

Briefs | Analyses

Recalibrating the Global Balance of Power?

Multilateral Organizations, Taiwan, New Tech War



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2049 will be the next symbolic milestone for China with the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC). What do you think Xi Jinping aims to achieve by that date?

Andrew Nathan The rhetoric from Xi and from the Chinese foreign ministry about what China aims for is vague, and it is, I think, intentionally so. In comparison, American national security strategy policy statements are fairly clear: they identify who the main enemies are, what kind of threat they present, what the military ambitions are... China doesn't make that kind of statement publicly, it leaves a lot to the imagination. What Xi Jinping aims for is hence debatable. Rush Doshi, who is currently in Biden's National Security Council, argues that China wants not merely to dominate the Asian region but to displace the United States as the dominant global power. For him, China would like to monopolize the 21st century technologies, establish a global network of military bases and to dominate the international institutions.... According to Doshi's theory, which is based on a substantial set of evidence, China does not seek to establish Chinese-style socialism in every country in the world, but does want to facilitate the rise and the survival of authoritarian powers that are easy for China to deal with.

For some other analysts, China's security goals are fundamentally defensive, and mostly regional. When you analyze what Xi Jinping and his diplomats say and do, it is hard to adjudicate which of these predictions is correct. Nonetheless, there is a substantial consensus over some of the things that China aims to achieve by 2049 in its international posture. These include reunification with Taiwan and weakening or breaking up the American alliance system that surrounds China in Asia.

Juliette Genevaz When we look at the foreign policy that Xi Jinping has led in the past seven years that he's been in office, it is indeed hard to see a grand strategy emerging. For example, the Belt and Road has really changed directions since he launched it in 2013. First, it was directed towards Europe. It wasn't working very well, so he changed it towards the global south—where different countries have had very diverse receptions of the policy.

We can see a very incremental foreign policy and not a grand strategy. So, it's very difficult to say what in 2049 China's role in the world will look like. I don't think China wants to be the hegemon that the US has been, China probably considers it much too costly:

I really doubt that it intends to have 200 military bases across the world. But China is definitely aiming at leading in some areas such as technological innovation, managing to cooperate with the main leaders on climate change policy... We have to look at it policy area by policy area.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is aiming at restructuring global order to accommodate better Chinese interests. You either get it by negotiations or you force the restructuring... What is its strategy?

Andrew Nathan The CCP's idea of changing the international order is to rectify what it consider to be—and I think is—an unfair distribution of influence. The international institutions are slow to give China the amount of influence that China's weight in the world justifies. They want more influence, but they don't want to destroy the United Nations and create a different international organization. Relatively speaking, they are conservative about norms. They're not in favor of armed intervention against so-called genocide, they're not in favor of countries biting off parts of other countries—even of Russia biting off parts of Ukrainian territory.

Paul Irwin Crookes China is best viewed as both a revisionist and a status quo power at the same time. In many areas, China has a lot of power invested in maintaining the status of the current system, but it is also shaping a number of ways in which the system operates to overlap more with its own interests. China's leaders do understand what their primary interests are and have a clear view of what is China's normative position in a number of different areas. Increasingly, the Chinese now also see a way of projecting those norms through either existing international institutions or by creating new institutions of their own. And that

shouldn't be a surprise: this is what powerful states strive to achieve in the international system. But particularly for the European Union, which has long been an international normative power, it is a big challenge to recognize that China is emerging as a normative power too, not just an economic one, which means there is a major force internationally which doesn't agree on the norms that we have been putting forward as western liberal democracies. We need to get used to that. We are going to face a lot more plurality in how the world works and in the value systems underpinning these norms. We're going to have to become more comfortable with that. But we shouldn't throw out the fact that we have principles that are important to us, and that the liberal order is something where there are perhaps red lines that we need to make clearer. How do we accommodate differing perspectives but also defend our values? I have not yet seen a coherent strategy about how to do that from the leading western democracies.

Does China's desire to have more say in the international scene risk leading to a "cold war" phase?

Juliette Genevaz We should drop the cold war analogy because our world is so different from the one of that time. During the cold war, the big threat was the use of nuclear weapons... The biggest threat today may be climate change and how we deal with that. China has taken on some form of leadership at the international level regarding climate change, and is very happy to cooperate with whoever wants to cooperate in that policy realm. This has not always been the case: the Chinese leadership was not so keen on dealing with climate change at the Copenhagen Conference 10 years ago, but China's foreign policy stance is often very linked to its domestic policy issues and climate change has become such a domestic problem... To analyze the power balance, we need to look at each policy realm, be it industrial policy planning, climate change, global governance in health...

Global health is a very interesting example to take. China has embarrassed itself by not collaborating fully with the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s expert team. But outside of the WHO, it is doing very intense vaccine diplomacy. And that's been quite successful in some countries. Its involvement in the WHO's COVAX initiative has been very lukewarm—it may increase but the European union was much more forthcoming in this initiative. China is playing geopolitics: it's trying to be there in Africa, in the Middle East, in places that Europe and the US have forsaken (except for the COVAX initiative), and at the same time, it is trying to keep a high profile at the WHO, but not really succeeding. It's a complex, difficult world to cooperate in, but the blame is shared between China and us... or China and the US to be a bit blunt. About vaccine cooperation, for example the Chinese vaccines have been screened, they've been given the green light by all sorts of international authorities... We should adopt it widely and distribute it as widely as we can. The fact that it became an object

of rivalry is absurd because we need to vaccinate as many people as we can. China should be welcome when it's helpful, and in many areas it is helpful.

With various incursions by the Chinese air force into Taiwan's air defense zone, tensions between Taiwan and China are at their worst in 40 years. How do you explain that the peaceful reunification option seems to have drifted away?

Paul Irwin Crookes Taiwan is both an emotionally charged and politically vital issue for the Party in Beijing and has been framed as such for many years. However, a number of more recent developments have brought the cross-Strait relationship into even sharper relief. There is an evolving sense of identity collision with the definition of what it is to be Chinese and to be Taiwanese at the same time, and that definition in Taiwan is different to the one framed by the party-state in Beijing. The principles of liberal democracy, political pluralism, social tolerance and individualism are concepts that Taiwanese people have internalized and are increasingly confident in externalizing as a society. A peaceful reunification would require a level of societal transformation on the mainland that is currently impossible because the party-state as a Leninist system won't let it happen. The ideational development of identity is now the most significant element of what's happening on Taiwan that causes considerable angst to the leadership in Beijing. Recent polling across different age groups on Taiwan show that this contemporary identity construction has shifted opinion away from supporting reunification, especially amongst younger people.

The original Beijing strategy of peacefully reunifying with Taiwan through political, economic and diplomatic pressure seems to have failed. But Xi Jinping has made clear that kicking this issue down to future generations is not an option. There is a leadership—and Party—credibility dimension to this objective. Furthermore, it has always been seen as the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) historic mission to reunite the mainland with Taiwan. Current evidence suggests the Chinese strategy is more and more focused on military assertiveness to achieve this goal, which inevitably increases potential for escalation and conflict. However, this should not mask the very real military challenges and political risks that exist in launching an amphibious operation by Chinese forces across the Taiwan Strait. As a leader well-versed in both military and political strategy, Xi Jinping will no doubt be weighing these factors carefully in determining next steps but tensions remain extremely high in the current cross-Strait relationship and show no sign of diminishing any time soon.

For years, the United States has opted for a policy of strategic ambiguity regarding Taiwan. Is Taiwan becoming a red line for the U.S.?

Andrew Nathan In Washington, a small minority of strate-

gists consider it's not worth disrupting our relations with Beijing to protect Taiwan, and it's not worth a war. They suggest that the United States should find a way to disentangle itself from the Taiwanese guarantee, and maybe even facilitate Taiwan's surrender to Beijing. It is quite far from the mainstream American position, which is the same whether it's a Democratic or a Republican administration or think tanks or academia: the American commitment to the so-called peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue (which is effectively maintenance of the de facto autonomy of Taiwan) has become essential to American credibility in the world. It has hardened into a real commitment. If the United States didn't make good on this commitment, all of our 60 alliances (Japan, South Korea, Australia, NATO...) would be severely deflated. I wouldn't say exactly that it is a red line but it is a core strategic interest of the United States to effectively enforce the policy of peaceful resolution by means of military deterrence.

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The Pentagon has argued for the past decade that the American posture of military deterrence has severely eroded. China has built up asymmetric capabilities consisting of missiles and quiet submarines that can threaten U.S. aircraft carriers as well as missiles that threaten U.S. air and naval bases in Guam, Okinawa and Yokosuka.

The Pentagon labels this set of capabilities as "anti-access area denial" capabilities. There's an active discussion in the defense community about how to respond to this and restore effective deterrence with our own asymmetric deployments. The thinking is to reduce the dependency on aircraft carriers, which are gigantic and very vulnerable: if the Chinese sink one of them, we lose 5,000 to 7,000 personnel. We need smaller platforms, unmanned platforms and a variety of things that would negate the Chinese advantages. We will see over time a fundamental restructuring of the American deterrence position toward China.

The good news is that the Chinese are smarter about jumping into an armed conflict than the Americans have been in the last seventy years or so. Xi Jinping will assess the balance of military power and if he thinks that he's at risk of losing a war over Taiwan, he will wait. I think his bet is that in the long run, the USA is far away, with a lot of other business to attend to, and that eventually Washington will understand that it has lost the deterrence game, and the Taiwanese will understand that, and then China can implement the policy of Sunzi's *Art of War*, of winning the

battle without fighting, and Taiwan will surrender. I don't think Xi Jinping is going to launch a war that he believes he has a significant risk of losing. He is likely to be patient, which means that he might not unify Taiwan within his time in office.

Do you agree with this assessment that Xi Jinping will be patient and that a war is unlikely?

Juliette Genevaz In my opinion, the Chinese don't think they would lose if they waged a war on Taiwan. It's the first contingency that they've been preparing for the past 25 years, it's been leading their military modernization in terms of equipment... It's a military objective for the PLA. And if they launched an attack today, they are pretty sure that they would win because the US couldn't be having a diplomatic answer like they had in 95. If the US sends aircraft carriers, they will get destroyed immediately because China has the most advanced ballistic capacity today. It's very hard to be optimistic about the situation...

Nonetheless, there's another role that Taiwan plays today both for the US and for China which is a key role in the technology supply chains. Taiwan leads in the high technology production that is essential to industrial innovation today. Everyone is racing against each other about technology supply. That might be the most important aspect of Taiwan

Xi Jinping might be thinking about: how do we preserve this capacity that Taiwan has to manufacture the most advanced semiconductors needed to manufacture electric cars, advanced agricultural devices as well as weaponry in the technology race that the US is engaged in with China? Would the military attack preserve this? Would that mean that the Taiwanese production capacity would go into the Chinese mainland? It's very unlikely, so that may trump the military objective... If the status quo manages to keep the supply chains in place, then it may not be worth launching an attack, whatever the symbolic importance of Taiwan is in the political discourse of the CCP.

Finally, there's the ideational divergence which is definitely very important and has been increasing, but I'm not sure that the Chinese leadership is so preoccupied with this. What they're really focused on is both the military objective being ready—and I think they believe that they are

ready—and then there's the question of how to preserve the Taiwanese technological manufacturing capacity in a very pragmatic way. That might be what they perceive in the balance.

What if China was to go further and fire missiles in the Taiwan Strait, as it did in 1995? Would the Americans escalate?

Andrew Nathan For a time the Pentagon considered as a response to a Chinese attack on Taiwan the use of missiles and aircraft to attack Chinese missile and naval bases from which the attack was being launched. But this is a very unattractive option for an American president because it's escalatory, and China is a nuclear-armed power. Even if such a plan doesn't go to nuclear escalation, where does it take you? You are then fighting a battle on the Chinese mainland. Another option is to use cyber warfare, a third is to strangle China economically by using the U.S. Navy to cut off imports of oil to China. There aren't any attractive options. And it's possible that as the United States considers its options, the Chinese may already have taken Taiwan.

However, the operation of taking Taiwan is an extraordinarily difficult one. China would have to ultimately land troops on the ground and that would require an amphibious assault on rocky shores that the Taiwanese are defending. And China would pay a gigantic diplomatic cost. None of the Southeast Asian neighbors want China to launch a war on Taiwan. Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and so forth (maybe with the exception of Cambodia), these countries don't want that disruption of peace and stability in Asia.

Taiwan has the capacity to launch a couple of missiles reaching the mainland. Can Beijing take that risk?

Juliette Genevaz I don't think Taiwan can hold up to the PLA. And the situation is totally different from 1995, I don't think the USA will send any aircraft carriers. Having the Chinese sending amphibious forces there is not very realistic either. What the PLA is considering is not an invasion, because that wouldn't look good and that probably wouldn't be successful. There are other ways. It would be a different kind of scenario where the PLA cuts Taiwan from Internet communications, etc. Cyber warfare has already been underway for some time: Beijing is preparing and it is very well prepared. I don't think a spectacular war is very likely. If you cut off an island from all communications that island can't continue for a very long time, they can't work.

We need to imagine something that looks different from the kinds of war and deployments that we saw in the '90s. And there are many dimensions to take into account: the military objective, the ideational difference, the crucial role of Taiwan in global supply chains... There is also what any confrontation between the PRC and Taiwan would do

to China's foreign policy more broadly, and to Xi Jinping's continuous efforts to carve out a place for China at the multilateral table. This weighs as heavily in the balance as the symbol of Taiwan for the Chinese political discourse.

Technological decoupling is one of the most crucial issues in the rivalry between China and the West. What is the current situation?

Paul Irwin Crookes In the past 20 years, China has broadly engaged in a strategy where the economy was designed to assemble other people's intellectual property, linked to a phenomenally efficient domestic and international supply chain. In terms of incremental innovation for the domestic market, China has achieved great things through adaptation and application in a distinctly Chinese context. But in terms of blue-sky innovation in certain key areas like fabrication capability of advanced microchip technology, China has not succeeded as much. A number of previous strategies led by the party-state have not been sufficiently targeted and have even led to successful foreign enterprises becoming key parts of China's own supply chain, especially in the information technology sector.

Their new "dual circulation strategy," which actually builds on the now de-emphasized yet still operational "Made in China 2025" technology upgrading policy, is a much more overt attempt to inject vigor into creating domestic capabilities in these key areas. They want to create indigenous capability especially in the microchip fabrication sector, which is one of the most important industrial sectors where China remains behind the United States technologically. They have very capable scientists and developers, so with the right kind of targeting they might achieve their goals, in which case it may be China that seeks to decouple from everyone else.

Even the U.S. wants to make more of its own capabilities in this area within its own borders to reduce dependency on imports from Taiwan and elsewhere in a way very similar to what China wishes to achieve too, albeit from a different starting point. So decoupling isn't necessarily a great destruction of existing supply chains. It can be a narrow focus on creating wholly indigenous supply and production capability which is then protected domestically for various reasons—often linked to national security.

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Do you think China's stated objective of being the new technology leader is the core of the confrontation with the U.S.?

Juliette Genevaz Technological innovation is not a zero-sum game. International organizations exist where Chinese and American industrial actors work together on innovative technologies—that's the current focus of my research. At the international organizations that deal with technological standards, people sit at the table together. The technologies that each of them develops have to come together in order to operate 5G or artificial intelligence, so there is a need for cooperation. And it's not one technology, it's a thousand of them that need to work together. China leads in some of these technologies, and the U.S. leads in others. In these areas, decoupling is probably possible but it would be very hard and very detrimental to innovation.

Former President Trump nonetheless fueled a tech war by imposing sanctions on Huawei and cutting China out of key supply chain components. Can the U.S. not accept another country being the world's technology leader? A sort of Sputnik syndrome?

Andrew Nathan I don't think it's some kind of irrational American pride in being the number one. Rather, in the long run, whoever has the best 21st century cutting-edge technologies is going to make a huge amount of money. So, it's partly about setting the standard but it's really about who's going to make a gigantic amount of money with robotics, AI, nanotechnology, biotechnology, autonomous vehicles, battery technology, etc. In those areas, the decoupling takes the form of a strong concern amounting to an obsession, and perhaps in some cases exaggerated, with Chinese technology theft. There's a huge concern about that because the US, Germany, France and Israel are countries that are producing a lot of innovative ideas and the Chinese have numerous methods of getting that technology, whether it's investing in a startup firm in Silicon Valley or whether it's sending a visiting scholar to a physics department at an American university or whether it's reading Western technical journals. They have legal and illegal methods of acquiring technology. The Western countries will steadily increase obstacles to that kind of technology transfer in order to preserve their competitive advantages.

Could the US actually decouple from China?

Andrew Nathan In the Trump administration, Peter Navarro, the president's trade adviser, really wanted a hundred percent decoupling. We would never see any Chinese products and they would not see ours. That ran into a number of problems. Take the example of Apple which produces a huge number of products in China: Apple cannot produce that amount of things anyplace else in the world. Even going forward, if you redeploy your resources and gradually invest in India or Vietnam, it is impossible to produce

that amount outside of China, no place has a sufficiently large workforce, sufficiently high-capacity ports, and so on. Then, there's the problem of the Chinese market. It is too big to want to be out of it. Even in the finance industry, the so-called Wall Street faction in Trump's White House was unwilling to decouple from China because there's too much money to be made there. These are some examples of how you cannot fully decouple the United States from China.

But there are two areas where the United States has to, and will, decouple from China—and I think Europe will go along with this, eventually. One is in technologies that affect security, 5G for instance. The Trump administration worked very hard to make the case that the Huawei technology is vulnerable to spying. The thing with digital technology is that somebody's gonna spy on you. So you decide who's going to spy on you: do you prefer to have the Chinese spy on you or the Americans? Just pick your spy! That will require anybody who doesn't want China to spy on them to decouple from China with respect to 5G and some other technologies that have that vulnerability. So it's a sectoral thing: there are some sectors where decoupling must happen and there are other sectors where it cannot happen.

What is China's greatest strength and weakness to achieving its goals?

Andrew Nathan The Chinese political system is very tough and strong but it is in some fundamental way unstable. This intense discipline that Xi Jinping is trying to exercise over the entire society, not just Hong Kong, not just Xinjiang, but the middle class, the intellectuals, the party members themselves, it seems to me shows us that he senses threats to China's stability at home. And I don't see how a government can continue to impose that kind of discipline and control over what people think, say and read, all the way

from now until 2049. Especially as the economy, education, urbanization and wealth increase, people want more freedom. Twenty-eight years ago, we did not anticipate what we would see now: we're still in for a lot of dramatic change in China.

Juliette Genevaz The way that Xi has personalized power and the party leadership is a big problem for stability, so I totally agree with what professor Nathan just said. What he has done to the party has turned it more unstable. Regarding its biggest assets, it may be some new international links that China has built with third countries in Africa and South Asia, that western powers have not been able to build.

Paul Irwin Crookes I don't share the optimism of an interpretation that argues we're going to see the internalizing of liberal democracy in China. If you look at the evolution of education and the ideological underpinning of thought development, the embedded nature of surveillance and control of the Internet era coupled with the use of artificial intelligence, I can see many different ways in which the tentacles of the party-state system can continue to monitor and control the people of China so as to maintain the regime in power long into the future.

*This interview is based on a roundtable discussion conducted by Pierre Haski, France Inter geopolitics columnist, at the EURICS/Inalco/IFRAE/OSGA conference: **The Chinese Communist Party's 100-Year Trajectory**. It has been edited by Aurélie Louchart for this issue.*

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