

Xi Jinping's New World Order

Can China Remake the International System?

By Elizabeth Economy

Xi Jinping savored the moment. Speaking before China's annual gathering of nearly 3,000 representatives to the National People's Congress in Beijing in March 2021, the Chinese president took a post-pandemic victory lap, proclaiming that his country had been the first to tame COVID-19, the first to resume work, and the first to regain positive economic growth. It was the result, he argued, of "self-confidence in our path, self-confidence in our theories, self-confidence in our system, self-confidence in our culture." And he further shared his pride that "now, when our young people go abroad, they can stand tall and feel proud—unlike us when we were young." For Xi, China's success in controlling the spread of the novel coronavirus was yet more evidence that he was on the right track: China was reclaiming its historic position of leadership and centrality on the global stage. The brief official history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that was published the following month reinforced his assessment. It claimed that Xi had brought China "closer to the center of the world stage than it has ever been. The nation has never been closer to its own rebirth."

China already occupies a position of centrality in the international system. It is the world's largest trading power and greatest source of global lending, it boasts the world's largest population and military, and it has become a global center of innovation. Most analysts predict that China's real GDP will surpass that of the United States by 2030 to make it the largest economy in the world. Moreover, as the evolution of the pandemic has illustrated, China's response to global challenges has profound implications for the rest of the world.

Yet even as Xi's ambition and China's global prominence have become indisputable, many observers continue to question whether Beijing wants to shape a new international order or merely force some adjustments to the current one, advancing discrete interests and preferences without fundamentally transforming the global system. They argue that Beijing's orientation is overwhelmingly defensive and designed only to protect itself from criticism of its political system and to realize a limited set of sovereignty claims. That view misses the scope of Xi's vision. His understanding of the centrality of China signifies something more than ensuring that the relative weight of the country's voice or influence within the existing international system is adequately represented. It connotes a radically transformed international order.

In Xi's vision, a unified and resurgent China would be on par with or would surpass the United States. China is the preeminent power in Asia, and its maritime domain has expanded to include control over contested areas in the East China and South China Seas. The United States has retreated back across the Pacific to assume its rightful place as an Atlantic power. Moreover, the formidable network of U.S. alliances that has underpinned the international system for more than 70 years is dissolving in favor of a proposed Chinese framework of dialogue, negotiation, and cooperation. China's influence also radiates through the world via infrastructure ranging from ports, railways, and bases to fiber-optic cables, e-payment systems, and satellites. In the same way that U.S., European, and Japanese companies led the development of the world's

twentieth-century infrastructure, Chinese companies compete to lead in the twenty-first century. Xi ably uses China's economic power to induce and coerce compliance with his vision.

This shift in the geostrategic landscape reflects and reinforces an even more profound transformation: the rise of a China-centric order with its own norms and values. However imperfectly, the post–World War II international order was shaped primarily by liberal democracies that were committed in principle to universal human rights, the rule of law, free markets, and limited state intervention in the political and social lives of their citizens. Multilateral institutions and international law were designed to advance these values and norms, and technology was often used to bolster them. Yet Xi seeks to flip a switch and replace those values with the primacy of the state. Institutions, laws, and technology in this new order reinforce state control, limit individual freedoms, and constrain open markets. It is a world in which the state controls the flow of information and capital both within its own borders and across international boundaries, and there is no independent check on its power.

Chinese officials and scholars appear assured that the rest of the world is onboard with Xi's vision, as they trumpet, "The East is rising, and the West is declining!" Yet many countries increasingly seem less enamored of Xi's bold initiatives, as the full political and economic costs of embracing the Chinese model become clear. At the People's Congress, Xi exuded the self-confidence of a leader convinced that the world is there for China's taking. But his own certainty may be a liability, preventing him from recognizing the resistance Beijing is stoking through its actions abroad. Xi's success depends on whether he can adjust and reckon with the blowback. Failing to do so could lead to further miscalculations that may end up reshaping the global order—just not in the way Xi imagines.

REUNIFYING THE MOTHERLAND

Xi's path to a reordered world begins by redrawing the map of China. In an October 2021 speech, Xi asserted, "The historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled and will definitely be fulfilled." Asserting sovereignty over long-contested territories—particularly those Beijing terms its core interests: Hong Kong, the South China Sea, and Taiwan—is Xi's number one priority.

Beijing has already dealt with Hong Kong. In 2020, China imposed a national security law on the city that effectively ended its autonomy under the "one country, two systems" governance model that was put in place in 1997 at the time of Hong Kong's handoff from London to Beijing. In a matter of months, Beijing undermined the city's long-standing commitment to basic human rights and the rule of law and transformed Hong Kong into just another mainland Chinese city.

Xi has also made progress in asserting Chinese sovereignty in the South China Sea. He has created and militarized seven artificial features in the sea and laid claim to scores of other islands and stretches of maritime territory. He increasingly deploys China's powerful navy, newly armed coast guard, and vast fishing fleet to intimidate the five other nations with overlapping claims—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam—and to assert control in disputed waters. Throughout the pandemic, Xi has also taken advantage of other countries' distraction to press additional territorial claims: for more than 100 days in a row, Chinese vessels sailed into waters off Japan and around a number of contested islands there that China calls the Diaoyu Islands and Japan calls the Senkaku Islands; a Chinese coast guard vessel rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat; Chinese military aircraft flew over disputed waters claimed by both

China and Malaysia; and China and India engaged in their first deadly border conflict in four decades.

No map of China would be acceptable to Xi, however, if it did not reflect mainland Chinese control over Taiwan. At the 19th Party Congress, in October 2017, Xi declared that unification with Taiwan was one of 14 must-do items necessary to achieve the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” He has further underscored the importance of unification with his vivid imagery: “People on both sides of the strait are one family, with shared blood. . . . No one can ever cut the veins that connect us.”

Xi speaks about unification with Taiwan with increasing frequency and urgency. He remains convinced that Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen is advancing an independence agenda, claiming that the island nation’s “independence separatism” remains the “most serious hidden danger to national rejuvenation.” Since Tsai came to power, in 2016, Xi has cut off the long-established cross-strait dialogue; dramatically reduced the number of mainland tourists permitted to travel to Taiwan, from 4.2 million in 2015 to 2.7 million in 2017, contributing to a drop in the island’s annual tourism revenue from \$44.5 billion to \$24.4 billion; convinced seven of the 22 remaining states that formally recognize Taiwan as the Republic of China to abandon Taipei for Beijing; and prevented Taiwan from participating in the World Health Assembly briefings in the early months of the pandemic. During Tsai’s 2020 reelection campaign, CCP hackers also allegedly spread disinformation designed to undermine her. Beijing’s increasingly threatening military exercises along Taiwan’s coast provoke frequent talk of a possible Chinese military attack.

Xi’s efforts to intimidate Taiwan have failed to convince the island nation to embrace unification. Instead, they have produced a backlash both within Taiwan and abroad. A greater percentage of Taiwanese than ever before—64 percent—favor independence, and few Taiwanese retain faith that a “one country, two systems” framework could ever work, particularly in the wake of the crackdown in Hong Kong. A growing number of countries have also stepped up to offer support to Taiwan. In an unprecedented policy shift, Japan asserted in 2021 that it had a direct stake in ensuring Taiwan’s status as a democracy. Several small European countries have also rallied to Taiwan’s diplomatic defense: the Czech Republic, Lithuania, and Slovakia have all welcomed the Taiwanese foreign minister for a visit. For its part, the United States has supported a wide array of new legislation and diplomatic activity designed to strengthen the bilateral relationship and embed Taiwan in regional and international organizations.

BYE-BYE, MISS AMERICAN PIE

China is also busy trying to lay the foundation for the country to supersede the United States as the dominant force in the Asia-Pacific. Describing the Asia-Pacific as a “big family” and claiming that “the region cannot prosper without China” and “China cannot develop in isolation from the region,” China’s leaders portray the Asia-Pacific as seamlessly integrated through Chinese-powered trade, technology, infrastructure and shared cultural and civilizational ties. Xi has been particularly successful in cementing China’s position as the regional economic leader. China is the largest trading partner of virtually all the countries in Asia, and in 2021, the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations together ranked as China’s top trading partner. At the end of 2020, Xi concluded the negotiations over the Chinese-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which includes China, ten Southeast Asian countries, and Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. In a bold gambit, Xi has also advanced China

for membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Japanese-led free-trade agreement. This would make China the dominant economic player in the two most important regional trade agreements in the most economically dynamic region of the world; the United States would remain sidelined.

China has been less successful in its efforts to position itself as the region's preeminent security actor, a role long played by the United States. In 2014, Beijing proposed a new Asian security order managed by Asian countries. China's defense minister has crisscrossed the Asia-Pacific region with the message that countries there "should adhere to the principle that regional issues should be solved by the regional countries through consultation." Chinese officials have also tried hard to paint U.S. alliances as anachronistic relics of the Cold War and as hostile to China.

Yet Beijing's military assertiveness in the region has directly undermined its push for leadership. A survey of Southeast Asian experts and businesspeople found that less than two percent believed that China was a benign and benevolent power, and less than 20 percent were confident or very confident that China would "do the right thing." Nearly half of those polled believed that China was a "revisionist power" that intended to transform the region into its sphere of influence. (In contrast, over two-thirds of the interviewees were confident or very confident that Japan would "do the right thing" by contributing to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance.) China's behavior has also reenergized the Quad partnership, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States; spurred the establishment of a new trilateral security pact among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; and prompted several European countries, including France, Germany, and the Netherlands, along with NATO, to deepen their security engagement in the Asia-Pacific. Even Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who earlier threatened to end his country's alliance with the United States and called China "a good friend," is now upgrading the Philippines' defense relationship with Washington as he prepares to leave office.

THE DRAGON'S BITE

Xi's ambition for Chinese centrality on the global stage is exquisitely captured by his Belt and Road Initiative. Launched in 2013, the initiative not only offers a physical manifestation of Chinese centrality through three overland and three maritime corridors that will connect China to Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa but also evokes historical memories of the Silk Road and of Chinese centrality during imperial times. In its original conception, the BRI was a vehicle for Chinese-led hard infrastructure development along the six corridors. Today, BRI offshoots include so-called digital, health, and polar Silk Roads, and all countries are welcome to participate.

Unlike traditional infrastructure investment supported by multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, China is a one-stop shop. It provides the financing and the labor and materials for its projects; in many instances, it also skips time-consuming evaluations of financial risk, processes of transparent and open bidding, and assessments of environmental and social impacts. It is China's own development model gone global.

The BRI has positioned China at the center of the international system, with its physical, financial, cultural, technological, and political influence flowing to the rest of the world. It is redrawing the fine details of the world's map, with new railroads and bridges, fiber-optic cables

and 5G networks, and ports with the potential for housing Chinese military bases. By one assessment, the BRI now touches more than 60 countries and has exceeded \$200 billion in Chinese investment. Some countries, such as Pakistan, are being transformed by the BRI, with energy projects, new roads, and a massive upgrade of both its Gwadar port and its digital infrastructure. Others have more limited but overwhelmingly positive exposure. In Greece, for example, Chinese investment in the port of Piraeus has contributed to making it one of the top ports in Europe and among the top 50 in the world. Brazilian officials and scholars are excited about the possibility of the BRI not only developing infrastructure projects in their country but also advancing innovation and sustainability efforts.

Xi has also conceived of the BRI as a conduit through which China can transmit its political and cultural values. In a major address in October 2017, Xi advanced China's development model as one worth emulating, and Beijing now offers an extensive array of political training programs. Tanzania, which is a BRI pilot country for Chinese political capacity building, has modeled its cybersecurity law after that of China and worked with Beijing to constrain social media and the flow of information on the Internet. The governments of other countries, such as Uganda, have been eager recipients of Chinese technology and training to help them monitor and track political opposition figures. And political parties in Ethiopia, South Africa, and Sudan have participated in CCP training on the structure of the CCP, CCP-grassroots relations, and the Chinese propaganda system. China's Digital Silk Road, which includes undersea cables, e-payment systems, surveillance technologies, and 5G networks, among other digital connectivity technologies, is particularly valuable as a means of transmitting Chinese political and cultural values. In Kenya, for example, Beijing provided not only satellite television for more than 10,000 people but also tens of thousands of hours of Chinese programming. Kenya's airwaves, as well as those in other parts of Africa, are now filled with martial arts films, dramas about life in China, and documentaries that promote a CCP political narrative—such as one focusing on Japanese atrocities in World War II—that have been dubbed into local languages.

Yet the BRI has become increasingly bumpy. Although it can bring the benefits of China's infrastructure-heavy development model, it also carries with it all the externalities: high levels of debt, corruption, environmental pollution and degradation, and poor labor practices. Popular protests have proliferated throughout host countries. In Kazakhstan, citizens have demonstrated repeatedly against Chinese mining projects and factories that pollute the environment and use Chinese rather than local labor. Similar protests have erupted in Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, and Zambia. Still other countries, including Cameroon, Indonesia, Kenya, and Pakistan, have reported problems with corruption in their BRI projects. And some countries, such as Azerbaijan and Mongolia, no longer expect that the gains from their BRI projects will ever exceed the costs. Many countries have put projects on hold or canceled them outright: of the 52 coal-fired power plants planned for development through the BRI between 2014 and 2020, 25 were shelved and eight canceled. (China's September 2021 commitment not to build new coal-fired power projects abroad suggests that many of the shelved projects will ultimately be canceled.) A 2018 study found that 270 out of the 1,814 BRI projects undertaken since 2013 have encountered governance difficulties; these troubled cases accounted for 32 percent of the total value of the projects.

Beijing itself may be reconsidering its BRI commitments. Investment levels have declined steadily since 2016, and some of the presumed political benefits have not materialized. A review of the top ten recipients of BRI investments, for example, reveals no direct correlation between

the levels of investment and the countries' support for China on critical issues, such as Hong Kong, the South China Sea, and Chinese actions in Xinjiang. As with China's assertiveness on its borders, the BRI has also stoked a backlash. It has sparked competitive initiatives by Japan and other countries to offer infrastructure financing and support with higher standards and more benefits for local workforces.

Other efforts to enhance Chinese cultural influence are also encountering difficulties. For example, Xi has championed the adoption of Chinese-language and Chinese cultural offerings through the establishment of Confucius Institutes in overseas universities and classrooms. For many educational institutions, Beijing's financial support for these institutes was essential to their ability to offer Chinese-language training. As a result, they proliferated rapidly. Over time, however, the more coercive undertone of the initiative undermined its early success. In 2011, Li Changchun, then a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, stated, "The Confucius Institute is an appealing brand for expanding our culture abroad. It has made an important contribution toward improving our soft power. The 'Confucius' brand has a natural attractiveness. Using the excuse of teaching Chinese language, everything looks reasonable." Per Beijing's requirements, contracts between local academic institutions and the Confucius Institutes remained sealed, and the teachers and the curricula were determined by Beijing—a concession most universities would make for no other outside partnership. In addition, a few of the institutes tried to shape broader university policies around issues related to China, warning against hosting the Dalai Lama, for example. As scholars and politicians in Canada, Sweden, the United States, and elsewhere began to question the integrity of the enterprise, the allure of the institutes dimmed.

By 2020, China had put in place only slightly more than half the 1,000 Confucius Institutes it had hoped to establish. And their impact as a source of soft power appears to be limited. In Africa, where China has established 61 Confucius Institutes, a survey revealed that 71 percent of citizens believe that English is the most important language for the next generation to learn; 14 percent selected French, and only two percent chose Chinese. And in Kazakhstan, where the daughter of the former prime minister has been an outspoken champion of China and Chinese-language study, a public opinion survey conducted by the Eurasian Development Bank revealed that only one in six Kazakhs view China as a "friendly country."

Initiatives such as the BRI and the Confucius Institutes offer an attractive vision of Chinese centrality that has been somewhat undermined by unattractive Chinese governance practices, but much of Beijing's effort to advance Chinese centrality relies explicitly on coercion. China's pandemic diplomacy, for example, highlighted for many people the coercive nature of Chinese efforts to shape the world around them. China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomats weaponized the production of personal protective equipment (PPE) by threatening to cut off supplies to countries that criticized China. They also went on the offensive to spread disinformation about the origins of the virus to deflect attention from Chinese culpability. When Australia called for an investigation into the origins of the virus, Beijing slapped restrictions and tariffs on some of Australia's most popular exports.

China's use of economic leverage to coerce international actors is long standing and well known. Beijing threatened the international airline, retail, film, and hotel industries with serious financial repercussions, for example, if they did not recognize Chinese sovereignty claims regarding Hong Kong, the South China Sea, and Taiwan in their published material. In the wake of the now famous tweet by Daryl Morey, then the Houston Rockets' general manager, in

support of Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protests, Chinese stores pulled Rockets-branded products from their shelves, and China Central Television stopped broadcasting NBA games. CCTV announced, “We believe that any remarks that challenge national sovereignty and social stability are not within the scope of freedom of speech.” Beijing effectively signaled that it believed it had the right to control the speech of any individual anywhere in the world. Shortly thereafter, Beijing expelled several *Wall Street Journal* reporters in response to an opinion piece the newspaper published with a title describing China as the “Sick Man of Asia.” And perhaps as a sign of how such policies might evolve, a government office in Beijing proposed in 2020 that any criticism of traditional Chinese medicine—one of Xi’s special interests—should be made illegal.

Chinese coercion is most effective in shaping the behavior of individual actors. Many multinational corporations eventually succumb to Chinese pressure and adjust the way they conduct business. Some, however, quietly attempt to maintain their principles, even while appearing to acquiesce to Chinese demands. In the airline industry, for example, some airlines have dropped Taiwan from their websites but still identify it separately from mainland China and quote ticket prices in Taiwan’s currency instead of in yuan. Also important, China has overwhelmingly failed in its attempts to use its economic leverage to compel countries such as the Philippines and South Korea, among others, to change their policies on issues such as competition in the South China Sea and the deployment of the U.S.-made Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, missile system. Beijing also failed in its effort to short-circuit Canada’s judicial process concerning the detention of Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of the Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei, by imprisoning two Canadian citizens as political leverage. Ultimately, Meng spent almost three years under house arrest before her case was settled.

TUGGING ON THE REINS

Chinese centrality on the global stage emanates overwhelmingly from its economic wherewithal—its position as a driver of global growth and trade and the opportunity it affords to other countries for access to its vast market. Increasingly, however, Xi’s initiatives are raising questions about how China’s economy will engage with the rest of the world. His tenure has been marked by a series of policies, such as Made in China 2025, that enhance government control and work to insulate the Chinese economy from outside competition. In 2020, Xi articulated an economic paradigm of “dual circulation,” envisioning a largely self-sufficient China that could innovate, manufacture, and consume—all within its own economy. It would continue to engage with the international economy through exports, its critical supply chains, and limited imports of capital and know-how. Within China, Xi has also significantly enhanced the control of the CCP over the decision-making power of Chinese companies.

These moves away from greater economic reform and opening have introduced a new set of issues in Beijing’s relations with the rest of the world. Many countries no longer have confidence in the independence of Chinese companies from the government and are now tightening the access that Chinese firms have to their markets and increasing export controls on sensitive technologies to Chinese companies. Beijing’s coercive use of PPE early in the pandemic also raised alarm bells over dependence on Chinese supply chains, leading countries to encourage their companies to return home or move to friendlier pastures. The allure of the Chinese economy as both a market and a leader in global trade and investment remains strong, but Xi’s policies are diminishing, rather than enhancing, the type of consistency and predictability that

economic actors desire when they consider where to invest their time and capital, and they are therefore raising a new set of challenges for Xi's vision of Chinese centrality.

Xi also seeks to exert greater control in the existing international architecture of global institutions. He has called openly and repeatedly for China to lead in the reform of the global governance system—to transform the values and norms that underpin the international system to align with those of China. He and other Chinese officials argue that the current rules-based order does not adequately reflect China's voice or that of the developing world. Instead, it was created and perpetuated for the advantage of a small number of liberal democracies. Xi wants the values and norms embedded in these institutions to reflect instead Chinese preferences, such as elevating the right to development over individual political and civil rights and establishing technical standards that enable state control over the flow of information.

China's approach is both tactical and strategic. Chinese officials are primed to assert Chinese national interests even if they are at cross-purposes with the interests of the international institutions in which they serve. In 2020, the Twitter account of the International Civil Aviation Organization, for example, blocked users who supported ICAO membership for Taiwan. In another instance, Dolkun Isa, one of the world's leading Uyghur activists, was physically prevented from speaking before the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2017. Wu Hongbo, the Chinese official serving as undersecretary-general for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, later appeared on Chinese television to claim responsibility for blocking Isa's appearance, noting, "We have to strongly defend the motherland's interests." Similarly, in 2019, the French newspaper *Le Monde* reported that Beijing had threatened to block agricultural exports from Brazil and Uruguay if the two countries did not support the Chinese candidate for director general of the Food and Agriculture Organization.

Xi is also committed to a long-term strategy to transform broader global norms in areas such as Internet governance, human rights, and technical standards in ways that elevate state control over individual rights and liberties. In each of these areas, China has sought to secure leadership positions for Chinese officials or other friendly actors in the relevant institutions and supporting committees, flooded meetings with Chinese participants, and poured financial resources into trying to shape the agendas and outcomes of policy debates. Over time, the strategy has paid off. For example, Chinese proposals that advocate state control of the flow of information to every network-connected device are under active development and consideration at the United Nations.

Xi has, furthermore, signaled his intention to lead in the development of norms in areas where they are not yet fully established, such as space, the maritime domain, and the Arctic. In the case of the Arctic, Xi has already moved aggressively to try to enhance China's role in determining the region's future. Despite being 900 miles away from the Arctic Circle, China has provided training and financial support for thousands of Chinese researchers on Arctic-related topics, supported joint research and exploration with Arctic countries, built a fleet of state-of-the-art icebreakers, and funded research stations in several Arctic countries. Among the observer countries to the governing Arctic Council, China is overwhelmingly the most active, hosting scientific conferences, submitting papers for review, and volunteering to serve on scientific committees. Xi has attempted to assert China's rights in the decision-making process around the Arctic by referring to China as a "near Arctic power" and reframing the Arctic as an issue of the global commons, necessitating negotiations among a broad array of countries. But as with other areas of Chinese foreign policy, assertiveness here comes with a price. Although China has made strides in inserting itself into the development of norms around the Arctic, it has also lost ground

as Arctic countries have become less inclined to accept Chinese investment as the result of concerns over potential security risks.

Xi's more activist approach has also sparked new interest among many countries in bolstering the current rules-based order. Countries have coalesced, for example, to prevent UN agencies and programs from automatically supporting the inclusion of the BRI in their mission statements or initiatives. They are rallying to support candidates for leadership in UN agencies and other multilateral institutions who will bring a strong commitment to openness, transparency, and the rule of law. And they are drawing attention to cases in which China appears to be unduly influencing or undermining best practices, such as the World Health Organization's initial reluctance to address China's lack of transparency during the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic.

SACRIFICING THE WAR TO WIN THE BATTLE

China's desire to rearrange the world order is an ambitious one. The United States' leadership on the global stage, its democratic alliance system, and the post-World War II liberal international order are deeply entrenched. Still, Chinese officials argue that the last two centuries, when China was not the dominant global economy, were a historical aberration. They claim that U.S. leadership is waning. As He Yafei, former vice minister of foreign affairs, has asserted, "The end of Pax Americana, or the American Century, is in sight." Chinese leaders and many international observers express confidence that Beijing is well along the path to success. The renowned Fudan University scholar Shen Dingli has characterized China as occupying the "moral high ground" in the international community and acting as "the leading country in the new era." Xi himself has described China's rejuvenation as "a historic inevitability."

There is reason for Xi's optimism. China has clearly made progress in each of the dimensions that he has identified as essential for reform, and the reputation and influence of the United States have been battered by domestic strife and a lack of leadership on the global stage.

Yet it appears equally plausible, if not more so, that China has won a few battles but is losing the war. Xi's bullish assessment of China's pandemic response may resonate at home, but the international community retains vivid memories of Beijing's bullying diplomacy, coercive PPE practices, military aggression, repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and continued belligerence around determining the origins of the virus. Xi wants China to be "credible, lovable, and respectable" in the eyes of the international community, but his actions have yielded public opinion polls that reflect record-low levels of trust in him and little desire for Chinese leadership. Many initiatives to cement Chinese centrality, such as the BRI, the Confucius Institutes, and global governance leadership, are now sputtering or stalling as the full economic and political costs of acquiescence to Chinese leadership become clear to the rest of the world.

The international community might also be forgiven for wondering what beyond centrality Xi desires. He has made clear that he wants China to play a dominant role in defining the rules that govern the international system. But as the United States retreated from global leadership during Donald Trump's presidency, Xi proved unwilling or unable to step into the United States' shoes to marshal the international community to respond to global challenges or to serve as the world's policeman. China may simply want to enjoy the rights, but not the full responsibilities, that traditionally accrue to the world's most important power.

Xi's ambition for Chinese centrality on the global stage holds little attraction for much of the rest of the world, and in the current context of mounting international opposition, his outright success appears unlikely. Yet if Xi perceives that his strategy is unraveling, the result for the international community could be as challenging as if he were to succeed. In recent months, Xi has alarmed global leaders by cracking down on China's world-class technology sector, eradicating the last vestiges of democracy in Hong Kong, and flexing China's military muscles through a hypersonic missile test. And the potential looms large for further, even more destabilizing actions, such as resorting to the use of force to unify with Taiwan. Xi has not articulated a peaceful path forward for unification with the island nation, and he has already demonstrated a willingness to engage in risky military behavior in the East China and South China Seas and on the border with India.

Faced with significant international headwinds, Xi has responded by raising the stakes. He appears unwilling to moderate his ambition, except in areas that do not compromise his core political and strategic priorities, such as climate change. An optimal—although still unlikely—outcome would be for Xi to engage in a series of internal ongoing and implicit tradeoffs: claim regional economic leadership but step back from military aggression in the region, take pride in arresting the spread of COVID-19 but acknowledge the weakness of Chinese vaccine innovation, trumpet success in eliminating terrorist attacks in Xinjiang but begin the process of releasing the “reeducated” Uyghur Muslims from the labor camps. This would enable Xi to maintain a narrative of success in advancing Chinese centrality while nonetheless responding to the most significant concerns of the international community.

Whether Xi is able to realize his ambition will depend on the interplay of many factors, such as the continued vitality of the Chinese economy and military and the support of other senior leaders and the Chinese people, on the one hand, and the ability of the world to continue to resist Chinese coercion and the capacity of the world's democracies and others to articulate and pursue their own compelling vision of the world's future, on the other. Perhaps most important to Xi's success, however, will be his ability to recognize and address the vast disconnect between what he wants to deliver to the world and what the world wants delivered from him.

- ELIZABETH ECONOMY is a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and the author of *The World According to China*.