

Beijing's ambitions shouldn't be treated as an existential threat to the United States, argues Professor Anatol Lieven



A central distinction in Realist international relations thought is that between vital and secondary national interests. Vital interests are threats to a state's survival, and can take the form either of conquest and subjugation from outside, or the promotion of internal subversion aimed at destroying the existing political and ideological order – the strategy followed by the USSR across much of the world during the Cold War, and by the USA against the USSR and allied regimes.

Rivalry between the USA and China is not a battle to the death of this kind, and it is very important that the USA not see it as such. The phrase "a new cold war" is a cheap journalistic formula, but it contains real dangers. The geopolitical competition with China is quite different from that with the USSR, and if the US establishment frames it in the terms of the cold war, it may do great damage to the USA and the world in general. For while the Cold War with the Soviet Union stemmed originally from the Soviet revolutionary threat and the evil nature of Stalin's regime, many of the ways in which this rivalry was imagined and therefore conducted by the USA did terrible damage to America's own politics, culture and public ethics.

When states permanently threaten each other with destruction from without or within, even periods of peace have the character of temporary armed truces requiring permanent military and ideological mobilization. This breeds in turn continual international tension and domestic repression, and a cultural atmosphere of fanaticism, hysteria and conspiratorial thinking in all the countries concerned.

We have learned this again over the past generation. The contemporary Middle East is a tragic example of how an entire region can be crippled by the threat of internal revolutions backed by rival ideological states; but our European ancestors learned it more than 350 years ago, and tried to do something about it. The great achievement of the Peace of Westphalia was to end in

Europe – for the space of 144 years – ideologically-driven mass rebellions against existing states supported by other states.

Crucial to the Westphalia settlement was the principle of *Cuius Regio, Eius Religio* – "Whose Realm, His Religion"; in other words, that the ruler of a country dictated the religion of his or her subjects without interference from other states belonging to the other religion. Rivalries and conflicts would continue, but states and regimes would no longer pose existential threats to each other.

All this changed again with the French Revolution. Once again, states threatened the basic identity of other states, and did so in part by stimulating internal rebellion. Once again, endangered states responded with ferocious mass repression. Assassination and the execution of defeated enemies returned to the European scene. The French Revolution spawned socialist revolution and conservative counter-revolution, which later characterized the Cold War. (More follows on next page)

By the standards of the rest of the world, the United States has not suffered from a truly existential threat from another power since the British defeat at New Orleans in 1815. Since then, the protecting oceans and the military and economic weakness of other American states has given the USA an exceptional degree of security, which in turn (as Tocqueville noted) has contributed greatly to its exceptional success. Hence the ability of the USA throughout its history until World War II to maintain only a very strong standing army (but a very powerful navy). The only subsequent existential threat to the USA was internal: the secession of the Southern states, brought about by basic and irreconcilable disagreement over the nature of US society and ideology. As Abraham Lincoln said, "If destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher."

This remains true today. It is worth pointing that there is no conventional threat to the continental United States today, nor any way that such a threat could be created in the teeth of the US Navy and Air Force. The US Army and Marine Corps today have no part in the defense of the US homeland – at least, on the assumption that the USA is unlikely to be attacked by Canada and Mexico. Their entire purpose is to defend US interests in the wider world; some of them important, others considerably less so.

Even in the Cold War (nuclear weapons aside) the USA itself did not face a truly existential threat. There was never the slightest chance of Communism taking over America either from within or without. On the other hand, in the first years of the struggle, there were good reasons to believe that a combination of Communist ideology and Soviet power was a threat to vital US allies: Stalinism in the USSR and Eastern Europe was indeed a truly evil and monstrous system; the economic chaos of Western Europe after World War II did give opportunities for Communist takeovers; the Soviet army was in 1945 clearly the most formidable land force on earth; and by 1950 China too had experienced Communist revolution.

Within a relatively few years however, the Soviet communist threats to the USA and its key allies, though still real, had greatly diminished. In Europe, Stalin's death led to a very much milder version of Communism. Stalin's withdrawal of support from the Communist side in the Greek Civil War in 1949 had already made clear that the Kremlin would not risk a direct clash with the USA in Europe.

By the early 1960s, the Hungarian revolt and the mass flight of East Germans to the West

(leading to the construction of the Berlin Wall to keep them in) made clear the collapse of Communism as an attractive force in Europe. By then, the Communist regimes in the USSR and China were also bitterly at odds, giving the USA the chance to turn China into a quasi-ally. The last two thirds of the Cold War could therefore well have been conceptualized by the US establishment as a limited series of minor skirmishes and holding actions until the Soviet bloc collapsed under the weight of its increasingly dysfunctional economy and its internal national divisions.

The reality of course was very different. The struggle with Soviet communism became the intellectual framework and the standard operating procedure for the whole of US foreign and security policy. Into this every local issue was fitted, with all the local elements that did not fit the paradigm of universal and existential struggle with the USSR stripped out in the dominant US analysis.

The result was a series of disastrous misunderstandings, with consequences that haunt the USA to this day: of Mosadeq in Iran as a Communist agent rather than an Iranian secular nationalist; of the Communist revolution in Vietnam as part of a Soviet plan for world domination rather than a continuation of the anti-colonial nationalist struggle against France; of the Afghan war of the 1980s as a struggle for liberation from Soviet imperialism rather than a continuation of a generations-old struggle between the forces of authoritarian modernization and Islamic and tribal conservatism, in which the USSR became embroiled (followed by the USA 22 years later). And of course across much of the world the USA found itself committed to supporting "anti-communist" regimes that were often as vile as the communists, and bitterly unpopular with their own peoples.

Again and again, the USA was drawn into local conflicts in which it had very few real interests at stake. As today, each one of these is then cast by the US establishment and media in the terms of the struggles against Nazism and Stalinism: as a black and white struggle of American-led good against absolute evil, with complexities abolished and facts twisted to conform to this image.

As C. Vann Woodward wrote during the Vietnam War:

"The true American mission, according to those who support this view, is a moral crusade on a worldwide scale. Such people are likely to concede no validity whatever and grant no hearing to the opposing point of view, and to appeal to a higher law to justify bloody and revolting means in the name of a noble end. For what end could be nobler, they ask, than the liberation of man."

At home, the Cold War exacerbated older tendencies to paranoia, cultural anxiety and Manichean views of the world. McCarthyism passed, but left behind a legacy of hysteria, extremism and paranoia that blights the Republican Party to this day, and has never had much connection to real dangers to the USA, whether external or internal. And of course the US War in Vietnam greatly worsened internal divisions in the USA which also linger to this day, with disastrous results for American national unity and basic political consensus.

It is therefore highly desirable for America's own sake that rivalry with China should be conceptualized by the US foreign and security establishment as a limited competition in particular areas, and not a universal and existential struggle between good and evil. Apart from anything else, to center the whole of US policy on struggle with China will be a terrible distraction from what are in fact much greater threats to the wellbeing of American citizens: at home, economic inequality and racial tensions; in the world as a whole, climate change and its consequences.

The Coronavirus pandemic should also help us better to understand the real interests of ordinary Americans. Whatever the Trump administration may now be trying to suggest, it has been a virus (albeit made worse by Chinese and American governmental incompetence), and not a rival great power, that at the time of writing has killed more Americans than died in the Vietnam and Korean Wars put together.

US competition with China is real, serious and bound to increase. That is inevitable, both for economic reasons and because of the incompatibility between Chinese ambitions and the US establishment's determination to maintain US global leadership. However, it is not an existential struggle between two fundamentally opposed systems, nor is it a universal struggle that must be fought in every corner of the world.

A comparison with basic features of the cold war with the USSR should make the difference clear. China is not promoting Communist revolution around the world. In fact there is no evidence at all that it is aiming at the overthrow of existing states. As a great capitalist trading power, it has a strong stake in the stability of markets and the safety of Chinese investments. If the Chinese government in principle prefers authoritarian states, it has as yet done nothing to foster such systems.

Chinese influence operations in the West are real and should be resisted; but they are intended to influence Western policies towards China, not cause state collapse and revolution. And the US has an old and tried arsenal of international influence operations of its own that it can deploy in response. As to the US political system, the impact of Chinese (and Russian) covert propaganda on US politics has been minimal compared to the impact of America's own domestic problems. It was not China that killed George Floyd.

As a great capitalist trading state, China is dependent on the health and stability of the international capitalist system. Unlike the USSR, it needs a degree of rules-based international order – though not if (as seen from China) this means a system in which the USA sets all the rules and then breaks them whenever it wishes. On the other hand, China has certainly sought with great determination to increase its international influence through international capitalism. Some of these efforts (like Huawei's role in 5G) must be strongly resisted. They do not however as yet greatly exceed past US patterns of international economic influence.

The defense and strengthening of US capitalism in competition with China is indeed essential, but needs to be seen however not just in terms of tariffs on Chinese imports (as the Trump administration has seen it), but as requiring a massive program of US domestic economic reform and investment in infrastructure and technology – in other words the way the Chinese government conducts this competition.

When it comes to hard geopolitical influence and the expansion of Chinese military power, with one important exception China has proceeded with great caution. It is important to emphasize this, both to avoid US over-reaction and to indicate just how much worse Chinese behavior could become if the USA launches a full-scale campaign against Chinese interests and Chinese communist rule. In the Indian Ocean, until now the Chinese programme of port construction has

been entirely commercial (except for a small refueling and repair station in Djibouti, next to a much bigger US one). The Chinese naval presence in the region is insignificant compared to that of the USA, let alone the USA plus India.

Above all, China has not sought to exploit US difficulties in the Middle East, despite multiple opportunities to do so. The contrast between the strategies of Beijing and Moscow in this regard is extremely marked. Readers may wish to imagine for example the impact on the US position in the region if China were to devote even a fraction of its resources to a full-scale program of strengthening Iran economically and militarily.

The reasons for this Chinese abstinence are not of course altruistic. In the first place, China as the world's greatest energy importer depends on the stability of the Persian Gulf –far more than does the USA, since thanks to fracking the USA is now self-sufficient in oil and gas. Secondly, as a Chinese official told me a decade ago, China has studied the repeated and disastrous messes that the USA has got into (and sometimes caused) in the Middle East, and has no desire to follow suit. There is no evidence that this very sensible approach has changed in the years since.

The great exception to this Chinese caution has been the South China Sea, which Beijing regards as its back yard (as a Chinese journalist remarked to me recently, it is after all called the South China Sea, and not the South American Sea). Here, the USA must continue to reject Chinese territorial claims (while however recognizing that the claims of Vietnam are just as outrageous – Hanoi just has much less power to enforce them).

It should also be recognized however that Chinese control of these reefs and sandbanks (which climate change will in any case eventually place under water) does not threaten international trade or US maritime supremacy. If China were mad enough to block trade through the South China Sea, the US Navy (especially if backed by India) has the power to interdict Chinese maritime trade with the whole of the rest of the world. Elsewhere in East Asia, the USA has a formal military alliance with Japan, which is by far the most important state of the region after China, and which has no intention of submitting to Chinese hegemony. This alliance, and US forces in Japan and South Korea, must of course be maintained.

The only truly dangerous issue between the USA and China remains, as it has always been, Taiwan. Of course, the USA cannot and must not give any kind of green light to Beijing to invade Taiwan. At the same time, the US security establishment must clearly recognize (in private) that in future, whatever the USA does, growing Chinese military power and the proximity of the Chinese mainland will make it impossible for the USA to defend Taiwan against blockade or invasion without an unacceptable risk of military defeat or nuclear war. The goal must be to make sure that Beijing remains convinced of the catastrophic economic and political damage that it would suffer as a result of such an invasion.

US geopolitical competition with China should therefore be handled by the USA on a pragmatic and case by case basis, and combined with continued co-operation with China on other critically important issues, like climate change and disease control. Washington must be careful not to be drawn into local conflicts in which the USA has no national interest, and where the rights and wrongs are uncertain and the dangers of escalation very great: the Sino-Indian border dispute, for example.

The really key area of struggle in the Cold War was Europe, and it was there that the evident economic, social and political superiority of the West eventually led the Soviet bloc to collapse from within. In Europe, however, US allies were (mostly) successful liberal democracies ranged against Communist dictatorships. In Asia, the picture is very different. The key Asian regimes

that the USA needs to cultivate include Narendra Modi's Hindu chauvinist and quasi-authoritarian regime in India, the Vietnamese Communist state, and the ferocious authoritarian populist government of Duterte in the Philippines. These are hardly convincing allies in a struggle to defend and promote democracy.

Above all, as Stephen Walt has written in *Foreign Policy*, conceptualizing the competition with China in terms of an existential ideological conflict will both distort US strategy and make the competition vastly more dangerous:

"Focusing on the internal characteristics of other states is also tempting because it absolves us of responsibility for conflict and allows us to pin the blame on others...[P]inning most of the blame for conflict on an opponent's domestic characteristics is also dangerous. For starters, if conflict is due primarily to the nature of the opposing regime(s), then the only long-term solution is to overthrow them. Accommodation, mutual coexistence, or even extensive cooperation on matters of mutual interest are for the most part ruled out, with potentially catastrophic consequences. When rivals see the nature of the other side as a threat in itself, a struggle to the death becomes the only alternative."

The competition with China cannot be won by the sort of systemic knock-out that finished the USSR, and that the USSR dreamed of inflicting on the West. Its most important aspect is the relative success of the two capitalist systems in terms of economic growth, the maintenance of social stability, and ability to cope with new crises. This is indeed where China, as a successful capitalist country, is a more serious challenger than the USSR. For the USA to compete successfully with China in these areas does not however require more warships, more CIA operations, or more money for Voice of America. It requires long overdue reforms at home.

Anatol Lieven teaches at Georgetown University in Qatar. His latest book, *Climate Change and the Nation State: The Case for Nationalism in a Warming World*, was published in April by Oxford University Press.

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