



Agreements started in the mid-2020s for expansive cooperation on issues of mutual concern resulted in the development of a “near-ally” relationship between the United States and China by 2035. (Artificial intelligence image created by Charlotte Richter, *Military Review*)

2035: Sino-American Détente

From Near-Peer Foe to Near Ally Again

Dr. Geoff Babb

Preface. Army Futures Command (AFC) Pamphlet 525-2, *Future Operational Environment: Forging the Future in an Uncertain World, 2035-2050*, discusses four “alternative futures.” These are warfighting scenarios the United States Army must be prepared to confront to “deter or fight and win against.” The first is a “New Cold War,” where the United States and China “compete to achieve global primacy.” The second is “Ascending Powers,” where the

United States and China compete within a multipolar system of “persistent instability and conflict.” The third is “Stable Competition,” a bipolar world where “China ascends to superpower status.” Alternative four is “Clashing Coalitions,” where the world is multipolar and “geographically unpredictable.”¹ In all four futures, China is a major protagonist. This article outlines a fifth alternative that includes dealing with issues outlined in AFC’s pamphlet but also offers an alternative history

from 2023 to 2035 where the United States and China end up as near allies that together confront Russia and a range of military operations across the globe.

This article is written in late 2035.

What China's campaign of co-option, coercion, and concealment has in common with Putin's playbook is the objective of collapsing the free, open, and rules-based order that the United States and its allies established after World War II, the order that some believed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, was no longer contested.

—H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*²

In 1971, Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai began the process of fundamentally altering a long adversarial Sino-American relationship. The United States was an aggressive, if not leading, participant in China's century of humiliation.³ To protect American citizens and commerce, U.S. naval forces patrolled the Yangtze River and its tributaries beginning in the 1850s. In 1900, an American joint force participated in the multinational effort during the Boxer Relief Expedition that included operations against Chinese imperial forces. This event led to the subsequent stationing from 1900 to 1941 of both U.S. Army and Marine elements in multiple locations in China. Through World War II and the second phase of the Chinese Civil War, U.S. forces supported Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists who were ultimately defeated in 1949 by Mao Zedong and the communists. The first major direct military conflict between the Americans and Chinese communist forces occurred from 1950 to 1953 on the Korean Peninsula.

This animosity and periodic confrontations with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued through two major crises in the Taiwan Strait in the 1950s and Chinese support to North Vietnam through the 1960s. However, a slow process of change in the relationship became possible with Mao's split with the Soviet Union in the late 1950s. By 1969, this deterioration progressed to conflict over the demarcation of their common border. By the early 1970s, China played a key supporting role for the United States in ending the long Vietnam War. By the end of the 1970s, China was at war with Vietnam with an invasion in early 1979, fewer than five

years after the fall of Saigon, and only weeks after Deng Xiaoping's visit to Washington.

With the 1984 visit of President Ronald Reagan to China, military-to-military activities with the United States increased significantly with weapons sales, intel sharing, and closer military-to-military ties. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union ended the driving force behind improving Sino-U.S. military ties. That said, as military and diplomatic relations grew more estranged over the following decades, mutual economic entanglements expanded as the Chinese economy steadily grew and became more integrated into the global system. Trade with the United States continued to expand, despite worsening relations. In the early 2020s, economic decoupling and independence became the goal of both sides; however, that evolved over time to de-risking. The economic relationship eventually settled into selective detaching and a return to a new form of bounded globalization that reemphasized prudent nationalization of key sectors with increased protection of security-related industrial and technological ideas and property. This dichotomy lasted until the U.S. presidential election of 2032 and subsequent policies supporting Sino-American détente on a level not seen since the early 1970s.

Working more closely with American and European businesses was recognized by the post-Xi era Chinese government as critical for reenergizing economic growth. Xi Jinping's destructive left turn, especially in his third five-year term, had caused significant economic stagnation, putting at risk the CCP global external

Dr. Geoff Babb was commissioned from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, in 1973 as a U.S. Army military intelligence officer. After serving in the Defense Intelligence Agency as a ground forces analyst, he was assigned to Monterey, California, Hong Kong, and Beijing for language and area studies. He was then assigned to Joint and Army Headquarters in Hawaii. In 1991, he joined the Command and General Staff College faculty at Fort Leavenworth. After retiring from the military, he earned a masters degree in East Asian languages and cultures, and a doctorate in Chinese history from the University of Kansas. He currently serves as a professor in the Department of Military History.

relationships, internal control, and especially legitimacy. For more than a decade, China's inward-looking protective policies curtailed investments and led foreign businesses to diversify away from China. After the collapse of the Xi regime, foreign companies slowly began to return to the Middle Kingdom to take advantage of technical capabilities and irreplaceable manufacturing

China slowly began to recover from economic stagnation and took advantage of the significant successes in reductions in fossil fuel needs that nuclear power, alternative energy sources, and transportation system electrification allowed. The virtual end of the global oil economy nearly beggared an unprepared Russia. The new post-Putin regime was forced to embark on a dra-



As memories of the Soviet dissolution faded and the excesses and failures of the Putin and Xi regimes were exposed, the new regime in Beijing again opened the door to economic changes not seen since the time of Deng Xiaoping.



advantages in addition to greater access for goods and services in the Chinese market. Xi's programs to avoid any semblance of a Soviet Union-style collapse fueled the CPC's ultimately self-destructive move inward and to the neo-Marxist left. This had been exacerbated by the slow recovery from COVID and successful American and Western efforts to decouple the economies and strengthen relationships with friends and allies in Asia. However, as memories of the Soviet dissolution faded and the excesses and failures of the Putin and Xi regimes were exposed, the new regime in Beijing again opened the door to economic changes not seen since the time of Deng Xiaoping.

The Emerging Situation

By 2035, the eras of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, and shared Sino-Russian anti-Americanism, had passed into the dustbin of history. The weak leadership that immediately emerged in both Russia and China at the end of the 2020s was followed in Beijing with the return of a strong, pragmatic nationalist leader less guided by ideology than workable policies to address emerging national security and economic growth concerns. While relations with Russia worsened, China mended fences with a West that was slow to recognize the sea change in Beijing. The relationship had been poisoned by China's aggressive military posture during the Xi era and the ever-present "all relations are based on deception" paradigm that initially prevented a more balanced view of China's actions and objectives.

matic and risky program to exploit alternative resources in the Far East and the former SSR Central Asian states. This was often directly at odds with Chinese interests and developments in these regions.

Russian aggression created political and social discontent in Central Asia and in Russia east of the Urals. China began to react more forcefully in the west and north as Russia attempted to play a greater role across the former SSR "-stans," Siberia, and the Far East. This fracturing of the Sino-Russian relationship was exacerbated as both nations vied for influence and non-oil critical resource extraction not only in Central Asia but also in Africa and South America. In addition, concerns over the future development and usage of the Northern Sea Route continued to divide the two states as its value for trade and commerce became more fact than hope. China, northern European states, and the United States were united in the desire for security, freedom of access, and support to navigation along this vital sea line of communication.

Whether led by Peter the Great, the Soviet Communist Party, or the neonationalist Putin, Russia has always been an expansive empire without easily defensible borders and a mean streak of often well-founded paranoia. China, on the other hand, is a long-established empire whose borders have expanded and contracted since the establishment of the Qin Dynasty in 221 BCE, depending on the ruling dynasties' proclivities for addressing foreign threats or domestic stability and consolidation. For China—ancient,

dynastic, or modern—there has always been a Hobbesian choice of which enemy to fight. The external potential foes most often originate in the north, and there are the ever-present internal threats to stability. Temporarily ruling dynasties and regimes experienced their rise, plateau, and inevitable loss or squandering of the right to rule. By 2030, the Xi regime had lost the “mandate of heaven” and was unable to meet the needs

global stage in consonance with their history, demographics, and geography. However, in this truly multipolar world, China’s increasingly closer relations with the West has been strengthened by years of Russia’s continued threat to NATO and its overbearing behavior toward Central and Far East Asia. A harbinger of these policies in Asia was Russia’s “peacekeeping” effort in Kazakhstan in 2022. This aggressive deploy-

“By 2035, the crises in both Ukraine and Moldova, which was invaded and occupied by Russia in 2027 as the U.S.-Taiwan crisis erupted, had reached a relatively stable, if still uneasy, status quo.”

and demands of the Chinese people as Xi dealt unsuccessfully with his paranoias.

In the final analysis, strong personalities heading autocratic regimes, with supporting sycophant oligarchs, magistrates, or politburos, are still likely to rule in both countries for the coming decades. However, since 1949, the CCP has shown an amazing ability to rebound successfully after debilitating autarky. Between 1966 and 1976, Mao turned China inward during the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution that drove China to isolate itself from the world. While Xi Jinping did not move as far left as Mao, he did attempt to reduce China’s reliance on global trade, if not resources. As Deng Xiaoping opened China back up to the world post 1978, the CCP after Xi is embarked on a similar course of reopening.

China has also successfully conducted turnarounds from costly outwardly aggressive periods in pursuit of unachievable foreign policy goals and the ever-present requirement to maintain domestic stability. China’s internal policy changes and more realistic international goals have led to a return to solid economic growth, stable government, and more “harmonious” international relations, with one major exception. During the first five years of the 2030s, China and Russia emerged as each other’s most likely enemy and primary threat, to the great advantage of the United States.

China and Russia are destined to vie for control of Halford Mackinder’s heartland and regional dominance.⁴ Both empires also demand influence on the

ment in China’s backyard eventually evolved into a full-on Sino-Russian split. It also led to the fracturing of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that had formed in 2001 to assist China and Russia with working together diplomatically, economically, and in the areas of security and defense in the Eurasia region. The United States reacted, albeit slowly and tentatively, with support for closer Chinese ties to Europe as the split became more obvious. In 2033, the new American administration’s national security documents outlined measures to support China and take advantage of the growing animosity between the two rival Eurasian powers.

By 2035, the crises in both Ukraine and Moldova, which was invaded and occupied by Russia in 2027 as the U.S.-Taiwan crisis erupted, had reached a relatively stable, if still uneasy, status quo. The Chinese economy that peaked before COVID and then began its precipitous decline in the late 2020s helped drive the new regime’s mandate to address the myriad domestic issues that grew in the Xi era.⁵ China’s internal and diplomatic situations were significantly influenced by the failure of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the Western-fearing “debt trap” evolved into Beijing’s own “debt entanglement.” China’s relative economic decline, exacerbated by its debt crisis and demands by the Chinese people to address internal issues, was instrumental in a sharp decline not only in foreign lending but also in offshore resource procurement and manufacturing, and this led to a significant drop in defense spending.



The theater commands of the People's Liberation Army, 4 February 2016. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Despite the military threat from Russia, China was forced to not only curb the growth of the People's Liberation Army but also to make significant reductions in forces, operational tempo, and spending on research and development. More surprising were curbs on intelligence operations. Spying, a cornerstone of China's way of war, was outlined over two thousand years ago in Sun Tzu's 2,500-year-old treatise on war. Sun Tzu, a contemporary of Confucius, stated that intelligence is vital to the national and military leadership's ability to deal with threats and to maintain power.⁶ However, the developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and Western success in securing of systems and communications in the cyber domain seriously curtailed machine and human intelligence collection and complicated source management. In terms of internal

surveillance that had been the hallmark of the Xi control regime, AI became a key countersurveillance tool in the hands of China's well-educated and the all too often idle and discontented younger population.

Successful programs in the mid-2020s by the United States and the West to deprive China of key defense technologies also helped bring on a plateau and then a reduction in major military systems development and acquisition. Defense of the homeland and securing influence and access to resources in Central and Far East Asia became the hallmark of China's defense policy as clearly outlined in its 2034 Defense White Paper. The China dream of the Xi administration to displace a declining United States and gain a globally harmonious hegemony with, by, and through an expanding and more capable military, expansive BRI with greater port

accesses worldwide, and the fostering of an alternative geopolitical model, failed spectacularly. The debt trap so feared by many U.S. security analysts became a diplomatic and economic tarpit with widespread backlash against Chinese “liaison institutes,” private and state-supported companies, China’s cash-strapped central banks, and diplomatic communities.

civil wars with accompanying massive human rights violations and dislocations are now being addressed. The complexity and diversity of the potential threats precludes a singular focus and demands capabilities and plans across the spectrum of conflict.

Responsibility to protect deployments by the United Nations with NATO, U.S., and Chinese mili-

“ Access to artificial intelligence; exploitation of social media; broad availability of cyber capabilities, drones, and a lethal array of antiair, antiship, and antiarmor weapons systems; and an organizational and doctrinal approaches for their use have flourished in both regular and irregular forces of both state and nonstate actors. ”

Perhaps as important geo-strategically, American presidential and congressional elections in 2028 and 2032 slowly returned political parties to greater consensus for a foreign policy of measured global engagement while maintaining reasonable growth in defense expenditures. The U.S. military, despite some lingering holdovers in the fringes of both political parties and in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) leadership, no longer sees China as its “pacing threat.”⁷ For more than a decade, China’s “rise” and military expansion kept the United States, its friends and allies in the region, and key NATO partners more focused on security for the region, drove weapons improvements, and finally drove a realistic and militarily supported “pivot” to Asia.

The United States and its allies and friends slowly put into place their own mutually supporting anti-access/area denial system along the first and second island chains designed to keep an aggressive China from breaking out. This strategy and these new systems are now focused on the Russian Far East and supporting pan-Asian informal security regimes as Moscow has now attained top billing as America’s potential threat. However, throughout the world, there are islands of instability that demand American support for multinational approaches to global security. Localized conflicts caused by climate change, loss of arable land with diminishing agricultural yields, accelerating and expanding refugee migrations, mutating terrorist regimes, and

tary contingents and support increased significantly, driven by a shared desire to “do something” to ameliorate the worsening conditions. This concept emerged thirty years ago in a world summit “to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.”⁸ However, it receded into the background as the new Cold War emerged in both Europe and Asia. At about the same time in 2005, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick talked about China as a “responsible stakeholder,” a role that has now also come to pass.⁹

Chinese and American troops are increasingly working side-by-side throughout the world, conducting multidomain operations across the lower end of the spectrum of conflict against sophisticated and surprising technically savvy nonstate actors and failed or failing states. Access to artificial intelligence; exploitation of social media; broad availability of cyber capabilities, drones, and a lethal array of antiair, antiship, and antiarmor weapons systems; and an organizational and doctrinal approaches for their use have flourished in both regular and irregular forces of both state and nonstate actors. China, the West, and the U.S. have been forced to cooperate far beyond what was imaged even in the early 2030s.

Perhaps most importantly for the improved Sino-U.S. relationship is the changed situation in Taiwan and the South China Sea. In the USINDOPACOM security environment of 2035, the Taiwan situation has

returned to the 1970s consensus with the passing of the “Cuban Missile Crisis moment” in the fall of 2027. The result of what might have been a catastrophic escalation to major conflict was a new communique reaffirming a modified One China policy. The new Tianjin communique included a separate “secret” face-saving agreement that reunification is an issue for China’s “future generations” to decide, and for American defense support to Taiwan to be much reduced. The support to Taiwan through the 2020s and increasing pressure from neighboring Asian states not only cast doubt on the possibility of a successful PLA invasion but also convinced China of the folly of continuing a policy of forced reunification. This major change was the result of a near catastrophic escalation.

A widening conflict was averted after a brief clash that began with a U.S. destroyer that was badly damaged while transiting the Taiwan Strait. This resulted in an air battle during which numerous U.S., PRC, and Taiwan planes were shot down, and one of China’s South China Sea islet fortresses was obliterated in retaliation when PLA forces fired on Philippine fishing vessels overwatched by U.S. naval assets. War was averted only by a quick diplomatic intercession by the Association of Southeast Asian States led by Vietnam and Indonesia. Neither a CCP reunification of Taiwan, nor sovereignty claims in the Spratly Islands, nor a “winning without fighting strategy” are now seen as viable to the regime in Beijing. Reuniting with Taiwan through coercive and military approaches were not viable at acceptable cost. Both sides agreed to continue a One China policy and “kick the chips down the road.” This incident and Xi Jinping’s failure to convince the People’s Liberation Army leadership that the United States would not escalate, set the stage for negotiation and the strategic relook by the PRC and the United States. This was a Cuban Missile Crisis moment for both countries and the region.

China’s growing fears of conflict with Russia also played a significant role in driving the Chinese to the negotiating table over Taiwan and South China Sea. This major change in the regional security environment eliminated the most potentially volatile situations between the United States and China. At the same time, China reached an accommodation with the nations of the Association of Southeast Asian States after a decade of counterproductive “wolf warrior”

diplomacy and attempts to intimidate those nations adjacent to and near the South China Sea. By the late 2020s, the key assumptions outlined in Michael Pillsbury’s *One Hundred Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* and Rush Doshi’s *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* were no longer valid.¹⁰ Two decades of fraught relations and escalating tensions from 2012 to 2027 were not appropriate foundations for Sino-U.S. relations.

In a very prescient book, *The Avoidable War*, published in 2022 by former Australian prime minister and China expert Kevin Rudd, presented ten factors that drove Xi’s foreign and domestic policies.¹¹ He outlined not only what drove Xi’s policies but also how and why the United States saw China as the rising and most dangerous potential enemy. Mutual misunderstandings, animosities, and worst-case assumptions fueled what was nearly a road to war.

Should the two giants [China and the U.S.] find a way to coexist without betraying their core interests—through what I call strategic managed competition—the world will be better for it. Should they fail, down the other path lies the possibility of a war many times more destructive than what we are seeing in Ukraine today—and, as in 1914, one that will rewrite the future in ways we can barely imagine.¹²

The basis of Xi’s security policies was founded on a goal of national rejuvenation, anchored in the legacy of China’s weakness and exploitation during the hundred years of humiliation. Xi was determined that this would not happen to China again, and this was an easy sell to the people of China who saw the United States as engaged in a program to stop its rightful rise to global influence. However, China’s real goals, even under Xi, were more defensive than offensive. The objective was global influence compatible with China’s new place in the world and secure borders with the fourteen adjacent states, Japan, and the United States rather than expansion of a global empire controlled by a new “tribute system.”

Former National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster had outlined Xi’s aggressive “three-pronged” strategy, which he characterized as “co-option, coercion, and concealment.”¹³ Through most of the 2020s, many American foreign policy experts saw China as the major security threat to the United States and its allies. However, a

frank discussion of the consequences, global and regional, of a war with China was generally avoided. Few wanted to think about much less explore in any detail how limited military operations in the South China Sea or Taiwan could spiral out of control leading to horizontal escalation across the Indian Ocean and along vital global sea lines of communication. The possibilities of escalation to global conflict were never fully elucidated nor the following questions answered with any clarity or depth. A term from the Vietnam War by Professor Douglas Pike comes to mind: “vincible ignorance.”¹⁴

What does war with one-fifth of mankind, armed with nuclear weapons, in their home waters or territory, against a government that practices civil-military-economic-intelligence fusion look like? What is the direct existential security threat to the American homeland, and what are the triggers, or red lines, for such a war with China?

As this current *détente* with China goes forward, what are the residuals from the formerly fraught relationship that should be understood and addressed? Looking at Rudd’s ten characteristics outlined in *The Avoidable War* and how these evolved through the early 2030s in terms of the China threat and foreign and domestic policies provides a useful roadmap to how and why the U.S.-China relationship evolved relatively quickly from near conflict to near alliance. In hindsight, the American strategy was based on worst-case assumptions that thankfully did not materialize.

The U.S. national security documents of the early 2020s were full of dubious underlying assumptions on which unrealistic strategies were built that may have protected the Nation and its allies and friends in the region, but also provoked a provocative and escalating response from China. A key issue was the inability of the U.S. policy community to come to grips with China’s rightful place in the security, diplomatic, and economic global environment, and this almost led to war. An analysis of China’s evolution over the last decade through the lens of Rudd’s ten characteristics along with a sober view of China’s historical lessons, which they used and understood, helps explain how we got to where we are today. The bottom line is Xi’s goals were more aspirational than achievable and not a true reflection of China’s true global intentions and national direction. Reviewing these ten characteristics is a method of evaluating why many of the assumptions

that drove America’s broad anti-Chinese agenda and animosity did not stand up over the test of time.

Core Interest 1: “The First Circle: The Politics of Staying in Power” (Chapter 4)

Keeping the CCP in power is the key driving factor in Xi’s decision. A classic example was his turnaround in 2023 of the three-year COVID lockdown. The driver is not ideology, it is pragmatism; Marxism is the vocabulary, but not the foundational ethic of Xi thought. The party fears the people and for good reason. Xi is as subject to losing the mandate of heaven as any past dynastic emperor. In addition, the party has had and will have factions that ebb and flow as the dynamics of the influence of the people and regional blocks fluctuate.

Core Interest 2: “The Second Circle: Securing National Unity” (Chapter 5)

Economic growth was the key to national unity. Initially, the Chinese people fully supported the rejuvenation of the Middle Kingdom, the party’s call for protection and reunification of core sovereignty to include Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, and the South China Sea. Over the decade, it became increasingly clear that the United States and the West were not the enemy and responsible for the “splittist activities” as claimed by the CCP. The measured reduction in aggressive activities by the United States and its partners in concert with a persistent information campaign showed results over time on the views of the Chinese people. A strategy based on the false assumption that “the only thing China understands is power” with its attendant increasing military pressure on its periphery changed with the American acceptance of the reality of China’s more defensive posture reminiscent of Sun Tzu’s “invincibility lies in the defense” strategy.¹⁵

Core Interest 3: “The Third Circle: Ensuring Economic Prosperity” (Chapter 6)

China could not recover the economic growth targets necessary to support domestic stability without Western technology, markets, and investments. The deep flaws of Xi’s policies began to become apparent with his COVID response and grew inexorably over time. There could be no economic recovery and development without capitalism, access to technology,

and foreign markets. China was forced to move back to Dengist policies.

Core Interest 4: “The Fourth Circle: Making Economic Development Environmentally Sustainable” (Chapter 7)

Global climate issues demanded U.S., European, and Chinese cooperation. Catastrophic crop failure in China, significant reduction in global food sources, and technology-inspired fixes demanded Sino-American cooperation. As throughout its history, poverty (in this case the stalling of China’s economic rise) and the number and severity of natural disasters presage the loss of the mandate of heaven.

Core Interest 5: “The Fifth Circle: Modernizing the Military” (Chapter 8)

Non-security demands for funds and the costs of the systems and operational forces for multidomain operations forced China to dramatically reduce defense spending. Naval and aviation expenditure were the first to be curtailed. Ironically, the country that Mao introduced to People’s War and the importance of men over technology saw its weakness across the security domain—not in the technology of its forces, but in the leadership, organization, and especially the preparation and quality of its forces.

Core Interest 6: “The Sixth Circle: Managing China’s Neighborhood” (Chapter 9)

China had few allies among the fourteen states on its border. Russia was always a potential threat and is now the enemy. Myanmar is a continuing embarrassment of human rights abuses and autocratic government. Pakistan is a long-standing ally normally poorly and inadequately governed by its military. North Korea is more of a millstone than border buffer fortress. India and Vietnam are ancient enemies, constantly testing the winds for policy changes and never trusting the words or actions of the Beijing government. Beyond the bordering states are a second web of problematic powers in Australia, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore, all allies or close friends of the United States. China has no friends and only needy allies on its border.

The wolf warrior diplomacy and “wolfpack business practices” drove many nations into the Western

diplomatic and economic camp. China’s coercion backfired dramatically, first in the nations on its periphery, but as its economy shrank, its repayment demands intensified to become a global phenomenon. China’s continued activity as a bad or inconsistent friend drove most away. Xi’s bad-neighbor policy backfired and underwent systematic revision.

Core Interest 7: “The Seventh Circle: Securing China’s Maritime Periphery—the Western Pacific, the Indo-Pacific, and the Quad” (Chapter 10)

There is no Chinese Ma Han, and the Middle Kingdom is not a natural naval power as outlined in the writing of Alfred Thayer Mahan. Reminiscent of the end China’s Treasure Fleet of the voyages of Zheng He, China’s navy shrank in size and became very much a defense force in its home waters inside the first island chain. This was driven in part by a U.S. strategy not to concentrate on breaking through the anti-access/area denial defensive system, but to instead build a defensive belt with its allies from the Republic of Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore, and India; China could not compete. This allied naval defense strategy helped build a near NATO-type organization when very few analysts believed such unity was possible. In addition, Japan, Australia, and India’s naval modernization programs also helped to convince China that its maritime program could not compete against a vast allied armada, despite the self-imposed fiscal cap of the size of the U.S. Navy of just over three hundred ships.

Core Interest 8: “The Eighth Circle: Going West—The Belt and Road Initiative” (Chapter 11)

This program was a catastrophic failure. It was an unaffordable, unmanageable, and unsupportable program. The BRI did not evolve past an economic program to facilitate trade and resource access to a much-feared military basing system. It became a major drain on China’s resources and led to a backlash against its too often heavy-handed methods and overseas jobs program for Chinese workers. Like the Treasure Fleet of Zheng He, the new leadership in China abandoned the program. It did consolidate its investments in those areas where key resources critical to China’s economic development were located, predominately in Africa.

The less publicized land segment of the BRI was mortally wounded in Central Asia by the growing competition with Russia. Beyond that, this New Silk Road was not fiscally sustainable or sufficiently profitable given the transportation infrastructure costs and lack of transit-state markets. How do you collect on the debt trap with Pakistan or Iran? The cost of buying influence and greater access was more than China could bear as the domestic requirements for funding took precedence.

Core Interest 9: “The Ninth Circle: Increasing Chinese Leverage Across Europe, Africa, and Latin America and Gaining a Foothold in the Arctic” (Chapter 12)

China’s efforts in South America and Africa caused a significant reaction. Other foreign competitors began to learn from and outcompete China in acquiring access to needed natural resources. The host nations also became more sophisticated in their demands for not only better terms for what was extracted, but also for local refinement, manufacturing, and production. Several attempts by China to move beyond economic relationships for the ports and facilities they had developed for overtly military purposes, as a remedy for the incurred debt, backfired. Military access to another nation’s ports is mostly a function of the circumstance at the time of the conflict or crises for which they are needed. Nations have their own self-serving interests that must align with those of their allies to survive. The BRI saw major and extensive economic, military, and diplomatic setbacks.

Core Interest 10: “Changing the Global Rules-Based Order” (Chapter 13)

A study of history, and especially Japan’s attempt to establish an East Asian coprosperity sphere, is instructive for understanding 2035 China. China was never going to repeat Japan’s mistakes, even by winning without fighting. The cost of empire and global influence are a bill China was never going to pay. Perhaps Fukuyama’s “End of History and the Last Man”¹⁶ is instead better viewed as an end of empires. It is not about the inevitability of the triumph of democracy or autocracy, but the inevitability of conflict and search for global balance of power. A global order dominated by China was never in the cards. A correct reading of China’s new “tribute system” showed not domination, but measured management of

foreign affairs by pragmatically dealing with stronger and weaker powers on its periphery for its own stability, national interests, international legitimacy, and harmony.

China’s goal, even under Xi, was not global hegemony, nor even the displacement of the not so pacific Pax Americana that emerged after World War II. China showed it was willing to participate in a system that attempted secure regional harmony, using compromise, cajoling, and coercion only as a last resort. The new Han China of Xi Jinping was never going to be the second coming or the foreign Mongol Yuan (1279–1368), the foreign Manchu Qing (1644–1911), or even the Han Chinese Ming (1368–1644). These dynasties ruled a China that aggressively expanded and protected the Middle Kingdom for over seven centuries until the end of rule by emperors in 1911. The rise and fall of these three dynasties, and many before them, are instructive for a sober look at China and its future.

Conclusion

But our [China’s] strength is what it has always been—our judicious patience. The Americans are incapable of behaving patiently. They change their government and their policies as often as the seasons ... They’re governed by their emotions, by their blithe morality and belief in their precious indispensability.

—Elliot Ackerman and James Stavridis, 2034: A Novel of the Next World War¹⁷

As U.S. and Chinese military forces conduct joint patrols through the Northern Sea Route, share intelligence on Russia forces in the Far East and Central Asia, and support United Nations operations across the globe, a long-term modus vivendi between the two powers is clearly underway. Mutual acceptance of each other’s systems of government and regional and security prerogatives was a first step. Both sides clearly saw the costs and lack of rewards of global leadership and control versus international influence based on a larger consensus to deal with significant global issues beyond the means of any one state to deal with effectively. Most importantly, China and the United States together are needed to control and mitigate the effects of a myriad of crises around the globe not unlike those that have existed throughout history. There is now a shared national interest to oppose a malignant and bellicose Russia that continues to cause and inflame many of these problems for the world. ■

Notes

1. Army Futures Command Pamphlet 525-2, *Future Operational Environment: Forging the Future in an Uncertain World, 2035-2050*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO]), 7–14, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1128552.pdf>
2. H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: Harper, 2020), 124.
3. The following quote is germane: "The ensuing catastrophes are viewed with considerable dismay in contemporary China, as part of the 'century of humiliation' that ended only by the reunification of the country under an assertive nationalist form of Communism." Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 58. The Kowtow Questions, the Opium War, and chapter 3, "From Preeminence to Decline," outline the Century of Humiliation.
4. Matt Rosenberg, "What Is Mackinder's Heartland Theory?," Thoughtco.com, 10 September 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-mackinders-heartland-theory-4068393>. Sir Halford John Mackinder was a British geographer who wrote a paper in 1904 called "The Geographical Pivot of History." Mackinder's paper suggested that the control of Eastern Europe was vital to control of the world. Mackinder postulated the following, which became known as the Heartland Theory:
 - Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland.
 - Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island.
 - Who rules the World Island commands the world.
 The "heartland" he also referred to as the "pivot area" and as the core of Eurasia, and he considered all of Europe and Asia as the World Island.
5. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 147, 149. Chapter 13, "Employment of Secret Agents," states, "There is no place where espionage is not used" (147), and "secret operations are essential in war; upon them the army relies to make its every move" (149).
6. Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Norton, 2022), xiii. This book argues, "Americans urgently need to start seeing the Sino-American rivalry less as a 100-year marathon and more of a blistering, decade-long sprint. That's because China will be a falling power far sooner than most people think." Their argument is that China has already peaked.
7. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022), 4.
8. "The Responsibility to Protect populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing has emerged as an important global principle since the adoption of the UN World Summit Outcome Document in 2005." "What is R2P?," Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, accessed 30 October 2023, <https://www.globalr2p.org/what-is-r2p/>.
9. "Robert Zoellick's Responsible Stakeholder Speech," National Committee on U.S. China Relations, <https://www.ncuscr.org/fact/robert-zoellicks-responsible-stakeholder-speech/>. In 2005, Zoellick, then deputy secretary of state, "urged China to become a 'responsible stakeholder.'"
10. Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: St. Martin Griffin, 2016); Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China Grand Strategy to Displace the American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). These two books by Michael Pillsbury and Rush Doshi make powerful arguments that China's long-term goal is to supersede the United States as the global leader. These two works by prominent China scholars underpin America's China policy that emerged in the Trump and Biden administrations.
11. Kevin Rudd, *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022).
12. Ibid, 2
13. McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 105.
14. "Interview with Douglas Eugene Pike," 13, <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/mss/mf-dip/2004/2004pik01/2004pik01.pdf>. This quote is from a transcript of an interview with Douglas Pike by John Hutchison, for the Association of Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project that was conducted in February 1989.
15. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 85
16. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), <https://www.amazon.com/End-History-Last-Man/dp/0743284550>.
17. Elliot Ackerman and James Stavrides, *2034: A Novel of the Next World War* (London: Penguin, 2021), 94.