WINTER 2021 / ISSUE NO.18

$ 15.00 | € 10.00 | 1500 RSD

HORIZONS

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

ISSN 2406-0402

THE (NOT SO) ROARING TWENTIES?

BREMMER • ČIČAK • DORSEY • FRIEDMAN • GENSER • GRLIĆ RADMAN
HERRMANN • KHAN • KHANNA • LANDSMAN • LO • MA
MINUTO-RIZZO • MYERSON • PETERSEN • RUDD • TROITSKIY • YUSTE

cirsd.org

ASIA IN THE ROARING TWENTIES

ACCOUNTING FOR CHINESE EXPANSIONISM

Parag Khanna

CHINESE expansionism is not like a British model: it is not conquering the Raj, it is not sending Chinese people to run foreign countries. And it is not like an American model, because China does not have a plethora of formal alliance relationships. Rather, Chinese expansionism is built on economic bonds and assumption of economic leverage. It's really about global supply chains and securing its own supply chains.

Coming to grips with this novel, particularly Asian expansionism is a prerequisite to properly imagine the trajectory of China and all Asia in the Roaring Twenties. The mistake many people made in 2015 or 2016 was to complain that China was on a linear pathway toward dominance. But now the pushback has begun. And that is what we see with the trade war, with Europe being very strict about investments, with the Quad alliance, and the military maneuverings, the efforts to pull supply chains out of China, and so forth.

It is also important to remember that just because China *was* dominating certain industries, it does not mean that China *has to* dominate certain industries; and, conversely, it should not mean that China *must not* dominate certain industries. China was doing so because the world let it happen. And the main reason the world let it happen is because it was cheap. But once China began to act in what was perceived to be a hegemonic or unipolar or monopolistic way, the world countered that. And we see it with rare earth minerals, with manufacturing, with telecommunications, with medical devices and equipment, and that is where we stand right now.

***Parag Khanna** is the founder and managing partner of FutureMap, a data and scenario-based strategic advisory firm. His latest book is* The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict and Culture in the 21st Century. *This essay draws from two articles written for* Noēma *and a more recent essay published in* The National Interest. *You may follow him on Twitter @paragkhanna.*

Photo: Gulliver Image/Getty Images

Just one recent successful example of Chinese expansionism...

ENTROPY AND TECHNOCRACY

The end result, I can predict with confidence, is that Asia and the world will see a continuation of entropy. Entropy means the diffusion or the dissipation of power in more places, but also more distributed production and more democratization of power, because that is the nature of the world in the 2020s.

The rise of Asia presents the strongest evidence for geopolitical entropy as the new arc of history—and China, today's going concern, is only half the story. China has managed economic ascent while clinging to political authoritarianism, reinforcing Samuel Huntington's point that modernization does not mean Westernization. But much as today nobody visits America seeking to copy Washingtonian politics when all they want is to replicate West Coast tech giants, the "China model," too, is not an off-the-shelf package. China is not exporting its ideology just because others are imitating its supply-led growth, industrial policy, and full-service digital apps. Corrupt regimes don't need to hold up China as a role model to justify importing its surveillance technologies; they could buy these tools from American or Israeli firms as well.

China's unshakeable presence as a superpower affirms that geopolitics has become, for the first time in history, both multipolar and multi-civilizational. But we need to put this in context. China today represents about 15 percent of global GDP, not the 50 percent embodied in post-World War II America. Furthermore, the contemporary geographic playing field does not favor China, which is surrounded by more than a dozen neighbors with which it mostly has hostile relations. As poor former European colonies or Soviet republics, they welcome Chinese investment in their dilapidated infrastructure but are highly suspicious of Chinese neo-mercantilism. China's wolf warrior diplomacy and pandemic cover-up are a reminder of Asians' abiding wariness of China, even as they've benefited enormously from its rise. In this new post-post-colonial era, however, China faces the insurmountable reality of an anti-imperial psychology by which there is little appetite for either American or Chinese "leadership." The 2020s will see all this playing itself out across Asia and indeed the entire world.

China's unshakeable presence as a superpower affirms that geopolitics has become, for the first time in history, both multipolar and multi-civilizational.

Furthermore, the entropic trend does not stop with China, which is why it is only half the story; the rest of Asia is now doing to China what China has done to the West: hitching themselves to global and regional supply chains, demanding joint ventures and technology transfers, and building their own national champion firms rather than becoming Western or Chinese neo-colonies. Both America and Europe are eager to assist, launching a slew of strategic initiatives like the military "Quad" with India, Japan, and Australia and the "Clean Network" to yank Huawei 5G telecom equipment out of Asian infrastructure networks. A decade hence we will look back at the post-Cold War era, not for the rise of China but the reemergence of this much greater Asian system encompassing a half-dozen major powers.

Indeed, if there is a political system that has emerged victorious from the coronavirus pandemic, it is Asian democratic technocracy. China's resilience has put paid to the notion that China's mandarins are merely East Asian versions of Soviet apparatchiks. But more significantly, Asia's gold-standard democracies such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have proven to be global role models for their blend of competence and transparency. They embody a far more balanced and healthy relationship between rationalism and freedom than America or Great Britain today. These societies are the vanguard of what I call the "new Asian values" of technocratic governance, mixed capitalism, and social conservatism that are far more likely to become a global set of norms than post-truth Western democracy. From restoring pride in experts to massive economic bail-outs to restricting "fake news," Asian approaches appear to have already gained favor in the West. Bottom line: while amateur political scientists talk democracy, professional state administrators talk governance.

If there is a political system that has emerged victorious from the coronavirus pandemic, it is Asian democratic technocracy.

And so, rather than the global hierarchy freezing in 1989, in the 2020s we will see further evidence of a landscape featuring at least four coherent and viable centers of global leadership: the United States, Europe, China, and democratic Asia (especially the budding entente among Japan, Australia, and India). Geopolitically, it's three against one. Economically, it's every power for itself. And ideologically, each holds itself to be superior to the rest. In the 2020s, it is clear that no model will prevail over the others.

So, the question will depend on whether or not China is able to adapt to a new equilibrium and accept that it cannot dominate Asia alone. It has to accept certain limitations and settle certain disputes that it cannot win. And its competitors near and far, large and small, have to accept that China is no longer willing to settle being the point of origin of cheap goods destined for consumers beyond its borders.

Taking a Step Back

The story of Chinese expansionism starts with roads. Upon the conclusion of the country's civil war in 1949, China began a decades-long campaign to push westward into restive and contested terrain. Roads and railways began to inch westward along the Yellow River and through the narrow Gansu corridor—the ancient northern Silk Road passageway between the more inhospitable Mongolian and Tibetan Plateaus—into Xinjiang, land of the Muslim Uighurs, onto terrain labeled East Turkestan on many maps that depicted the Anglo-Russian maneuverings of the fabled nineteenth-century "Great Game." By the time the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Chinese roads were well-positioned to expand across once frozen Cold War borders and reshape the trade relations of the half-dozen newly-independent Central Asian republics. China's plan to win the new Great Game was to build new Silk Roads.

Throughout China's turbulent decades under Mao Zedong, the same domestic power play was unfolding in Tibet. When Tibetans resisted the convulsive campaigns of the Great Leap Forward, their 1959 uprising was crushed and the Dalai Lama fled into exile in India. In the 1962 Sino-Indian war, China seized parts of India's Arunachal Pradesh (which China considers part of "South Tibet") as well as Aksai Chin, a disputed region in the western Himalayas abutting India's state of Ladakh.

Buddhist Tibet and Muslim Xinjiang are China's two largest provinces, yet they are mutually distinct cultural universes. The only thing that connects them is a road: the Western Highway—formally, Highway 219—that goes through Tibet along the Nepali border, over Aksai Chin's rugged passes and then descends into Xinjiang's forbidding Taklamakan Desert.

In 1962, the construction of this highway kindled the first Sino-Indian War. In 2020, road-building again sparked a conflict between the two countries, this time in Aksai Chin. China claims it was responding to two changes India recently made to the decades-old status quo: First, declaring Ladakh a Union Territory directly governed by New Delhi (something people in Ladakh wanted), and second, building roads in disputed areas near the ambiguous Line of Actual Control that stretches from the Karakoram Pass, which connects China to Pakistan, and the shimmering blue of Pangong Lake, which extends from Ladakh into Aksai Chin and Tibet.

Building Infrastructure

For the Romans, Ottomans, Russians, and British, transportation infrastructure was an essential tool of conquest. It is no different for China today. In a world of mostly settled boundaries, China seeks to control infrastructure and supply chains to achieve leverage over its neighbors as well as carve through them to its destination: the oil-rich Gulf region and the massive export markets of Europe. From oil refineries and ports to internet cables, China is maneuvering for infrastructural access where it cannot dominate territory. Even where China shifts boundaries by force, the purpose is nonetheless to pave the way for its infrastructure. China is a mercantile power, not a colonial one.

When it comes to using roads and rails as instruments of power projection, China has gotten used to being the only game in town. Nobody builds roads faster or cheaper, at home or abroad, as Chinese construction crews. In 2006, it took me two months in the most rugged jeep available to drive the full length of the Western Highway, with a number of high-altitude near-death experiences along the way. Every day, I would encounter Chinese road crews hard at work, and army convoys fording rocky rivers and gingerly navigating slippery gravel mountainsides. Today, you could make the journey without raising your heart rate, though you might need oxygen at 16,000-plus feet of elevation.

China has actually had little choice in taking this approach. In the 1990s, it was militarily weak but economically surging. Around the time China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, it suddenly found itself the world's largest importer of raw materials as well as one of the largest exporters of consumer goods. Yet still, it was subject to the "Malacca trap," for most of its trade passes through the narrow Strait of Malacca, the world's busiest waterway, which it does not control. Building road and rail infrastructure across neighboring states was thus something of a defensive measure to reduce dependence on a single chokepoint. When China innocuously announced its aspiration to construct a "New Eurasian Land Bridge" in 2003, few took notice. But defense can quickly become offense.

For the Romans, Ottomans, Russians, and British, transportation infrastructure was an essential tool of conquest. It is no different for China today.

Borrowing from the Cold War paradigm, American analysts have long been focused on China's military modernization to assess its geopolitical power. Until recently, many still held China to be only a limited threat in the Western Pacific, and not at all beyond its immediate maritime periphery. Hence, it was not deemed a peer competitor. But China differs from the Soviet Union in fundamental respects. Whereas the Soviet Union was not integrated into the global economy, China is the top trade partner of more than 120 countries, and is now the largest international creditor as well. China's main instruments in pursuit of its grand strategy have been connectivity projects, not military incursions. Rather than conquer colonies, China has sought to buy countries.

Still, by 2017, when China convened a gathering of nearly 100 countries for its inaugural Belt and Road Forum, nobody viewed it as a purely magnanimous exercise. India boycotted the summit, as well as its 2019 edition, on the grounds that Chinese road projects such as the Karakoram Highway traverse Kashmir, which India claims in its entirety. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi also stepped up India's pace in the infrastructure arms race, both in the east in Arunachal Pradesh (where China and India skirmished in 2017 over Chinese road-building activities) and in the west in Ladakh. In 2019, it completed a road from Leh, Ladakh's capital, to the world's highest gravel airstrip at Daulat Beg Oldi, less than five miles south of the Chinese border.

China certainly hoped that no one would dispute its checkbook diplomacy, nor its "use it or lose it" approach to planting its flag in disputed areas. But instead, a wide array of initiatives have emerged as a direct response to China's Belt and Road Initiative to undermine and dilute China's infrastructural prowess: the U.S. International Finance and Development Corporation, the EU's "Asia Connectivity Initiative," the EU-Japan "Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure," the U.S.-Japan-Australia "Blue Dot Network," the India-Japan "connectivity corridors" and myriad other coalitions. None of these existed even four years ago. Roads have always been the pathways of conquest; now they are the battlefield of competitive connectivity.

It has also taken just four years for China to go through the whole imperial lifecycle, from economic preponderance and strategic entrapment to widespread resentment and outright rejection. Whereas European colonial powers were able to practice divide-and-rule politics for centuries, and Cold War manipulation lasted decades, today's world is largely defined by sovereignty and transparency. Governments are coming under fire for signing deals with unfavorable terms; the slightest rumor of commercial capitulation to China can bring down a government. Even in China-friendly Pakistan, Chinese nationals are often tracked. After centuries of colonialism and the Cold War—and enough leaders alive to remember both—no country wants to be a pawn again.

China's leaders are presumed to play the long game, thinking several moves ahead. But in dozens of visits to Beijing, I have found my interlocutors unable to grasp this basic psychological fact. While many societies admire China's success and are grateful for China's role in their development, none want to be like China, nor be subservient to it. It's an argument that's fallen on deaf ears in Washington, too. And as with America's experience of benevolent nation-building, China's policy of intimidating neighbors into feebly muting their own interests has predictably backfired.

Going for Broke?

There was a time not too long ago when China was big yet still largely unnoticed in the global strategic calculus. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, China's focus on commercial cooperation and non-interference in politics paid off. It managed to simultaneously have good relations with pairs of rival states across the globe: India and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Brazil and Venezuela. It even provided tacit aid and other lifelines to America's designated "rogue states" such as Cuba, Sudan, Syria, and North Korea. Bogging down the adversary while moving stealthily towards one's objective has been an axiom of Chinese diplomacy for generations. But there is little stealth anymore in China's land grabs, island-building and wolf-warrior diplomacy.

It has also taken just four years for China to go through the whole imperial lifecycle, from economic preponderance and strategic entrapment to widespread resentment and outright rejection.

With China's suppression of information about the coronavirus painting it into a corner, Beijing no longer feels it has anything to lose and is going for broke: moving on Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Senkaku Islands, India's borders, and other disputes while the rest of the world is off-kilter, girding itself for a new Cold War with America. China's leadership has convinced itself that West-leaning powers seek to encircle it militarily, splinter it internally, and destabilize the Communist Party. This is the classical psychological spiral at the heart of any security dilemma in which each action taken by one side elevates the perceived insecurity of the other.

A repeat of the Cold War would surely not play out as favorably for the United States as the last one. America is politically polarized and is the world's largest debtor nation. Its most recent major wars have been disasters and its military needs time to rebuild and adjust to new adversaries and tactics. And many of its erstwhile allies from Europe to Asia are far more vested in China than America is and don't trust it to lead a consensus-based global coalition. Furthermore, China is the world's most populous nation (almost five times the Soviet Union at its peak), is effectively the world's largest economy and is already an enormously sophisticated technological power. Lastly, unlike the Cold War in Europe, China has home-court advantage in Asia.

What the United States and Europe do have in their favor is that they are territorially secure whilst China is not. China has 14 neighbors, all of which harbor deep suspicions of its motives, even as many (especially Russia) cooperate with it. Small and vulnerable lands have always welcomed America's strategic presence: Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, Kurdistan, the Baltic nations, Mongolia, and other prisoners of geography tend to want more America, not less. Yet American strategists have been far more fixated on China's presence in Africa and South America rather than developing a comprehensive strategy for reassuring China's neighbors and supporting their own efforts to stand up to it. More than any other measure, this could decisively shape China's trajectory in the decade ahead.

Recent American measures make clear it is taking a firm stand to pressure China in its own domain. The United States has rescinded Hong Kong's special status, is selling more arms to Taiwan, stepping up freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, sanctioning Chinese officials involved in Xinjiang's labor camps, blocking American pension funds from investing in China's bond and equity markets, forcing Chinese companies to delist from U.S. stock exchanges, and seeking to near-shore production of key industries out of China.

But a similar slate of measures is needed that generates strength in numbers among China's many smaller and weaker neighbors. Despite the immense economic leverage China has accrued vis-à-vis the many states along its perimeter, it is the complexity of having so many neighbors that constrains China more than its increasingly sophisticated military arsenal suggests. Maintaining global influence is much harder when you are fighting a 14-front war in your own neighborhood.

Along its vast periphery, China must learn that "victory" on one front means backlash on others. Seizing territory from India or Vietnam should embolden Mongolia and Kazakhstan to defer projects that strengthen China's hand. It is not a coincidence that when Sri Lanka ceded operation of its Hambantota Port to China on a 99-year lease in 2017, countries from Kenya to Pakistan to Myanmar made moves to scale back their exposure to Chinese lending to avoid a similar fate. These simultaneous awakenings are not a coordinated containment strategy, but they are an essential pillar of one.

China is both a terrestrial ("heartland") power as well as a maritime ("rimland") one, so its neighbors include its proximate littoral ones. Owing to America's naval preponderance on the world's oceans, this strategy has evolved considerably more quickly. From Malabar to Pearl Harbor, the United States, Japan, Australia, India, and numerous other countries have been deepening their coordination in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain. The "Quad" coalition features joint strategic patrols and hardware support for the navies of Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia in the South China Sea. In the summer of 2020, ASEAN foreign ministers finally graduated from their usually limp communiques watered down by Chinese pressure and reaffirmed that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea must be the basis for arbitrating maritime disputes.

Containment?

The delicate balance that lies ahead involves both acceding to some of China's grievances and actions while also convincing Beijing that it has much more to lose should it continue down the path of imperial overstretch. History shows that it is wiser to settle borders than to fight over them. Boundary agreements are rarely perceived as fair by both sides, yet such settlements have the virtue of enabling counties to mature towards functional cooperation.

There is much more that can be done to strengthen China's neighbors at its expense. More companies should divert supply chains to Southeast Asia, India and Central Asia, making only in China what they sell in China. Capital continues to pour into China as it lifts foreign ownership caps in financial joint ventures and other areas; the rest of Asia deserves the same as countries from India to the Philippines privatizes assets, liberalize capital accounts and build new national champion firms. Amazon, Facebook, and Google's large bets on India's e-commerce, mobile services, and AI sectors, respectively, speak to this enormous potential.

Furthermore, the United States under the leadership of Joe Biden must recommit to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement that will boost Southeast Asia's exports, while working with governments such as Vietnam and the Philippines to strictly prevent Chinese firms from using them for mere relabeling of their products bound for America. The European Union trades much more with China and Asia than does the United States, and should more quickly pursue free trade agreements with India and Southeast Asian countries on the model of its existing FTA with Singapore and the newest one with Vietnam. Through the aforementioned rival initiatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative, they could also much more efficiently deploy and disburse loans and credit bilaterally and via the Asian Development Bank to wean countries off Chinese debt. What China does not finance it cannot lay claims to in the event of default.

Such moves are more important now than ever. Precisely because the United States and the EU have imposed such stiff restrictions on Chinese investment, China has redirected its outbound capital portfolio ever more towards its more proximate Asian domain. The West may be squeezing China out of some markets, but China's balloon is inflating across Asia as it lowers tariffs on all its Belt and Road trading partners. The American and British plot to convert the moribund G7 into a "D10" of democracies—including Asian powers India, Japan, South Korea, and Australia—is a timely step to offer an alternative. The focus on building strong innovation and commercial linkages across members in areas ranging from 5G and the "internet of things" to pharmaceuticals and medical devices will also benefit countries from Kazakhstan to Vietnam that have the natural resources and human capital to contribute to thriving biotech and manufacturing activities, but won't cede control of their companies to China.

China's weakest neighbors also need much more reinforcement. Western diplomacy was crucial to pushing Myanmar in a more democratic direction a decade ago, but commercially, China still rules the roost because Western governments aren't backstopping risky investments. Laos and Cambodia, two of Asia's poorest countries, have become all but wholly owned subsidiaries of China, even as China's Mekong River dams have ravaged their agriculture through volatile water flows and chemical pesticides. With stronger technical and diplomatic assistance, these countries could demand that Chinese investments reinforce their sustainability and local businesses.

Asia's neighbors should use China's playbook against it. For the past four decades, China has risen through a combination of foreign investment coupled with mandatory joint ventures, technology transfer and its own industrial supports. Now it is time for Asia's next wave of developing nations across South and Southeast Asia—2.5 billion people, and all demographically younger than China—to do to China what China did to the West: absorb, learn, copy, innovate, resist. After all of this is done, China will still be China, but it will be somewhat more dependent on good relations with its neighbors rather than only its neighbors being dependent on its goodwill.

Equilibrium

It was always going to be an uphill battle for China to be perceived as a benevolent superpower. Unlike America or the European Union, China is wholly unconvincing as a multiethnic empire. It systematically squelches diverse identities rather than elevating them. Furthermore, though China is an ancient and rich civilization, it coexists with other Asian civilizations with equally respectable glory. None will ever bow to the others, as Japan learned the hard way in the twentieth century. Every time China gains an inch of territory, it loses a yard of credibility. The essence of geopolitical stability is equilibrium, and the pathway to it follows the logic of reciprocity.

China's assertiveness signals neither an inevitable new Cold War nor a new unipolar hegemony. Rather, it is one phase in Asia's collective story and the global shift towards multipolarity.

There is a lesson for America, too. Both the left and the right have fallen into line behind the view that China's rise presents the world with a stark choice between worlds led by the United States or China, or a new Cold War between them. But clearly, this is not what the rest of the world wants. The greater agenda that countries deeply suspicious of both America and China can agree upon is the preeminent importance of preserving equilibrium on the Eurasian continent.

The essence of geopolitical stability is equilibrium, and the pathway to it follows the logic of reciprocity.

Never has Eurasia been ruled by a single hegemon. The Mongols came closest 700 years ago, but the fourteenth-century Black Death fractured its disparate khanates, and the Silk Road fell idle. Today again, a pandemic has emerged from China, but rather than shut down the Silk Road, we should build many more of them among dozens of Eurasian nations rather than in and out of China alone. All roads need not lead to Beijing.

Peaked Already?

China has studied every great power's rise, but it is a fair question to ask whether it failed to pay an equal amount of attention to great power decline. Here it is useful to go back to November 2006, when the Chinese public was held rapt by a 12-part documentary series titled "The Rise of the Great Powers."

Curated by a team of respected Chinese historians, each episode revealed the pathways major empires took to reach the zenith of their global influence, including the United Kingdom, Japan, Russia, and the United States. At the time, China was viewed—both at home and abroad—as Asia's central force and a future superpower, but not the main geopolitical story—especially as America was in full "hyper-power" mode, deep into its indefinite occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. This was all the more reason for the Chinese to sit back and cautiously study how nations could become so powerful as to extend their might all across the planet.

"The Rise of the Great Powers" achieved its central objective: to socialize and legitimize the notion that it was China's turn to rise into the pantheon of history's superpowers. And China has clearly followed the documentary's lessons to a tee: practice import substitution, force technology transfer, amass currency reserves, hoard precious metals, deploy merchant fleets, lend prodigiously, install infrastructure far and wide, build a powerful military, protect your supply chains, buy off elites in colonies and client states, and so forth. If world history were a game of Risk, then in every century the board would be reset and another player would get a turn to rule the world. The scale is finally weighted in China's favor.

Or maybe not. If history really did repeat itself, we would marvel at our own predictability. But this time could also be very different. We have amassed enough history to preventively alter the course history seems to be taking us on. It is said that Westerners reason in linear terms and Easterners in circular concepts. Neither though seems to grasp complexity, in which every collision of forces, every action and reaction, produces fractal outcomes that recirculate and ripple through the system. What if, rather than confidently repeating the past, China is mistakenly repeating the present?

CCTV unfortunately never produced a sequel on imperial *decline*: the ideological rigidity and strategic blunders that corrupted, subverted, and undermined the success of empires. But even without a formal curriculum on imperial overstretch and hubris, Chinese television has beamed home blow by blow America's past two decades of international flailing and domestic decay. Yet convinced it can do no wrong, China's decline may have begun before its rise is complete. America has quickly fallen from its hyper-power apex. China may well never reach it.

It seems premature to speak of "peak China" when the country is still going from strength to strength. Growth has slowed, but in the wake of COVID-19, it is the only economy growing at all. It is rapidly aging, but still has more youth than Europe has people, while robots churn out enough goods for itself and the world. Its domestic debt has skyrocketed, but it still has enormous reserves, is opening its capital account and deploying a global cryptocurrency. But the sense in which to use "peak" is akin to "peak oil" or "peak America"—relative, not absolute. Proponents of "peak oil" missed the reality of vast additional global reserves as well as the phenomenal rise of alternative and renewable energy. Because we have reached peak oil *demand*, supply has become irrelevant.

Similarly, despite foreign policy blunders and much else besides, America will remain the world's preeminent power long into the future. Its economy is gargantuan, and it controls the world's only reliable reserve currency. Its military has global reach and can reinforce allies across the globe, and North America is the only truly conflict-free continent. Yet as with oil, the *demand* for American leadership has peaked. Countries choose their service providers for military assistance, financing, technology, and other utilities from a global marketplace of suitors and vendors.

Winning Battles, Losing the War

Until recently, most Americans thought the world wanted to be like them. By now, they probably know better. In recent years, the Chinese have been telling themselves similar things, given the country's internal dynamism and external activism in building a new layer of global infrastructure through its Belt and Road Initiative. But much as America has abused its privileged status by cajoling allies toward policies counter to their own interests and imposing wanton sanctions that inhibit meaningful progress in rehabilitating pariah states such as Iran and North Korea, China has very quickly crossed the line from receiving fraternal goodwill to permanent suspicion.

Entropy is inherent in complex systems; power inexorably diffuses. Never before have we had such a global distribution of power.

From the Himalayas to the South China Sea, its aggressive pursuit of micro-territories has ensured that more than three billion Asians may never trust it again. Arabs, Africans, and Latin Americans are trimming their exposure to Chinese debt and projects. For its part, the European Union recently declared China a "systemic rival." China has been so busy winning battles that it doesn't realize it may already have lost the war.

Both America and China have also overestimated their technological superiority. The United States has conflated invention with innovation, overlooking how rapidly technologies spread and are adapted to foreign markets by rival governments and their firms. The internet and gene sequencing were pioneered in America, but Japan, China, and others have delivered the fastest bandwidth and gene therapies to their citizens. The same goes for 5G and quantum computing.

China too has mistaken market prowess for monopoly. But the coordinated ejection of Huawei from critical infrastructure networks—and efforts such as the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative to boost the industrial capacity of countries such as Japan, Australia, India, and others in semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, rare earth minerals and automobile parts—demonstrate how quickly dominance can be eroded.

Why go with Chinese companies that harvest your data when American-backed Indian firms offer AI-as-a-service—a third-party provision of big data analysis, machine learning and other statistical tools to clients without the need for large self-directed investment—with no strings attached? The most inevitable force in history is not imperial cycles but technological diffusion.

In the same vein, today's world is far more characterized by geopolitical entropy than concentration. The EU has emerged as an independent pole of financial, diplomatic, and regulatory authority. Far from despondently accepting junior status in a U.S.-China bipolar "new Cold War," Brussels is increasingly going its own way in dealing with Russia and Iran. The EU-Asia Connectivity Initiative is a far more sensible approach to Eurasian engagement than anything America has come up with, and EU trade and investment ties with Asia could soon be double America's.

Dynamics within Asia itself are also hastily bringing an end to China's version of America's "unipolar moment." Japan has mounted a strategic revival and India is confidently parrying Chinese maneuvers in multiple Himalayan theaters; even a neo-Ming armada of "treasure fleets" will never control the Indian Ocean. Together with the United States and Australia, these Indo-Pacific powers have formed a strategic "Quad" to fortify the defenses of China's weaker neighbors to limit Chinese expansionism. Today's weak states aspire to sovereignty and self-actualization, not neo-mercantile subservience, and strong lifelines have emerged to ensure they remain on the former path rather than succumbing to the latter.

FAILURE OF IMAGINATION

It bears repeating: entropy is inherent in complex systems; power inexorably diffuses. Never before have we had such a global distribution of power: the twenty-first century is the first time in human history that every continent or region represents independent poles of power in their own right. This complex global system is far greater than any single power: within its webs of relationships, no power can impose itself on the world without counter-coalitions forming. There are limits to power, but no end to entropy.

Demographics and psychology are also significant variables nudging us toward a non-cyclical tangent for the future—certainly in the 2020s. Since 1945, the global population has more than tripled and the number of states recognized by the U.N. has nearly quadrupled to 193. The vast majority of the human population lives in post-colonial countries with unhappy memories of both colonialism and the Cold War; they do not wish for history to repeat itself—and will not let it. The backlash against China that has materialized in just the past three years would have taken decades, centuries ago. The 2020s will provide a rude awakening from the "Chinese Dream" of the 2010s.

All of this suggests that today's conventional wisdom—by which either America restores its primacy or China displaces it while the rest of the world is forced to choose sides in a new Cold War—represents a fairly spectacular failure of imagination. Nonetheless, our recent intellectual shortcomings can be instructive in teaching lessons in the emerging dynamics of world politics. An older and increasingly out-of-date scholarly tradition takes comfort in simplicity, with theoretical parsimony masquerading as rigor.

Not only have Western academics been seduced by their historical models but ironically, so too were the Chinese. After all, from Beijing's perspective, what is not to like about Western authorities telling you it is your turn to rule the world? The media has been all too eager to embrace the "Thucydides Trap," as if Graham Allison's great book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* did not contain a question mark in the subtitle.

With no institutional memory of past pandemics, most Western societies failed to heed the simple lesson of the 1918 Spanish flu: stay at home and wear a mask.

What has actually transpired, however, embodies the rapid feedback loops inherent in a complex global system: hyping the China threat has inspired myriad responses to that threat, shifting geopolitics along new vectors. A similar phenomenon has been underway with respect to the global population. Fears that the world population would reach fifteen billion and plunge the world into Malthusian anarchy evoked widespread measures to control rampant population growth. Current estimates suggest the human population will reach about ten billion people in 2050.

There is a tempting objection to this drift from fatalism: It's all priced in already. Like Christopher Nolan's film "Tenet" or Alex Garland's slightly more comprehensible miniseries "Devs," asserting free will is an element of the dramatic apotheosis, but merely a distraction from the master plot we cannot escape (think of the final elevator scene in "Devs" or the cat-and-mouse between Kenneth Branagh's Andrei and John David Washington's Protagonist in "Tenet"). In sci-fi at least, the future communicates with the present, providing a stark incentive to act on its message. In real life, we maintain the illusion of control and consign the worst-case scenario to a corner of our mind.

The pandemic has been a tragic reminder of this default mental state: all the foresight in the world meant very little when it struck. While scientists warned of its exponential global spread, militias occupied state capitol buildings demanding an end to lockdowns they never took seriously in the first place. With no institutional memory of past pandemics, most Western societies failed to heed the simple lesson of the 1918 Spanish flu: stay at home and wear a mask. Similarly, the Transition Integrity Project ran scenarios of disputed U.S. election outcomes so that steps could be taken to prevent chaos, but ideological division and our incapacity for collective action all but ensure that one of those scenarios will come to pass anyway.

Isn't it just the same with geopolitical cycles of cataclysmic wars? We may claim to have the foresight to advise China to accept realities America ignored prior to provoking wars that will similarly erode its hard-won ascent—but what if China actually *wants* these wars as part of its master plan? Indeed, another worrying example from the recent past: The Trump Administration's overt upgrading of diplomatic and military ties with Taiwan—combined with sanctions banning the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company from selling semiconductors to China—are meant to disentangle allied countries' supply chains from the Chinese mainland, yet they could very well be accelerating China's plans to invade Taiwan and physically capture the production of these critical components. A strategy designed to cripple China's high-tech industries would perversely enhance them, boosting China's ability to dominate the battlespace.

Whistling A Different Tune

Still, even if China has thought two steps ahead, has it thought three or four? I have my doubts. China is nimble but not omniscient. It could have averted the present (and future) pushback to its ambitions through a more "peaceful rise," but Xi Jinping's nationalism hijacked the country instead. An inescapable pivot in history's master plot? Perhaps. But China would not be the first power to confuse its momentum for longevity. Both nationalism and triumphalism indicate a high likelihood of conflict—but not that its aftermath will necessarily favor China.

The present needs more voices from the future. Absent the "temporal pincer movements" of "Tenet"—the process by which characters move backwards ("inverted") through time in order to alter events in the present—we must constantly run scenarios and derive pathways to avoid the worst outcomes. In the 1983 hit film WarGames, the War Operation Plan Response simulator cycles through every possible nuclear war scenario and upon realizing they all end in stalemate, famously utters: "A strange game: the only winning move is not to play."

If history is a pre-programmed algorithm, our only hope is a collective will to maintain a self-regulating autopoiesis. We have a dangerous amount still in common with our forefathers: pride, fear, and greed. But what is different should matter more: deterrence, sovereignty, a common climate threat, and more. In the 2020s, it's high time to start whistling a different tune.