



Macro-Strategic Dynamics and Superpower Rivalry

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America now stands in the mid-2020s with a new president and a remarkably changed world that may not evolve with continuity or predictability. Former President Biden's 2022 National Security Strategy defined the 2020s as the "decisive decade," and historians years from now may look back and agree that we are living through significant shifts in the global balance of power. The decisions the United States makes as a society now may chart the course for a revitalized Pax Americana or a self-induced unraveling spurred by civil dysfunction and a trend toward inwardness that could give rise to a Pax Sinica earlier in this century than anyone has imagined.

Every country in the community of nations is undergoing profound changes as political leaders attempt to deal with an onslaught of globe-shaking trends. No people will be left unscathed. The world is being wracked by an overlapping set of geopolitical currents that can be defined by five dangerous Ds: (1) **destabilization**, (2) **deglobalization**, (3) **disintegration**, (4) **depopulation**, and (5) **disinformation**. How well leaders in each society understand these forces and build consensus within their polity on how best to deal with them internally and in concert

with other nations will likely determine how power and influence is reconfigured in an ever-evolving world order.

Destabilization is a global phenomenon stemming from both man-made and environmental causes that are unsettling every continent. Superpower and middle power rivalries are back with a vengeance as leaders in Washington, Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and New Delhi jockey to project power in their respective near abroad zones and exploit opportunities to secure larger spheres of influence. Political elites justify their neo-Manifest Destiny ambitions in defensive and historical terms, highlighting long-standing grievances, crafting victimhood narratives, and rallying civilizational, nationalist, ethnic, and religious sentiments to attack the geopolitical status quo. Intensified friction between multiple poles in the international system today is not unlike the ideological divides, identity politics, protectionism, and proxy struggles that defined the pre-World War I period when the British Empire, Germany, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russia, and France maneuvered against one another. Today, people talk in whispered tones regarding whether World War III lies just around the corner.

These anxieties are not without merit. Hot and cold wars have already erupted where the world's geopolitical tectonic plates touch, leading to instability, migration, security spirals, and casualties in the hundreds of thousands. Russia's invasion of Ukraine rocked Europe to the core and shook the continent out of its holiday from *realpolitik*, resulting in a scramble to rebalance its instruments of national power to deal with Russian aggression. The Middle East was struck by another round of fire and fury, this time by the Israel-Hamas war that delivered severe blows across the region to minor, middle, and major powers alike. Each of the five subregions of Africa, but particularly the pan-Sahel, remain mired in non-international conflicts that appear insoluble in the foreseeable future. The Indo-Pacific, once considered the most stable region and the future engine of twenty-first century economic growth, has been unmoored by North Korea's persistent rattling of its strategic weapons and the People's Republic of China's (PRC) assertion of neo-imperial power along its periphery as it attempts to enlarge its strategic space. Beijing's actions and rhetoric show they are doubling down on claims of sovereign ownership over territories that once belonged to the Qing Dynasty, including Taiwan, along with



South China Sea, The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Halsey (DDG 97) conducts routine underway operations in the South China Sea, May 10, 2024. Halsey is forward-deployed and assigned to Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 15, the Navy's largest DESRON and the U.S. 7th Fleet's principal surface force. | U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Ismael Martinez | public domain



Memorial to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine in Turku, Southwest Finland in March 2025. | Tadeáš Bednarz CC BY-SA 4.0

broad swaths of the maritime domain in the China Seas. Even the planet's poles are now intensified zones of economic competition, military posturing, and strategic contestation. Other destabilizing forces include the potential for increasingly potent technologies to fall into the wrong hands and climate change. The latter has already spawned extreme weather, disasters, ecosystem damage, health crises, displacement, and suffering, stressing every nation's ability to cope. As to the former, although scientific discoveries offer a net positive for mankind, the development of new classes of advanced technologies in the fields of cyber, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and robotics has also opened up fresh channels for bad actors to use novel breakthroughs for exploitative and malign ends at scale and scope.

Deglobalization parallels these destabilizing forces. Free trade economic policies that engineered the easy flow of capital and cheap goods across borders for speedy, just-in-time delivery ended up sowing the seeds of their own destruction. Efficiencies that lowered consumer prices failed to account for the victims of creative destruction. The shuttering of domestic manufacturing industries, outsourcing, and an associated tide of lost jobs bred widespread disenchantment with internationalist-oriented decision-makers. An angry wave of have-nots lashed back in paroxysms of populism and protectionism. By all accounts, the

world has passed “peak globalization,” which some aver climaxed in the 2021 timeframe, and we are well beyond “slowbalization.” The nail in the coffin may have been the PRC’s mercantile, zero-sum approach to economics and ambitions to rejuvenate their nation at all costs to become the dominant pole in a multipolar world. China’s state-directed subsidization of its industry champions, protectionism, intellectual property theft, forced tech transfers, security laws, and increasingly coercive behaviors finally unmasked the true vulnerabilities of interdependence. Europe’s overreliance on energy from a revanchist Russia underscored this point. The world is adjusting to its new reality – that it is bad business to get in bed with irresponsible stakeholders unwilling to compete fairly in the global marketplace, especially those bent on revising international rules and norms in their favor. Reshoring, friend-shoring, and near-shoring are terms *du jour* to describe the creeping balkanization of the global economy.

The world’s economic fragmentation is mirrored by geopolitical **disintegration** into competing power blocs. A loose blue bloc is roughly centered on North America, Europe/NATO, and U.S. allies in the Western Pacific like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines. Recent White House actions to forfeit transatlantic solidarity in favor of Russia have opened a deep fracture in this traditional blue camp. An increasingly collusive anti-Western red bloc is composed of the PRC, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and client states such as Belarus, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Yemen. Nations comprising the rest of the world, including scores of minor powers and a dozen stronger middle powers such as India, Turkey, and Brazil, actively pursue their interests while enjoying increased agency in playing red and blue poles off one another. International institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and World Health Organization that were set up after World War II to promote economic growth, global stability, and shared problem-solving have proven too anemic and internally compromised to

countervail the slow implosion of the pre-existing international system. Faith in their efficacy has sunk to an all-time low. As a result, geopolitical struggles have returned with less restrained, muscle-bound players exerting more hard and sharp power to get their way. In many ways, the world is regressing toward a more Hobbesian milieu.

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The fourth danger unfolding on a longer time arc is **depopulation**, a slow-moving fertility crisis for almost every developed country. While planetary population numbers will peak at over ten billion in the mid-2080s, the only real growth will occur in Sub-Saharan Africa, a region least prepared to support ballooning populations. The graying of many advanced nations will pressure government social welfare and health care sectors, while declining working-age citizens will negatively impact productivity and overall economic growth.

All of these stresses are amplified by the fifth danger of **disinformation**. The proliferation of information technologies, explosion of media sources, sophistication of social engineering, and ease of manipulation has enabled industrial-level distortions that have brought the world to a post-truth nadir. Facts have lost their significance in political discourse. Gaslighting is commonplace. Persuasion seems futile. Experts are increasingly ignored, replaced by biased sources that have perfected the art of the con. At the national level, adversary nations have proven adept at curating streams of false narratives to obfuscate, confuse,



The guided-missile destroyer USS Chung Hoon steams alongside the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz during a fueling-at-sea. Nimitz is in U.S. 7th Fleet conducting routine operations, the U.S. Navy's largest forward-deployed numbered fleet, and routinely operates with Allies and partners in preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific. | U.S. Navy Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Caitlin Flynn | public domain

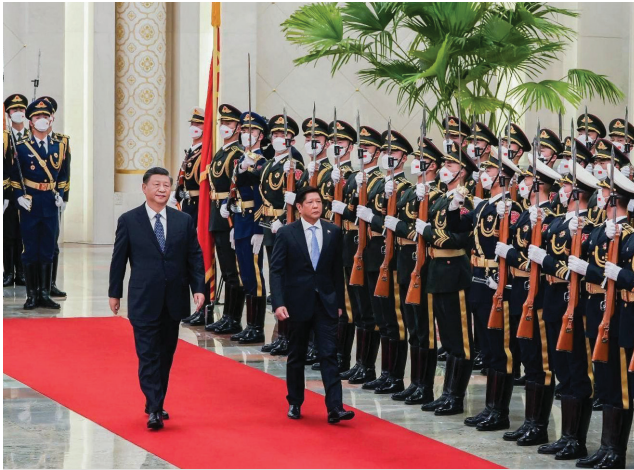
divide, and propagandize. Many political leaders worldwide have figured out they can secure power by capitalizing on the ease with which the masses can be gulled by fabrications.

HOW THE PRC IS EXPLOITING OPPORTUNITIES IN THIS DISORDERED WORLD

Chairman Xi Jinping describes the accumulation of these deconstructive trends, many of which his regime abetted, as “changes unseen in a century,” pregnant with opportunity for the PRC to gradually take center stage. Xi intends to maneuver the PRC to a position of advantage vis-à-vis the United States in a renewed superpower rivalry designed to prove which system is better at managing and leveraging these new macro-strategic dynamics. Despite facing serious economic headwinds and a GDP gap that China may never close with America, Xi believes that the United States is a declining hegemon stricken with polarization and spiritual exhaustion, thus no longer willing to carry the mantle of global leadership. China is likely to exploit “America First” policies to paint the United States as isolationist, protectionist, and unilateralist. Beijing believes that the PRC can step into actual or perceived leadership vacuums by convincing the

world that Washington is unfit, unwilling, and unable to lead the West or other nations. Beijing is already touting itself as the true defender of multilateralism, international organizations, and trade without strings attached. The Chinese Communist Party’s propaganda machine continues to spin yarns that China stands for stability, peace, development, and modernity. China upholds its Global Security, Civilization, and Development Initiatives and associated Silk Road projects as the vision for the future. One of Xi’s priorities has been to build “discourse power” not just to legitimate Chinese policies and weaken liberal democratic ones but extend the PRC’s global influence and position itself to reconstruct the international system in a way that favors Chinese preferences. Other major thrusts of Beijing’s strategy include co-opting international institutions from the inside and constructing a host of alternative regional bodies designed to keep out the United States and further marginalize American/Western power and influence across key economic zones on the planet.

Beijing knows it cannot rush history. The United States will remain economically preeminent for many decades to come. Lessons from the Warring States period taught that descending



Chinese leader Xi Jinping hosts Philippine president Bongbong Marcos on a state visit to Beijing on January 4, 2023. | An anonymous member of the Office of the Press Secretary | public domain

hegemony is prone to lashing out to keep their status, which requires the ascending power to remain patient and coax the old power through its dangerous downturns. Therefore, Beijing is undertaking measured responses to Washington's tariff threats, striking back with precisely targeted, proportional penalties designed to hurt vulnerable U.S. businesses. Beijing's leaders believe they enjoy an asymmetry of political will that will allow them to impose more costs than U.S. business elites or the White House can endure. Xi also hopes to demonstrate China is a more responsible superpower that uses its power judiciously, which could parlay into expanded influence with disgruntled nations smarting from Washington's wire-brushings.

The PRC is also poised to exploit fissures in the U.S. alliance system that are already starting to emerge as a result of Washington's pressure tactics. Any unwinding of U.S. alliance ties, doubts about U.S. security guarantees, or strategic stresses between democratically-elected political leaders could slow or reverse the trend toward

solidarity between NATO, Five Eyes partners, AUKUS, Japan, South Korea, Quad members, and other partners. China will view these developments as strategic wins and renewed openings to incentivize hedging toward China.

In the meantime, Xi is securitizing China's economy and building up its indigenous capabilities to become a self-reliant technology superpower. In fact, China already leads the world in 37 of 44 critical technologies. According to Xi, "Technological revolution is intertwined with the wrestling of superpowers, with the hi-tech sector becoming the main battlefield." Xi believes tech innovations are "new quality productive forces" that will help strengthen the PRC's comprehensive national power despite declining demographics. He continues to drive China's manufacturing base to convert latent power into deployable power, giving the CCP more ways and means to achieve strategic ends. Most notably, China is translating its civil-military fusion efforts into a world-class fighting force able to ride a "locomotive of history," as Marx might have put it, if directed into action to seize Taiwan. For now, China's security forces are being used to shape conditions and achieve favorable outcomes in China's near abroad.

THE DANGER THAT AMERICA CAN'T GET OUT OF ITS OWN WAY

Unfortunately, the American people remain largely ignorant or dismissive of these macro-strategic trends, superpower dynamics, and stakes. Political elites across Republican and Democratic administrations have fallen short in strategically communicating these global realities and mobilizing the nation to deal with them. Leaders have spent their political energies and capital elsewhere, which does not bode well for a nation facing strategic challenges that exceed those encountered in the

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twentieth century. America needs leaders who can accurately connect the dots regarding the nature of contemporary nation-state threats from an increasingly cooperative red bloc of actors, explain the nature of the fraying global environment, and then factually communicate what America and its friends can and must do about it within the limits of our collective resources. Rare has been the American official who was sufficiently educated, articulate, and willing to honestly speak about these matters to the American people.

While a new National Security Strategy has yet to be promulgated, early signs suggest the new administration will focus significant American energies on competing with China. This would be welcome news if the full breadth of the China problem was diagnosed comprehensively and dealt with holistically, including strengthening countermeasures to deal with PRC exploitations inside our borders. But new administration leaders will need to reconcile juxtaposing strategic impulses that are already manifesting if they hope to compete better in a superpower rivalry. More cynical, inwardly-focused advocates of “America First” seem to have already decided that sustaining a Pax Americana is not worth the effort. Retreating from other regions of the world, de-emphasizing



The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Mustin fires its MK-38 Mod 2 machine gun during a live-fire gunnery exercise in the South China Sea. Mustin is on patrol in the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operation in support of security and stability in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. | Mass Communication Specialist Seaman David Flewelly public domain



President Donald Trump delivers his Joint address to Congress, Tuesday, March 4, 2025, in the House Chamber of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. | Official White House Photo by Daniel Torok | public domain

allies in Europe (for Russia!), weakening America's diplomatic capabilities abroad, and walking away from international institutions are forms of self-displacement that will favor China. For now, Beijing is playing a longer, smarter game of Weiqi/Go (surround), while the White House is consumed with waging trade wars, the equivalent of playing checkers (hopping over anything in America's way). China is not destined to win primacy in the twenty-first century, but America could certainly lose it through strategic incoherence, miscalculation, and trust-squandering gambits. To remain a great power, fit to win any superpower rivalry, American leaders would be well-advised to remember that our country still needs to be seen not just as a good power, but a better power than the alternative.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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