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A Rival of America's Making?

The Debate Over Washington's China Strategy

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Many observers would agree with John Mearsheimer that the liberal bet on China did not work out ("The Inevitable Rivalry," November/December 2017). Welcoming the country into the world economy after the Cold War did not cause it to open up, liberalize, and become a responsible stakeholder in the international order. Quite the opposite. Today, the country has taken a dangerous autocratic and illiberal turn. But Mearsheimer goes further, arguing that the United States's strategy of engagement in the region was a mistake from the start. He argues that the liberal strategy, containment, would have prevented or at least delayed the emergence of China as a threat.

What Mearsheimer and the rest of the U.S. foreign policy elite did not do was pursue a different approach that sought to strengthen the foundations of the American-led liberal international order after the Cold War, a strategy that brought together the United States and its allies and partners in a long-standing effort to shape the rising Chinese challenge. It pulled the international system in a direction that broadly aligned with its interests and values, precisely-taking into account the emergence of China as a great power and the transformations of power and order that Asia, Europe, and the United States underwent during the twenty-first century.

Abandoning this strategy once China started to rise would have put the United States in a dramatically worse position now and probably for years to come. Washington would have had to deal with a China that was not tied to its allies and partners. And it would face a China with accurate and generous grievances in a global order that was stable and open—a China capable of generating the competition needed to grapple with the problems of the twenty-first century.

THE DOMINANT OR THE DRIVEN

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the last great alternative to the U.S. led liberal order suddenly disappeared, and Washington was left with a unipolar moment. The United States accounted for more than half the world's economic output, 40 percent of all countries in the early 1990s to about 60 percent in the first decade of the twenty-first century. NATO and the U.S. Navy were the only military forces capable of projecting power globally. The U.S. dollar was the currency that all other currencies pegged to. The United States was an expeditionary power with military bases and military alliances of several (rather than just three) seas to any potential rival. This was the overarching liberal bet, and it was a remarkable success. The United States and its allies and partners had created a liberal order that was so open and so hot that was never the static prospect. The far more important goal was to build a liberal international order that accommodated the rise of new powers.

The brand of realism that Mearsheimer is offering as a guide to confronting China simply could not see, analyze, or respond to this dynamic. Realism, with its focus on balances of power and military rivalry, could not see that the U.S. led alliance system would connect "the Rimlands of Eurasia" to the global sea that holds NATO together, "Mackinder's island" and the Western Hemisphere. It could not see that the United States would be able to draw on the resources of its allies and partners to confront the Soviet Union in the Cold War and that this would be a decisive factor that helped prevent the Cold War from turning hot. Put the opposite second to Lenin and Ernst Cassirer, Mearsheimer's realism could not see that the contest was ideational and military, economic and political, and that it was open.

Years after the end of the Cold War, many realists, including Mearsheimer, saw rising questions about U.S. alliances and under the banner of "offshore balancing," arguing for a smaller American security footprint in the world. In the Obama years, Stephen Walt was arguing for withdrawing the Western Hemisphere from NATO and Asia-Pacific allies to protecting allies in Europe and East Asia. But U.S. ambassador would usually be an invitation to Chinese and Russian efforts to undermine the liberal order and to weaken the United States's allies and partners. Walt's and Mearsheimer's proposals would have doubtless made it granted that the United States did not follow Mearsheimer's realist script.

CONTAINMENT

Mearsheimer also fails to appreciate that U.S. strategy toward China was always about more than just engagement. Washington was also pursuing a strategy of containment, which was not a matter of building a military alliance to encircle China but rather a matter of the United States and its allies and partners. Washington was pursuing a strategy of hedging from 1992 on, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty that there were two other components to the U.S. strategy.

First, Washington held commitments to Chinese power through an integrated and dispersed alliance system in East Asia. The United States's security partners in East Asia were and are established for reasons that have little to do with China, a fact that rarely rises on any of the great accomplishments in post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy. In 1991 and 1992, the United States and its allies and partners in East Asia, as the Foreign and Trade Ministers of the ASEAN Chinese administrations, noted "the rise of Chinese power" and made the case for a strategy of "deep engagement" in East Asia to keep China from "dominating the region." Washington's allies in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East supported the United States's strategy of engagement with China, but they also wanted the United States to remain at the core of U.S. strategy in this region.

Second, the United States and its allies strengthen regional institutions in the broader Asia-Pacific region. Looking beyond the traditional boundaries of East Asia, Washington worked with Australia, India, and the Association to bolster the Asia-Pacific's security institutions, including the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit. As Kurt Campbell discussed in the Obama years, there, it is not surprising that many observers in the 1990s—including, one might add, Mearsheimer—saw the United States's strategy as "engagement," a view of engagement that was incomplete.

The major failure of U.S. strategy toward China was to not make the country's integration into the liberal capitalist order and institutions. In the 1990s, the liberal order was still in its early stages of expansion and China was a nonactive outsiders embraced liberal democratic principles in where free access to the Western minimal systems of trade and investment. The United States and its allies and partners had to wait for China to "come out" and to be ready to be a responsible stakeholder in the liberal order. Meanwhile, China was growing and developing, and it was building its military and its allies and partners. Washington's strategy of hedging was a mistake, but it was not the United States's strategy of engagement with China. It was the United States's failure to integrate China into the liberal order. Mearsheimer argues that the United States's strategy of engagement with China was a mistake, but the United States's strategy of engagement with China was a mistake, but the United States's strategy of engagement with China was a mistake, but

India and Japan, but that is a far cry from facing five great powers well positioned to stop it from achieving regional hegemony. Making the situation even more favorable to China is the fact that India, Japan, and the United States are thousands of miles apart, which will impair their ability to work together to contain China. Moreover, China is not as friendless as Nathan portrays it to be: the country has fostered increasingly friendly relations with two of its most powerful neighbors, Pakistan and Russia.

The most serious difficulty Nathan identifies is China's aging population, but it is hard to know what its effects will be in the foreseeable future. Beijing will surely turn to automation to mitigate the problem, which anyway will take a few decades to have a significant impact. Also, many of China's competitors are dealing with similar demographic challenges, including Japan, South Korea, and even the United States to some extent. Nathan argues that China's economy is likely to slow down markedly moving forward, and he may be right, but it is difficult to know how much that economy will grow in the next few decades (and how the U.S. economy will perform over that same period). After all, few experts predicted China's spectacular growth over the past 30 years. But even if the country's economy grows more slowly than it has in recent years, it will still be enormously powerful and will provide Beijing with the military wherewithal to cause its neighbors and the United States much trouble.

THE ODDS OF WAR

Susan Thornton disagrees with my categorization of engagement after the Cold War as a serious "strategic blunder," arguing that the policy "lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty," which is "a major human achievement." I agree, but that accomplishment has little to do with the security of the United States, which is the issue on the table. Thornton never explains why a policy that hastened the emergence of a formidable peer competitor was not, from the U.S. perspective, a colossal misstep.

Thornton recognizes that China and the United States are now engaged in an intense security competition—which makes one wonder why she has no reservations about the policy of engagement that got us here. It may be because she is not worried that the rivalry will lead to war, arguing that "there are a number of formidable restraints in place to keep the peace." She maintains that in contrast I believe that the rivalry is "inexorably leading" to "an apocalyptic war." But I did not say that war is inevitable. Indeed, I emphasized that war is unlikely. After describing the different ways fighting might break out, I wrote, "None of this is to say that these limited-war scenarios are likely." To be clear, I recognize that there are significant barriers to armed conflict. Those barriers are not impregnable, however, as logic and history make clear.

It is worth remembering that great powers were heavily engaged with one another before the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War, the Franco-Prussian War, World War I, and World War II. In some cases, they were also important trading partners. Yet major war happened anyway. And despite what Thornton may wish, victory is still possible in modern war; not every conflict leads to "certain catastrophic losses for all," as she says a U.S.-Chinese war would. War is always a real possibility when great powers struggle over regional hegemony. Helping China rise rapidly made a clash of this sort more likely—even if it is not inevitable.

Like Thornton, Sun Zhe misrepresents my argument when he claims that I view China as "robotically destined for war," making a U.S.-Chinese war "all but inevitable." In fact, I maintained that security competition is inescapable but war is not—as Sun should recognize, since he quotes me saying, "This rivalry can be managed in the hope of avoiding a war."

Sun seems to think that even an intense security competition can be avoided, but he is wrong. In his view, China is "a conservative, status quo power," and the United States is moving toward a China policy that emphasizes cooperation over conflict. Neither characterization is accurate. China is explicitly committed to radically altering the political status quo regarding the East China and South China Seas, Taiwan, and its border with India. Meanwhile, the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden shows no sign of returning to the failed policy of engagement. It is willing to talk with Beijing and manage bilateral relations, but the available evidence—such as the continuation of U.S. President Donald Trump's trade war and repeated signals of a growing commitment to defend Taiwan—suggests that Biden and his team intend to maintain a hard-nosed containment strategy.

Sun also emphasizes that although numerous Chinese are pessimistic about the future of U.S.-Chinese relations, there are also many who hold an optimistic view and want to improve ties. The same is true in the United States. At the end of the day, however, those debates are eclipsed by the competitive pressures inherent in an anarchic system, where each state must ultimately take care of itself. Those pressures will encourage China to strive for hegemony in Asia and lead the United States to try to prevent it—even if there are dissenters in both countries.

Sun writes that "engagement modernized China to an extraordinary degree." He is correct, of course, and that is wonderful news for China. But it is not good news for the United States, which mistakenly helped create a peer competitor that it ultimately may not be able to contain.

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