

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The first in our series of expert comment and analysis, authored by the former Foreign Secretary and GSF Advisory Board member, the Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## China's Future And Its Relationship With The Wider World

That China will be the new superpower, alongside the United States, cannot be seriously contested. Its population of over a billion, its recent increase in economic strength and export capability, its status as a nuclear weapon state and its occupation of a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations will ensure that its aspiration is realised.

Indeed, its emergence as a superpower should have occurred 50 years ago. It was the foolishness of its Communist ideology, of the Great Leap Forward, and of the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong, that seriously delayed its transformation.

This is not just hypothesis. We have known, for many years, that the Chinese are excellent and successful capitalists when they are allowed to be. It is no coincidence that Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, all Chinese states and territories, became as modern and prosperous, two generations ago, as China is now. It has been by adopting capitalism and market economics, although with 'Chinese characteristics' that the so-called People's Republic has flourished since Deng Xiaoping. Today, China is Communist in name only. In effect it has created a system of State Capitalism in order to enable the Communist Party to retain its power and privileges.

Although China, nominally a Communist state, is now the world's other superpower, the world is not about to see a new Cold War of a kind we faced with the Soviet Union from 1945-1989. There are reasons why one can say that the two situations are not comparable.

Firstly, the Soviet Union was not just a national threat to the United States and to Europe. In Communism and Marxism-Leninism it possessed an alternative ideology that had

appeal to millions of ordinary people in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as in Western Europe. China has no comparable ideology. Its enthusiasm for authoritarianism and dictatorship is of appeal to other despots and potential dictators. There may be other states that will end up, or even choose through election, a populist dictator but China cannot aspire, as the Soviet Union did, to be the potential leader of a global empire.

Secondly, China, unlike the Soviet Union, does not control or, so far as we are aware, aspire to control, as oppose to influence, the domestic or foreign policy of any other state, apart from Taiwan. The Soviets controlled the satellite states of Eastern and Central Europe throughout the Cold War and invaded Hungary and Czechoslovakia when they tried to restore their independence.

Thirdly, although China has greatly increased its military and naval power it will remain far weaker than the United States both in nuclear weapons and conventional military strength for the foreseeable future.

At the time of writing, the Chinese government's influence and authority in the world is in decline. Its attempts to conceal the Coronavirus, and its almost certain falsification of the number of deaths and infections that have occurred in China have not only eroded its legitimacy with its own people but has already incurred severe criticism from African and other governments in the developing world. In North America and Europe, China, with its current policies, is seen as a much less attractive partner than in the past.

Its human rights record and its dreadful incarceration of over a million Uighur in western China, as well as its assaults on Hong Kong autonomy and its bullying of its neighbours over the South China Sea have won it no new friends and is losing it old ones.



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There is another point that needs to be made.

Xi Jinping likes to present China as a model to follow because of its economic growth and transformation. It aspires to offer a kind of government to Asia, Africa and Latin America based on its own form of state capitalism combined with one party dictatorship.

But, in truth, it is because China has a population of more than a billion that we have become aware of its achievements. China's economic success, while impressive, has been no greater than that of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan or other Asian countries that achieved similar economic growth years ago. Indeed China's achievements remain significantly less than its Asian neighbours who have shown that one can combine prosperity with genuine democratic systems of government. Taiwan and South Korea transformed themselves into democracies which respect the rule of law. They, together with Japan, were economically successful a generation ago. They are more attractive role models for developing countries to follow than is China.

But global supremacy will be near impossible for China to achieve. The world has changed fundamentally since the British Empire covered a quarter of the world or since the United States achieved its own global power after 1945.

The British Empire only happened because the Industrial Revolution gave Britain unprecedented economic and naval strength. That led to Britain, during the nineteenth century, gaining control over weak, poor, undeveloped countries unable to resist. The United States then replaced Britain. Its extraordinary dominance occurred in the twentieth century after 1945 with a Europe and a wider world devastated by the Second World War.

In contrast, today, all China's Asian neighbours are modern, successful states. While individually they cannot compete with China they are slowly forming new alliances to check Chinese ambition. So India and Japan have joint naval exercises and communist Viet Nam is getting closer to the United States than it is to China. India, South East Asia and Japan will, to a considerable degree, balance China's strength especially if the United States remains fully committed to the region.

There remain two major issues which will determine China's future and its relationship with the wider world.

Will hundreds of millions of increasingly well-educated middle class Chinese be content to remain subjects of a totalitarian government denied the basic civil liberties and freedoms that much of the rest of the world, including India, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and Taiwan enjoys? Or will they insist

on political reform and political pluralism as have so many once undemocratic countries? Will they demand the rule of law rather than rule by law so that their rights and property can be protected and their government will be held accountable?

Secondly, will the rest of the world work together to ensure that their combined strength will prevent an aggressive China from imposing its power by divide and rule? The answer to that question will, to a considerable degree, depend on the United States. If it can regain its political will to lead the free world there can be little doubt that the world as a whole will be able to contain China, if that proves to be necessary.

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