

FOREIGN ANALYSIS

MARCH / APRIL 2026

POST-XI

The Unfinished Dynasty

HENRY H. MARLOWE

**The PLA's Loyalty and
the Future of the CCP**

YAN CHANG BENNETT
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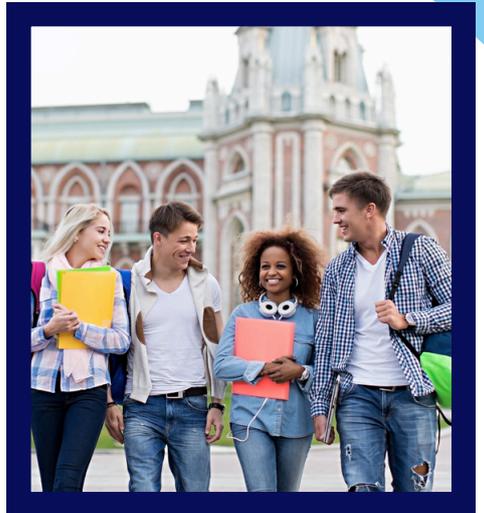
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Ahmet Garret Aksu, Founding Editor
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The Unfinished Dynasty

Why Xi Has Built Power But Not a Future

HENRY H. MARLOWE

On its outer edge, apartment blocks stretch toward a horizon of construction cranes, shrouded by a perpetual industrial haze. The wind moves dust from the Gobi in the north. The neighborhoods are ordinary, functional, and dense, animated by the routines of residents of a capital that governs more than a billion people. Move inward, and the scene changes. Universities grow more elite. Compounds grow more guarded. History compresses. Closer still, the rings tighten around symbols that define the Chinese state: Tiananmen Square, the Great Hall of the People, the vermilion walls of the Forbidden City. Tourists pass through these spaces daily, photographing what remains of imperial grandeur. Yet adjacent to this former seat of dynastic authority lies something less visible and far more consequential.

HENRY H. MARLOWE holds his master degree from Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh's School of Foreign Service.



Within the guarded walls of Zhongnanhai, once an imperial garden, now the inner sanctum of the Chinese Communist Party, another set of concentric circles takes shape. Beyond the gates monitored by the Central Guard Bureau, an institutional geometry unfolds. First, the sprawling Party apparatus: the Organization Department that manages careers, the Central Propaganda Department that forms narratives, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection that enforces loyalty. Inside those circles sits the Politburo, then the Politburo Standing Committee, the narrow chamber where national direction is set. And at the very center is a still figure.

Xi Jinping holds the titles of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. In practice, he functions as something more: the living core of the Party's authority. His reach extends across Party, state, and military domains, joining them into a disciplined whole. Under his tenure, the People's Republic of China appears more centralized, more consolidated, and more capable than at any point since Mao. The PLA continues its historic trajectory upward and outward, pursuing hawkish yet often ambiguous claims that inspire nationalistic fervor while worrying the international community. And the Party speaks with a collective voice, parroting the whims of Xi himself.

Yet within this tightening geometry lies a peculiarity. The system has changed. The Party, too. His style of authority stands apart from his predecessors. Authority has been drawn inward and upward through the Party apparatus, concentrated to a space within his own reach. What once operated through collective leadership and managed succession now orbits around embodiment at the middle. The circles remain, but their center has grown heavier, more consequential, more personalized. The growing density of Party centralization leaves little room for error in the geopolitical realm. In Washington, China is cast as the "near-peer" pacing challenge. In Brussels, interdependence has changed into vulnerability. In Tehran, partnership carries an asymmetric advantage. In Taipei, the stakes are existential. The gravitational pull of Beijing's innermost circle extends outward, drawing other capitals into its orbit.

Xi Jinping has bound China's stability to the durability of his own authority. He presides over a civilizational project framed as national rejuvenation and historical restoration. The Party he leads appears disciplined and unified. But the closer one moves to the center, the more the question shifts from how power is exercised to how it will be sustained. This is a system designed to function with extraordinary efficiency so long as its core stays intact. Whether it can reproduce that core once it is gone is the question that now defines China's future.

Personalist rule is not novel in China's history. "Cults of personality" have repeatedly served as instruments of control in authoritarian communist systems, just as imperial restorations have periodically rerouted China's historical path. Ideology has stood as a necessary substitute for institutional governance during periods of systemic strain. But what is striking about Xi Jinping's twenty-first-century China is not a return to personalism, but the intentional fusion of personalism with a civilizational mandate within a modern party-state explicitly designed to prevent such an accumulation of power.

Xi Jinping inherited a China facing a convergence of pressures that endangered the Party's claim to legitimacy: an economy defined by decelerating growth and diminishing returns; elite networks fragmenting into rival cliques capable of dissent; and a society moving away from the communist ideology that once underwrote political consent. Deng Xiaoping had presided over an era of extraordinary growth. Deng left a system that rested on informal norms, managed succession, and collective, procedure-bound leadership. As institutional dynamism waned and these arrangements lost credibility, personal authority emerged as the remaining logical integrative force capable of binding the Party—and the country—together.

Under Xi's personalization of authority, the Party's power structure was not merely consolidated; the terms on which Chinese public stability rested were also changed. As power was directed upward, the institutions that once served as mediators for interest groups and as arenas where risks could be taken increasingly functioned as instruments for transmitting Xi's own authority. Governance in China became less a matter of rules and procedures and more about signaling adherence to Xi's vision and loyalty to the top. In this configuration, stability was no longer determined by institutional frameworks designed to outlast leadership turnover, but by the uninterrupted rule of Xi Jinping himself. The result: a system that appeared unified and disciplined yet contained an equilibrium of power that grew more contingent, more individualized, and ultimately more fragile.

Despite appearances, China, without an appointed successor, will face tremendous challenges in regenerating itself. Xi's concentration of authority has produced a single, interdependent system with risks that cannot be understood in isolation. Politically, his personalization of power has reduced the potency of elite signaling while obliterating even the discussion of succession, binding regime continuity and legitimacy to himself. Militarily, his centralized control has consolidated his command while concentrating strategic miscalculation, generating an atmosphere in which voicing opposition directly leads to public purges.

Economically, the erosion of the once-trademark high-growth, perpetual-prosperity model that had underscored Party legitimacy for decades has forced Xi to labor intensively to control and curate the narrative China tells about its future, to enforce discipline within the Party bureaucracy, and to use administrative power to manage discontent. Geopolitically, outside pressures and nationalist mobilization increasingly serve as mechanisms of domestic unity, binding domestic stability amid a volatile international environment. Taken together, these domains reveal a China that is powerful and assertive today, yet more exposed than it appears once the question of succession moves to the foreground.

XIISM WITHOUT A FUTURE?

Deng Xiaoping did not democratize China, but he did something almost as consequential: he began to regularize elite politics. Following the social and economic turmoil of Mao's final years, stability grew inseparable from predictability. Deng stepped back from formal positions (he was never the

Party's General Secretary) while retaining ultimate influence, signaling that a leadership transition could occur without collapse at a time the Party needed it most. Age norms, staged promotions, and visible grooming of future leaders gradually formed what amounted to informal rules of single-party-state succession. This process did not become transparent, but it became legible. Elites could read the signals.

Jiang Zemin inherited a Party shaken by Tiananmen, increasing international isolation, and the shocking collapse of the Soviet Union. These factors shaped his agenda: consolidation was essential to the Party's functioning, but personalization was not. His outsized personality and charisma were instead used to balance factions and preserve term limits, while permitting collective leadership to serve as a procedural shell within the Party. Importantly, he signaled succession early in his tenure to reassure elites that the eventual turnover would not lead to chaos within the Party. Hu Jintao's rise followed the same logic. Elevated to the Politburo Standing Committee at a relatively young age, Hu's trajectory was visible years in advance. The Jiang–Hu era normalized Party leadership transition after the Mao-Deng era. Elites could plan careers. Factions could bargain within guardrails. Retirement came with dignity. Authority was institutional, procedural, and, importantly, predictable.



MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA WAIT AHEAD OF THE UNVEILING OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA'S NEW POLITBURO STANDING COMMITTEE AT THE GREAT HALL OF THE PEOPLE IN BEIJING, CHINA, ON SUNDAY, OCT. 23, 2022. PRESIDENT XI JINPING STACKED CHINA'S MOST POWERFUL BODY WITH HIS ALLIES, GIVING HIM UNFETTERED CONTROL OVER THE WORLD'S SECOND-LARGEST ECONOMY. PHOTOGRAPHER: ANDREA VERDELLI/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGE)

Hu's leadership was often described as technocratic to a fault, being steady, procedural, and rarely charismatic. Compared to Jiang, he seemed lacking, subdued. But that quality was not accidental. It reflected a system that had come to value process over personality. The state of the Party enabled Hu's rise to the top. Decisions moved through layers of committee review, and responsibility was shared, sometimes to the point of policy or decision dilution. The goal was not boldness but stability. The Party under Hu could be opaque, even frustratingly so, but it was also predictable. Several potential successors were visible well before any formal transition. Leadership turnover was treated as something to be managed collectively, not fought over personally.

When Xi Jinping emerged in 2012, his rise did not immediately appear disruptive. He fit the mold that had been reinforced for years: the son of a revolutionary veteran, seasoned through provincial administration,

acceptable to multiple factions. His public messaging stressed continuity rather than upheaval. There was little reason, at the time, to assume that the informal guardrails constructed since Deng would be dismantled. Xi did not arrive as an outsider forcing change upon the system. He came up through it. Xi's anti-corruption campaign began as a popular and necessary correction. Corruption was pervasive across local governments, state-owned enterprises, security organs, and the military. Framing corruption as an existential threat to the Party's survival allowed Xi to move quickly and broadly. What began as discipline soon altered elite incentives more fundamentally. Punishments were retroactive and far-reaching. Informal protective networks lost their credibility. Advancement became increasingly tied to demonstrated political loyalty rather than factional shelter or bureaucratic performance.

The change surpassed discipline. Collective leadership was preserved in form but hollowed in function. Decision-making gravitated toward small, centralized leading groups under Xi's direction. Norms that once constrained overreach—rotation, deference, consensus—remained nominally intact but lost practical force. Authority accumulated not through institutional mandate, but through proximity to the center. What remained was coordination without constraint. Succession planning became incompatible with this architecture. In earlier eras, unusually young promotions to the Politburo Standing Committee signaled generational transition. Under Xi, no comparable grooming occurred. Political time ceased to revolve around turnover. The decisive break came in 2018, when the removal of presidential term limits severed leadership from a predictable endpoint. Even if the General Secretary position had never been formally term-limited, the symbolic signal was unmistakable: the horizon had disappeared. A visible successor would constitute an alternative center of gravity. Under this logic, succession became a risk to defer rather than a process to manage.

Xi's authority extended outward across Party, state, and military structures. Party commissions increasingly overshadowed the State Council. Political loyalty outweighed specialization in determining trust. Ideological discipline intensified, elevating "Xi Jinping Thought" from doctrine to governing framework. Cadres learned to anticipate preferences rather than debate policy. Authority became vertically integrated. The system projected discipline and unity with impressive efficiency. What changed was not simply who held power, but how power was organized. The post-Deng model treated succession as a stabilizing mechanism embedded within collective leadership. Xi's model treated stability as something to be secured through concentration. The Party was no longer structured primarily to manage elites; it was structured to command them.

By the end of Xi's first decade, governance no longer revolved primarily around bureaucratic competence or negotiated consensus, but around demonstrated political reliability. Advancement flowed through networks of trust tied to Xi himself rather than through institutional reputation or factional balance. Cadres learned to anticipate preferences rather than debate

**Xiism has
accumulated power,
but it has not yet
demonstrated how
that power survives
its architect.**

policy. That shift produced discipline and speed, but it also narrowed the system's adaptive capacity. When authority is embodied so completely in one figure, initiative becomes cautious, and correction becomes risky. Institutions still function, but only conditionally, as long as the center remains present and decisive. This is not a dynasty in the traditional sense. There is no formalized inheritance, no structured reproduction of authority, no institutional mechanism that guarantees continuity beyond the individual. What has emerged instead is something more precarious: a political order whose coherence depends on personal centrality but lacks a durable method for transferring it. Xiism has accumulated power, but it has not yet demonstrated how that power survives its architect.

THE PROBLEM OF NO END

The Party's most consequential weakness today is not ideological drift or factional rivalry, but the absence of a predictable future. That absence is not abstract or deferred—it actively reshapes how Chinese elites behave in the present. The system no longer produces a recognizable set of potential successors, nor does it offer a common understanding of how authority is eventually transferred. Unlike earlier periods, this is not a temporary gap to be filled later. It is a structural condition. Succession has ceased to function as a planning horizon altogether. Political time, once organized around institutional rhythms and generational turnover, has instead collapsed into the expected longevity of a single leader. The result is not uncertainty at the edges of the Party, but at its center: governance continues, but without a common sense of how power is meant to end, renew, or move on.

In the post-Deng era, elite bargaining was stabilized by the expectation of turnover. Officials could afford to align, compete, and compromise because the future remained legible. Under Xi's system, that logic no longer holds. Without succession norms, there are no neutral forums for arbitration and no safe timelines for coalitions to form. Being aligned with a future alternative is no longer prudent because no future alternative can be named without risk. What once functioned as a balancing mechanism has become a liability. Elite politics do not disappear, but they lose their horizontal dimension. Instead of negotiation across institutions or factions, political behavior narrows upward, oriented toward survival rather than positioning. The system becomes quieter, but also more brittle.

This leadership vacuum alters behavior long before any formal transition is in sight. Officials hedge not by preparing for succession but by avoiding initiative altogether. Risk aversion supplants competition as the dominant survival strategy, slowing policy innovation precisely when the system confronts growing internal and external strain. Evading blame becomes more important than pursuing outcomes. Political contestation does not vanish—it is driven underground. The system seems stable because overt movement is suppressed, not because tension has been resolved. That tension accumulates instead, compressed beneath a surface of cohesion, until it reemerges in sudden, disruptive interventions. In closed authoritarian systems where elite politics cannot be expressed openly, stability is maintained less through negotiation than through periodic shocks designed to reassert control.

Despite the erosion of succession norms and institutional safeguards, the Party continues to function with remarkable discipline. But that discipline no longer stems from shared rules or distributed authority. It runs in one direction. Elite incentives now point almost exclusively toward Xi Jinping. Advancement depends less on administrative competence than on political fidelity. Policy is not developed through institutional bargaining; it is validated by agreement with the center. The question in elite politics is no longer “What is institutionally sound?” but “What is consistent with Xi?” This configuration produces a tremendous yet fragile coherence. Decisions move quickly because authority is unambiguous. But that clarity comes at a cost. Coherence has become inseparable from embodiment. The same concentration that eliminates ambiguity also eliminates redundancy. No parallel center exists. No institutional substitute has been cultivated. Authority has been drawn so tightly around one figure that its transfer would not be merely procedural—it would be structural. Remove the focal point, and the lines of incentive that currently run upward have nowhere obvious to reconnect. The Party’s order, therefore, is not self-sustaining. It is sustained.

The system stays together because its center holds and continues to work, but it remains highly susceptible to damage. Once that center is absent, coherence does not gradually revert to the stability of institutional control, but rather confronts the problem of never having been embedded there in the first place. The most damaging consequence of personalist rule is not what it does, but its potential to create crises through blind spots. Systems organized around affirming and projecting unity are poorly suited to absorb unfavorable information. In such an environment, warnings travel upward cautiously, passed through layers of self-preservation. Professional disagreement risks being read as political unreliability. When authority is tightly bound to a single figure, dissent is not procedural; it is existential. Under these conditions, risk is assessed through loyalty rather than independent evaluation. The system becomes quick to respond to visible threats yet increasingly inattentive toward slower, foundational flaws.

The recent purges within the People’s Liberation Army offer a clear illustration. Senior figures tied to modernization, procurement, and joint command reform, including current and former members of the Central Military Commission, were removed through Party disciplinary mechanisms rather than transparent institutional review. Many were not peripheral actors but central participants in Xi’s military reform agenda. The message was unmistakable: proximity and prior trust do not guarantee security. The purge swiftly restored discipline. It also reinforced a lesson familiar to personalist systems: survival depends on alignment, not candor. There is precedent for this pattern. Mao’s political campaigns and Stalin’s Red Army purges both relied on “shock discipline” to reassert control when confidence faltered. In each case, obedience increased in the short term while horizontal trust and professional openness declined. Militaries, like bureaucracies, adapt to these settings by managing exposure rather than confronting risk. Problems are concealed, softened, or reframed upward. Correction becomes episodic and punitive instead of continuous and procedural.

The danger in this design is not constant instability. It is an accumulation of misjudgments. Centralized authority accelerates decisions but narrows the

informational bandwidth that feeds them. As China's military reach, economic scale, and international ambitions expand, the consequences of misperception grow. A system optimized for projecting unity may struggle to process complexity. Small distortions compound when internal correction is weak and external signals are misread. What emerges is not a fragile state in the conventional sense, but a powerful one increasingly constrained by the limits of its own architecture.

POST-XI SCENARIOS

When succession is unresolved, competition does not disappear. It mutates. Under predictable transitions, rivalry is legible: elites can see who is rising, who is declining, and which behavior is rewarded. Under Xi's system, that clarity has narrowed to a single focal point. Any visible alignment outside the center risks being read as disloyalty. Signals become indirect. Intentions are inferred rather than declared. Bargaining continues, but without rules or a shared horizon. What once functioned as managed competition becomes muted positioning under the surface. In such an environment, the first actors to matter are not insurgents but custodians. Senior Party officials embedded in discipline and organizational control, figures such as Li Xi or Cai Qi, represent continuity of enforcement rather than renewal of authority. They could stabilize procedures in a moment of uncertainty. But procedure is not the same as legitimacy. A system that has trained elites to command compliance does not easily transition to one that negotiates consent. What they could preserve is order; what they may struggle to provide is direction.

The military and security apparatus form a second gravitational center. The PLA does not need to seize capacity to direct outcomes; its position alone amplifies uncertainty. Recent purges have hollowed out identifiable leadership figures without reducing the institution's structural weight. In ambiguous moments, militaries translate political uncertainty into posture. They do so not necessarily through aggression but through demonstration. A hyper-modernized force operating in a system without clearly stabilized stewardship is politically consequential. It acts both as a signal and an instrument. The technocratic and economic stabilizers form a third layer. Officials responsible for monetary policy, debt management, and administrative continuity, officials such as Pan Gongsheng or He Lifeng, would be tasked not with asserting authority but with preventing unraveling. Their power lies in competence and credibility. Yet economic governance depends on timely correction and trusted communication. When political time is undefined and initiative is risky, correction becomes cautious. Stabilization turns reactive. Deep foundational weaknesses are managed, not resolved.

At this point, imperial logic becomes relevant. When legitimacy cannot be settled internally, it seeks external affirmation. Under Xi, the language of national rejuvenation has already reframed political authority in civilizational terms. Frontiers are not simply strategic; they are symbolic. Maritime space, in particular, carries ideological weight. Naval deployments, island fortifications, gray-zone pressure, and persistent signaling in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea do more than deter adversaries. They affirm presence and

project permanence. In an imperial posture, authority is manifested through spatial means.

This does not mean that succession uncertainty automatically produces aggression. It does mean that external assertion becomes politically useful. If elite bargaining lacks a shared endpoint, visible demonstrations of resolve can temporarily substitute for it. In this configuration, Taiwan is not simply a territorial dispute. It is the most concentrated site where questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and historical destiny intersect. Miscalculation becomes more likely not because leaders seek confrontation but because external signaling carries domestic political weight. In a system where coherence has been embodied and legitimacy increasingly narrated through national destiny, the line between strategic signaling and structural escalation grows thinner.

Empire does not require expansion to be dangerous. It requires projection. And projection, when tied to still-unresolved internal authority, introduces risks that are difficult to calibrate. The risk is not inevitability, but exposure to miscalculation in a system with thinner guardrails. Centralization clarifies who decides. It does not always clarify how decisions should be implemented. In a system where authority has narrowed and succession remains undefined, institutions begin to hedge. Officials are no longer simply executing policy; they are interpreting signals. Some move aggressively to demonstrate alignment. Others slow down, waiting for unmistakable direction. The result is not open conflict between institutions, but divergence in tempo and emphasis.

In the military sphere, modernization continues apace. Procurement advances, joint command reforms deepen, and naval deployments expand in range and persistence. But without durable stewardship at the top, posture can harden faster than strategy matures. Operational assertiveness may indicate genuine strategic calculation, or it may reflect an effort to demonstrate resolve in a politically charged environment. When signaling carries domestic political weight, the boundary between deterrence and demonstration grows less distinct. In the economic realm, stabilization remains the overriding priority. Debt risks are managed, liquidity is adjusted, and local crises are contained. Yet economic governance depends on credibility and early correction. In an environment where political time is ambiguous and initiative carries risk, unwelcome data travels cautiously. Structural imbalances are addressed incrementally rather than decisively. The system becomes adept at avoiding immediate breakdown while postponing deeper reform.

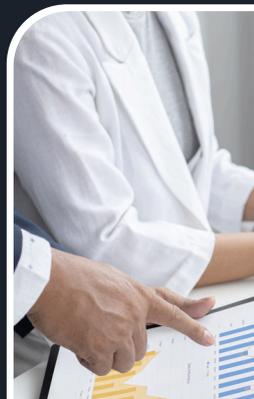
At the provincial level, incentives fragment even further. Local officials must manage growth targets, social stability, regulatory compliance, and political conformity. Without a clear political horizon, experimentation becomes hazardous. Ambitious reforms risk misreading the center's intent; inaction risks appearing ineffective. Over time, caution becomes the default.

The system becomes
adept at avoiding
immediate
breakdown while
postponing deeper
reform.

PROJECT PROPOSAL

Prepared for :
Wardiere Inc.

Prepared by :
Dani Martinez



Implementation diverges quietly throughout regions, not because of open resistance but because clarity thins as it descends.



A SCREEN SHOWS STOCK MOVEMENTS AT A SECURITIES OFFICE IN BEIJING ON APRIL 3, 2025. EQUITY MARKETS SUFFERED A BLOODBATH ON APRIL 3 AFTER DONALD TRUMP DELIVERED A "HAYMAKER" BLOW WITH SWEEPING TARIFFS AGAINST U.S. PARTNERS AND RIVALS, FANNING A GLOBAL TRADE WAR THAT MANY FEAR WILL SPARK RECESSIONS AND RAMP UP INFLATION. (PHOTO BY ADEK BERRY / AFP) (PHOTO BY ADEK BERRY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

None of these distortions is dramatic in isolation. They do not signal imminent collapse. Instead, they produce unevenness, including policies that advance forcefully in one sector while stagnating in another, signals that escalate faster than they are calibrated, and reforms announced with confidence yet adjusted through improvisation. Drift here does not appear to be paralysis. It looks more like misalignment, with policies advancing unevenly across domains. In a powerful state expanding its military reach and international ambitions, misalignment carries a cost. When internal coordination depends heavily on a single focal point and that focal point becomes uncertain, institutions begin to operate on the basis of inference rather than integration. Over time, inference accumulates error. Within environments like the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, where signaling, deterrence, and national prestige intersect, even small distortions can have outsized consequences.

The most consequential effects of a personalized system rarely appear during routine governance. They surface under stress. A high-risk window does not imply inevitable conflict. It describes a period when the leeway for error narrows, and the cost of miscalculation rises. In such moments, systems optimized for projection and discipline can struggle to calibrate. Taiwan is the tightest convergence point of China's internal political design and its external ambitions. It is embedded within the narrative of national rejuvenation and sovereignty restoration, while situated within an increasingly militarized maritime environment. PLA air incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone have become routine. Large-scale exercises following political events have normalized encirclement drills. Naval deployments in the South China Sea and the Western Pacific demonstrate sustained reach. These patterns signal capability and deterrent intent. They also invite constant interpretation.

In a system where external demonstrations carry domestic political weight, signaling can harden faster than strategy develops. Actions meant to affirm resolve may be read as escalation. Moves calibrated as deterrence may be interpreted as preparation. When authority is centralized and internal

correction mechanisms are constrained, there is less room to absorb ambiguity. Recent U.S.–China crisis communication failures highlight this vulnerability. Military-to-military dialogue has been suspended at politically sensitive moments, including after high-profile visits to Taiwan. Close encounters between U.S. and Chinese naval vessels and aircraft have occurred amid limited direct communication. Even established channels, such as hotlines, have proven unevenly utilized. The 2023 balloon incident demonstrated how quickly political distrust can freeze contact rather than facilitate clarification. These episodes do not prove intent to engage in conflict. They do illustrate how fragile guardrails can be when political signaling overrides institutional routine.

The public mood in Taipei today is not panic but normalization. Air-raid drills proceed with administrative calm. Reports of PLA flights are treated as background noise among the Taiwanese people. The exceptional has become procedural. That normalization shows both deterrence and accommodation, but it also reflects the constant presence of signaling. When signaling becomes a daily practice, distinguishing rehearsal from escalation becomes more difficult for all parties. The United States, Taiwan, and regional actors are active participants in this environment. They respond, adjust, and signal in turn. The danger is not in unilateral recklessness but in reciprocal misreading. In a system where coherence depends heavily on embodiment and legitimacy is reinforced through projection, the capacity to de-escalate through institutional reflex weakens. Small distortions, whether military, economic, or diplomatic, can compound, particularly when prestige and sovereignty are intertwined.

A high-risk window does not arise from volatility alone but from structure. China today is powerful and disciplined. It is not fragile in the conventional sense. Yet it operates under a system in which authority is concentrated, succession remains unsettled, and projection carries political weight. Under such conditions, the line between strategic signaling and unintended escalation grows thinner. The risk is not inevitable. It is exposure.

BUILT TO HOLD, NOT TO LAST

Xi Jinping has built a strong structure of control. Authority moves upward with little resistance. Discipline is enforced efficiently. The Party projects unity at home and resolve abroad. By conventional authoritarian measures, this is a consolidation of the highest order. But concentration is not the same as continuity.

The paradox of Xi's rule is that it has maximized control while narrowing the system's capacity to renew itself. Earlier post-Mao leaders treated succession as a stabilizing feature of governance—an informal, although real, mechanism that allowed authority to circulate without threatening the Party's survival. Xi treated succession differently. Rather than embedding it within collective leadership, he deferred it. What has emerged is neither a dynasty with institutionalized inheritance nor a collective system with distributed continuity, but a configuration of power whose coherence depends heavily on embodiment. Authority has been consolidated with remarkable effectiveness. Its transfer remains undefined.

That distinction is not confined to elite politics. It runs through every domain examined here. Military modernization proceeds under centralized command. Economic stabilization depends on calibrated top-down intervention. Maritime signaling and nationalist projection carry both strategic and domestic political weight. These are not separate vulnerabilities. They are expressions of the same structural condition: a system engineered to function smoothly so long as its center remains intact.

China today is powerful, capable, and disciplined. China's strength is not in question. What is still unclear is whether that strength has been organized in a way that can survive the man who concentrated it.

The PLA's Loyalty and the Future of the CCP

How the Chinese Military Could Shape China's Next Chapter

YAN CHANG BENNETT & BRENDAN MIRRA

The world watches with caution as the two preeminent world powers, the United States and the People's Republic of China, navigate an era of intensifying competition. Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has served as the center of gravity for geopolitics, economics, and military might. While the Soviet Union emerged as a formidable rival during the Cold War, the post-Cold War era identifies China as the primary state to watch in the contest for leadership in the 21st century.

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While China presents the outward appearance of a “normal” state—complete with executive, legislative, and judicial branches—it is unique as a party-state led exclusively by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP or Party). Since routing the Nationalists from mainland China in 1949, the CCP has maintained uninterrupted rule through five distinct leadership eras: Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and now Xi Jinping. Each Party leader has had distinct styles that have manifested in different objectives and outcomes. While the country has endured massive transitions and upheavals due to leadership transitions, two pillars have remained constant: the Party and its armed wing, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

As the world’s largest military force, the PLA is viewed by experts with a mix of caution and speculation. As a “Party army,” its primary function is the defense of the CCP against political enemies—a mandate that can include elements of Chinese society itself, as noted by Nan Li in *Chinese Civil-Military Relations in the Post-Deng Era* (2010). However, with domestic security handled by the People’s Armed Police and the Ministries of State and Public Security (which collectively command a budget exceeding the PLA’s), the PLA focuses primarily on external enemies of the state.

Unlike many Western militaries, the various branches are not separate entities but are subordinate components of the PLA. These branches include the PLA Navy (PLAN), PLA Air Force (PLAAF), and PLA Rocket Force (PLARF). The PLA, with its subordinate branches, operates under the centralized authority of the Central Military Commission (CMC). The CMC itself is a Party organ, ensuring that military decision-making remains firmly in the hands of CCP leadership.

Historically, the General Secretary of the CCP serves as the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), overseeing a body composed of senior military officers. While every Party leader has managed the PLA differently, the Xi Jinping era has subjected the military to the same sweeping measures as broader Chinese society: relentless anti-corruption campaigns, political “rectifications,” and a rigorous hardening of ideological standards. While these purges are seemingly designed to guarantee absolute loyalty, they also address inherent PLA characteristics that Xi views as obstacles: systemic corruption, graft, and patronage networks. Rather than a response to a looming military coup, these internal “cleansings” represent a foundational effort to align the PLA with the “New Era” as envisioned in Xi Jinping Thought.

Nevertheless, the PLA continues to grapple with an entrenched culture of self-dealing and patronage that prioritizes interpersonal loyalty over professional merit and combat efficacy. Despite these anti-corruption campaigns and purges, the PLA today lacks the institutional drive to amass authority as a rival power center to the Party. As Xi insists on changing the fundamental nature of the force, the question remains: will the PLA fundamentally transform, and what role will it play in the post-Xi era?

THE PARTY IN UNIFORM

Developing a nuanced perspective requires decoding the unique, inseparable bond between the CCP and the PLA. Founded in 1921 amidst the fervor of the

indigenous May Fourth Movement, the CCP was born from a sense of betrayal after former German territories were awarded to Japan following the First World War. Initially a small, urban organization, the CCP formed a “First United Front” with the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT) to combat warlordism. This alliance ended violently in 1927 when the KMT purged the Communists, forcing the CCP into the countryside. During the Long March (1934–1935), the CCP established a base in Yan’an, where Mao Zedong consolidated leadership and refined the guerrilla tactics that would win the hearts and minds of the peasantry. Following years of resistance against Japanese occupation and a subsequent Civil War, the CCP seized control of the mainland on October 1, 1949.

During the revolutionary period, the relationship between the CCP and its military wing—eventually named the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)—was defined by the absolute subordination of the gun to the Party. This was and is not a traditional state-military relationship; rather, the PLA was meant to engender political revolution and was inextricably tied to the party’s political survival and ideology. The PLA is not a national army sworn to a constitution; it is the “armed wing” of a Leninist one-party state.

With over 100 million members, the CCP’s highest priority is maintaining “perennial rule” that governs every aspect of Chinese life. This creates a dual-track system: Xi Jinping, for instance, serves as both the President of the PRC (a state title) and General Secretary of the Party (his supreme role). As such, the CCP is a Leninist one-party state intolerant of independent power centers and directs every facet of Chinese life, including the state, the military, and civil society, operating under the premise that “without the CCP, there would be chaos,” according to Party ideology.

While the PRC maintains a formal government structure that nominally mirrors democratic systems—complete with executive, legislative, and judicial branches—this architecture often obscures the reality of party-state integration. In practice, every significant state position is held by a CCP official who carries dual titles, with the Party role always taking precedence; for example, Xi Jinping’s authority as General Secretary fundamentally supersedes his role as State President. Although leadership transitions are ostensibly managed through the quinquennial National Party Congress to refresh the Politburo and the Central Military Commission, these processes remain opaque and frequently a result of “horse dealing.” This system ensures that while the state structure provides a facade of conventional governance, the Party remains the singular, undisputed source of power.

While international media often characterizes the Xi Jinping era as “unprecedented,” these shifts are primarily revisions to a membership-based organization founded in 1921. These changes affect the Party Charter and its internal traditions rather than state-level institutional government guidelines. Under the guise of “democratic centralism,” the CCP remains an elitist hierarchy managed by a small inner circle. As he nears a potential fourth term, Xi Jinping has not yet designated a clear successor, and he has used the country-wide anti-corruption campaigns to seemingly consolidate personal control.

Despite the opaque nature of the Xi era, his long-term objectives are clearly articulated in Xi Jinping Thought, which was codified into the CCP

Charter in 2017. This ideology functions as a “regime maintenance paradigm,” designed to cement the Party as the central authority over every facet of Chinese life. The core of this vision is the “Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation,” a plan to restore China to its rightful preeminence by the centenary of the PRC’s founding in 2049 (the Second Centenary; the First Centenary was 2021, based on the founding of the Party in 1921).

Unlike the American Dream’s focus on individual liberty, the Chinese Dream demands that citizens prioritize national rejuvenation over personal ambition. This shift is most visible in the transition from the previous era’s “to get rich is glorious” mantra toward “common prosperity,” a policy move designed to curb capitalist excess and strengthen Party oversight of the private sector. A fundamental tenet of the ideology is that “the Party leads everything—east, west, south, north, and center,” as noted by Xi himself. The CCP operates with a dual imperative: ensuring its own political survival while modernizing the state to reclaim what it views as China’s rightful place in the world.

To achieve this Second Centenary Goal, Xi has established a military roadmap with critical benchmarks in 2027 (the PLA’s centenary) and 2035 (the completion of fundamental modernization). Under this framework, the PLA remains the “armed wing of the Party” rather than a national army sworn to a constitution. At its apex sits the Central Military Commission (CMC), chaired by Xi, which functions as both a command center and an ideological watchdog. In this system, an officer’s career is defined more by political reliability and “unquestionable obedience” than by warfighting prowess—a striking shift from China’s founding leaders, who possessed extensive combat or operational experience that modern PLA officers largely lack.



THE WHITE HOUSE IN WASHINGTON, D.C., U.S., ON TUESDAY, APRIL 8, 2025. U.S. PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP IS MOVING TO EXPAND THE MINING AND USE OF COAL INSIDE THE U.S., A BID TO POWER THE BOOM IN ENERGY-HUNGRY DATA CENTERS WHILE SEEKING TO REVIVE A DECLINING U.S. FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY. PHOTOGRAPHER: AL DRAGO/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

For decades following China’s “opening up,” the PLA was notorious for endemic graft and self-dealing, a trend that extended to the highest levels of Party leadership. A review of Xi’s aggressive anti-corruption campaigns shows clearly a triple purpose. First, Xi is intent on keeping the CCP in power and has reduced threats to its authority within the country, which also includes threats to his personal authority as Party General Secretary. Second, Xi believes rooting out the corruption that would cripple the PLA’s ability to “fight and win” in a modern conflict is essential. Lastly, and most importantly,

he is unwilling to compromise the authority and continuing leadership of the CCP at the PRC's helm as the state and the PLA modernize.

While Western observers often speculate about internal dissatisfaction with Xi's hardline governance, there is currently no credible evidence of a pending political or military coup. Xi has successfully linked the Party's survival to the nation's modernization, signaling that while the methods may be ruthless, the objective remains a prosperous, stable China under undisputed Communist Party rule.

THE DENG BARGAIN

During the Mao Zedong era (1949–1976), the PLA functioned as the ultimate instrument of “continuous revolution.” Mao embedded ideological loyalty directly into the military's structure, prioritizing political credentials over professional competence. This high level of military-political integration allowed the PLA to act as the final stabilizer of the regime amid the collapse of regular political order during the Cultural Revolution. When Party institutions were paralyzed, the PLA intervened to restore order and prevent the fragmentation of authority. Mao's emphasis on building a military defined by class struggle meant that many in the officer corps were from peasant families with limited education and professional military experience.

During the transition following Mao's death, the PLA provided a stable balance of power that ensured regime continuity, enabling the shift from class struggle toward a more pragmatic, professional governing model under Deng Xiaoping (1978–1989). A veteran of the Long March, Deng reoriented the military toward the project of economic modernization, declaring that the PLA must serve the “overall interests of national construction” while ensuring regime continuity. Deng reinstated ranks and professional criteria but also slashed the defense budget, granting the military permission to engage in commercial activities to compensate for funding cuts.

This professionalization served a stabilizing function during the post-Mao transition by redirecting the PLA away from factional politics and toward institutional loyalty to the CMC, rather than to individual Old Guard elders. At the same time, Deng preserved the PLA's role as the ultimate guarantor of Party rule, a reality made clear during the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. The Deng era, therefore, represents a grand bargain, as the PLA became professionalized and gained institutional autonomy in exchange for political obedience, stabilizing leadership transitions by anchoring authority in formal military institutions rather than personal revolutionary charisma.

Jiang Zemin (1989–2002), lacking a personal military background, relied on formal institutional mechanisms to consolidate authority. He presided over a critical phase of professionalization centered on “informationization” and high-tech warfare. Most significantly, Jiang ordered the PLA's divestment from its commercial empire, recognizing that the “business of business” degraded the “business of war.”

Additionally, Jiang formalized predictable leadership turnover, most notably the “Seven Up, Eight Down” (Qi shang, ba xia) retirement convention, which reduced uncertainty around succession and insulated the PLA from personalized factional struggles. Under Jiang, the PLA stabilized politics not

through revolutionary loyalty or personal authority, but through institutional continuity defined by predictability, professional norms, and adherence to formal rules. The leadership transition from Jiang to Hu Jintao further demonstrates the PLA's stabilizing role through institutional continuity, as Jiang retained the CMC chairmanship while Hu assumed the position of General Secretary of the CCP. In this cooperative handover, the military provided a security guarantee as civilian leadership transitioned, with Hu focusing on state governance and Jiang centered on the military.

The campaign reinforces the idea that loyalty to the Party is synonymous with loyalty to Xi.

During Hu's tenure (2002–2012), the PLA increasingly stabilized the political system through the externalization of the military's mission. Hu, a rules-minded leader without military credentials or a personal power base, advanced a model that can be understood as "objective control with Chinese characteristics," emphasizing the need for budget increases, regularized procedures, delegation of authority, and a clearer separation between military and civilian bureaucracies. The PLA under Hu was largely prevented from intervening in intra-Party rivalries or domestic political struggles, and was instead tasked with expanding external and technical missions, such as maritime security, outer space, and international peacekeeping. This shift in focus reinforced the PLA's legitimacy as a professional institution defined by competence rather than ideology.

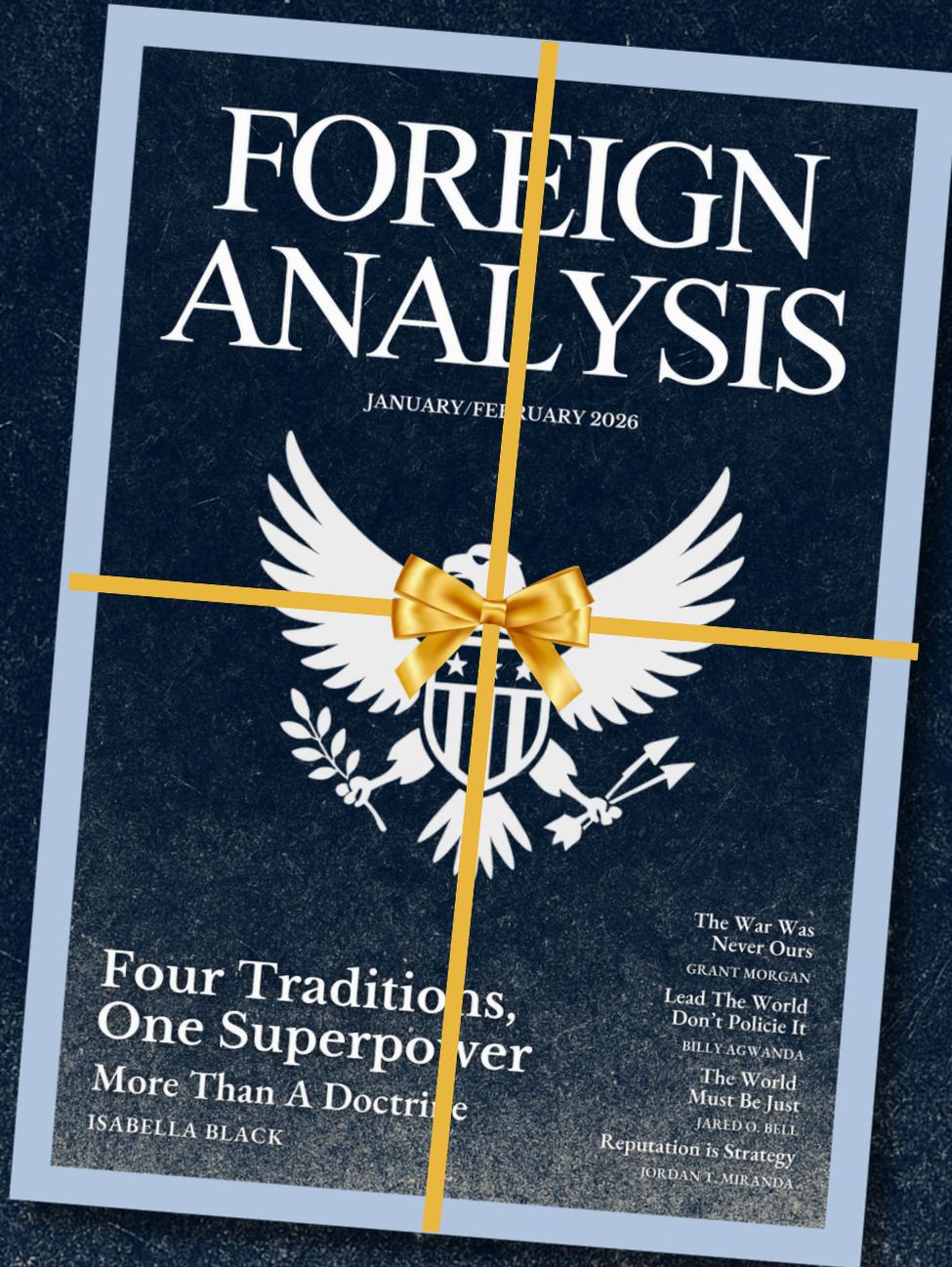
However, Hu's tenure was defined by a "weak center," which allowed military corruption to flourish under powerful generals such as Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, limiting the power and influence of Hu. Despite these internal struggles, the PLA continued to act as a stabilizing force by remaining out of political disputes and institutionalizing cohesion during leadership transitions. The Hu era, defined by this professional restraint and growth in systemic corruption, laid the groundwork for Xi Jinping's efforts to reassert personal, centralized control over the military.

XI'S ULTIMATE TEST

Xi's reforms are driven by "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" as incorporated into the CCP Charter in 2017. This is a "regime maintenance paradigm" designed to ensure the Party remains the center of gravity for all Chinese life. The Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation aims for China's reemergence as the world's greatest power by the 2049 Second Centenary.

Since taking office in 2012, Xi Jinping has instituted a country-wide anti-corruption campaign aimed at purging the Party of "tigers" (high-ranking officials) and "flies" (low-level bureaucrats). While Western observers focus on the consolidation of power, CCP rhetoric centers on moral revival and ideological purity. Xi warns that corruption is a symptom of "ideological wavering." By purging officials, the Party aims to strip away Western-style liberal influences and "lazy" governance, replacing them with a disciplined, ascetic commitment to Marxist-Leninist roots.

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The campaign reinforces the idea that loyalty to the Party is synonymous with loyalty to Xi. Deviating from central policy is categorized as political corruption, emphasizing a return to the revolutionary spirit of the Mao era. This purge ensures that those in power possess the “Red Gene,” prioritizing the Party’s survival over personal gain.

Xi’s anti-corruption campaign is the largest in the PLA’s history. It has progressed in two waves: first, removing the appointees of his predecessors (2014–2016), and second, targeting his own hand-picked leaders (2023–present). According to Jon Czin, a former top analyst at the CIA, the CCP utilizes a “mafioso-style ‘decapitation strategy’” to keep the PLA in line and enforces “political red lines” regarding social interactions and the exercise of power, leading to the removal of more generals than during the Mao era.

This “decapitation strategy” serves three goals. First, it reinforces that “the Party commands the gun,” eliminating independent power centers. Secondly, it seeks to avoid the “Russian Mistake” seen in Ukraine, where corruption weakened military efficacy. Finally, Xi believes rooting out graft is essential to achieving a “world-class” force by 2049 capable of winning “informationized” wars.

The 2023 purge of the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) serves as a case study. Triggered by a procurement probe, the investigation decapitated leadership, including Commander General Li Yuchao, and ensnared successive Defense Ministers Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu for allegations of rocket fuel replaced with water and nonfunctioning silo lids. While some Western analysts suggest the “water-filled” rockets may be a literal interpretation of a Chinese idiom for price inflation, the missing fuel and faulty silo lids highlighted a critical connection for Xi: endemic graft is not merely a financial drain but a direct threat to combat readiness.

In January 2026, Xi issued new military regulations that formalize combat readiness and warfare preparation as the PLA’s primary mandates. According to the Party journal *Qiushi*, these rules seek to “award the excellent and punish violators,” signaling a transition toward stricter performance-based accountability. While Xi’s early purges were often dismissed as “province stacking”—the replacement of predecessors’ appointees with loyalists from his own Shaanxi and Fujian cliques—the recent targeting of his own hand-picked leaders suggests a shift in priority.

The January 2026 arrests of high-ranking figures such as General Zhang Youxia and General Liu Zhenli for “undermining the system of ultimate responsibility” indicate that personal loyalty no longer guarantees immunity from professional failure. Zhang’s downfall, in particular, may stem from his skepticism regarding the 2027 Taiwan readiness timeline. This suggests that Xi is no longer merely purging political rivals, but is now removing any official perceived as an impediment to his 2035 and 2049 modernization benchmarks.

The recent purges and the introduction of new military regulations underscore Xi’s uncompromising commitment to his twin mandates: achieving full modernization by 2035 and establishing a “world-class” military by 2049. Within this framework, the 2027 benchmark for Taiwan’s invasion readiness is a metric of progress rather than an isolated objective.

These upheavals signal Xi's recognition that the PLA is currently failing to meet its internal modernization benchmarks. By removing even his own appointees, Xi has demonstrated that personal loyalty will not shield leadership from the consequences of failing to meet his modernization timeline.

Strategically, this push represents a decisive pivot from a traditional, land-based force toward a highly lethal, integrated military centered on air, naval, and nuclear capabilities. Xi's focus on a lethal, technologically advanced force is designed for asymmetric dominance, yet the "Taiwan question" remains a high-stakes gamble for the Party's continued leadership. The CCP's authority rests on its role as the vanguard of the Chinese people. It maintains its legitimacy through a dialectical mandate: the people provide political compliance and "struggle" in exchange for the Party's ability to guarantee collective security and "Common Prosperity."

An unsuccessful invasion would represent a catastrophic failure of the Party's historic mission, fundamentally severing its connection to the "masses." While Chinese society has demonstrated a profound capacity for sacrifice—having emerged from the "century of humiliation" and extreme poverty through the Party's guidance—this endurance is predicated on the state's ability to successfully manage China's rise. A military defeat would expose the CCP as unable to fulfill its prime directive, potentially triggering a cycle of "social contradictions" and instability that could lead to the demise of the Party's perennial rule.

Combining these elements, we can see that Xi's governance is a unified project of regime maintenance. On one side, the military purges ensure that the "armed wing" is technically and ideologically prepared for the 2035 and 2049 milestones. On the other, Common Prosperity secures the home front, attempting to build a resilient, socialist society that can withstand the external pressures of a potential conflict over Taiwan.

For the CCP, modernization is not an end in itself; it is the means by which the Party fulfills its historic mission of national rejuvenation. Any failure in this mission—whether through military incompetence or economic inequality—threatens to sever the dialectical bond between the vanguard and the masses, an outcome the Party views as an existential catastrophe. This context reveals that Xi's current "mass-line" approach is not just a policy shift, but a fundamental reclamation of the Party's role as the revolutionary vanguard, reversing the professionalizing trends of his predecessors.

These purges have induced institutional paralysis, where lower-level leaders prioritize political survival over initiative.

THE PRICE OF ABSOLUTE CONTROL

Historically, both the PLA and the broader CCP have utilized patron-client dynamics to solidify hierarchies. In this model, interpersonal loyalty often superseded professional merit. Advancement was rooted in patronage networks, creating vertical "pyramids" of loyalty and independent power

centers. Xi views these as existential threats. He has implemented "rotation" and "decapitation" strategies to force the officer corps to look exclusively to Xi and the CMC for career security. While framed as necessary to "eliminate toxins" and "remove rot," these purges have induced institutional paralysis, where lower-level leaders prioritize political survival over initiative, animated by fear that a perceived ideological lapse could result in a career-ending purge.

Analytically, this strategy may have the knock-on effect of creating a dangerous "echo chamber." By systematically removing senior leaders—often the very individuals with the experience to offer unvarnished assessments—Xi risks insulating himself from objective truths regarding the PLA's actual capabilities. If veteran generals feel too vulnerable to express that modernization targets for 2027 or 2035 are lagging, the likelihood of strategic miscalculation increases. This environment of enforced consensus may ultimately embolden Xi to act on flawed intelligence, particularly regarding a high-stakes contingency like Taiwan.

On the other hand, some Western analysts also claim that the PLA leadership is hiding from him the realities of the PLA's capabilities in an invasion of Taiwan. However, Xi's persistent purges of military leadership, even those with personal ties to him, show that he is clearly aware that the PLA is not on track to modernize and certainly not on the timeline that he has designated.

CONTROL TODAY, UNCERTAINTY TOMORROW

After more than a decade in power, Xi Jinping has emerged as China's most dominant political figure since Mao Zedong. However, this centralized authority has dismantled the power-sharing norms and elite consensus developed since the 1980s. By removing term limits and delaying the designation of a successor, Xi has secured immediate control while simultaneously exposing the state to a potential succession crisis. He faces a classic autocratic dilemma: naming an heir too early creates a rival and renders him vulnerable to his own decapitation, while naming one too late risks a chaotic struggle upon his departure.



CHEN MIN'ER (C), THE COMMUNIST PARTY SECRETARY OF TIANJIN, ATTENDS THE SECOND PLENARY SESSION OF THE NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS WITH HUANG KUNMIN, THE PARTY SECRETARY OF GUANGDONG PROVINCE (L) AND CHEN WEIQING, HEAD OF THE COMMISSION FOR POLITICAL AND LEGAL AFFAIRS OF THE CPC CENTRAL COMMITTEE, IN BEIJING'S GREAT HALL OF THE PEOPLE ON MARCH 8, 2025. (PHOTO BY GREG BAKER / AFP) (PHOTO BY GREG BAKER/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Despite Western speculation of a looming crisis, an orderly transition remains probable. Xi has "loaded the deck" with loyalists defined by socialist credentials. High-profile purges—like that of Foreign Minister Qin Gang—signal that neither ties nor seniority protect those who succumb to "decadent" Western tendencies. By the 2027 National Party Congress, Xi will likely utilize the Beidaihe Summer Summit to reaffirm his leadership mandate, operating entirely within the formal, albeit opaque, machinery of the Party.

It is unlikely that Xi will adopt the "rule from behind the scenes" model favored by his predecessors. Unlike Deng Xiaoping, who wielded ultimate authority without holding the top Party title, or Jiang Zemin, who retained his chairmanship of the CMC for several years after relinquishing his role as General Secretary, Xi has centralized all pillars of power into a singular, integrated mandate. Substantiating the Party's "perennial rule" and achieving the "Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035" requires his active, direct leadership.

The year 2035 holds immense strategic and symbolic weight: it is the benchmark for "basic socialist modernization" and the age at which Xi will turn 82—the same age at which Mao Zedong died. For Xi, 2035 may represent the opportunity to symbolically rectify the social fragmentation of the Mao era by achieving a "prosperous and strong" China. Consequently, he will likely delay appointing a successor until the 2032 Party Congress, maintaining uncontested authority while allowing a vetted protégé a few years to prove their ideological worthiness.

The only real unknown is if Xi is suddenly incapacitated and is unable to tap a successor. In the event of sudden incapacitation, the transition would likely be managed by Li Qiang, the Premier and number-two official on the Politburo Standing Committee. As a Xi loyalist with no independent power base, Li functions as the "fixer"—evidenced by his role in navigating the chaotic end of the Zero-COVID policy and managing the current housing crisis. His presence ensures that Xi's vision remains the institutional north star. While he may not be a "Xi whisperer," Li has proven himself as identically aligned with Xi's own views.

Beyond Li, the primary contenders for eventual leadership are Cai Qi and Ding Xuexiang. Number Five in the Politburo Standing Committee, Cai Qi is an ideological enforcer whose victory in internal power struggles (reportedly over the ousted Zhang Youxia) confirms his standing as a guardian of Xi's hardline policies. Number Seven, Ding Xuexiang was Xi's long-time personal secretary and holds the deepest understanding of Xi's strategic vision. Both men are Xi loyalists and lack independent factional bases. In the "New Era," charisma—once possessed by disgraced figures like Bo Xilai—is viewed as a liability. The current Standing Committee consists of disciplined "Party men" unlikely to risk the collective survival of the vanguard for personal ambition.

For the military, this continuity suggests that the traditional era of decentralized patronage and systemic corruption is being forcibly closed. Having eliminated senior rivals like Zhang and Liu, Xi is now free to populate the PLA with a younger cadre of "red and professional" officers whose career security is tethered exclusively to the Party's ideological roadmap. Whether

through an orderly handover in 2032 or the "behind-closed-doors" horse-trading that would follow a sudden vacancy, the PLA's historical trajectory and current structural constraints suggest it will remain a loyal instrument of the Party. The "gun" remains firmly in the hands of the vanguard, ensuring the pursuit of the 2049 goal continues unabated by internal military interference.

MISREADING CHINESE POWER

Ultimately, the PLA's loyalty serves as the ultimate guarantor of institutional continuity, but the military remains at the Party's direction rather than an independent political actor. The recent removal of General Zhang Youxia—who reportedly voiced public disagreement on the feasibility of the 2027 Taiwan timeline—has effectively neutralized the last significant pocket of potential resistance within the high command. By successfully purging a figure of Zhang's stature, Xi has signaled that even "untouchable" veterans must align with his strategic vision.

Western observers frequently dismiss "Xi Jinping Thought" as empty rhetoric or impenetrable jargon, but it is analytically reckless to ignore the official discourse that the CCP has consistently doubled down on for two decades. While some rely on anecdotal evidence of private dissatisfaction among the Chinese public, empirical data suggests a more complex reality. While direct polling often reflects a "standard" 90% satisfaction rate with the central government, more sophisticated list experiments—such as those conducted by USC Dornsife and Stanford—reveal that even when anonymity is protected, support for the regime remains remarkably high, hovering between 50% and 70%. This indicates that the CCP enjoys a deep reservoir of genuine legitimacy rooted in decades of material improvement.

The international community stands at a crossroads where old assumptions of Chinese institutional drift or inevitable liberalization must be discarded. The persistent "cleansing" of the PLA is not merely a series of paranoid purges, but a deliberate refinement of a critical tool to ensure it can fulfill its historical mission. By tethering the military's advancement to ideological purity and performance-based benchmarks, Xi has effectively reasserted the primacy of the vanguard over the gun. As we move toward the 2035 and 2049 milestones, the world must recognize that the "Chinese Dream" is backed by a military being forged into a loyal, professional extension of the Party's will. Success or failure in the 21st century will not be determined by waiting for a collapse that may never come, but by a clear-eyed engagement with a party-state that is actively preparing for its self-defined era of preeminence.

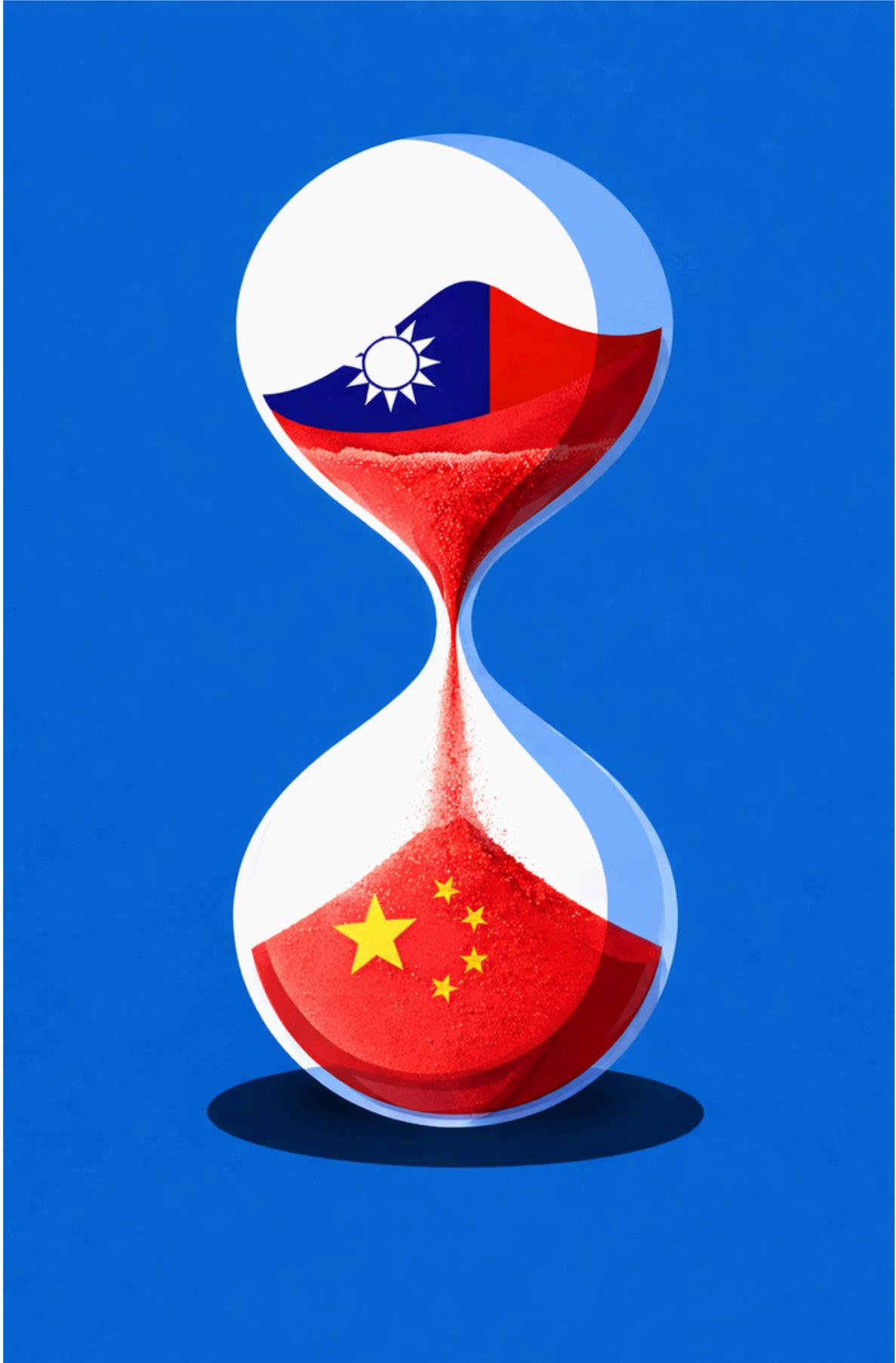
Taiwan in the Shadow of Transition

Will 2027 Be a Deadline or a Bargaining Tool?

YANGJIANXIN ZHOU

In 1972, Mao Zedong once assessed the relationship with the United States in a distinctly realist tone: he preferred dealing with America’s “right wing.” Half a century later, that remark has found a new echo in the Taiwan Strait debate. On January 20, 2025, Donald Trump was inaugurated as President of the United States. This unconventional American leader has been viewed by some observers in Beijing as the “American right wing” in today’s context. However, this does not automatically mean that China and the United States will strike a deal on the Taiwan issue, nor does it imply that the risk of conflict will decline. It does, however, introduce a variable into Beijing’s established rhythm: contacts, probing, and bargaining space between the two sides on Taiwan may emerge more frequently than before.

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Regarding Taiwan policy “after Xi,” there are at least three possible paths. The first is that the top leader continues in office and handles the Taiwan issue personally, keeping the ultimate decision over Taiwan Strait policy firmly in his hands during his tenure. The second is that the top Party and state positions are transferred, and the Taiwan issue is decided and handled autonomously by the successor. The third is a limited arrangement of power transfer: for example, retaining the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, or continuing for the incumbent leader to serve as Party Chairman by restoring the Party Chairman system. Under such a limited transfer arrangement, even if Party and government posts are adjusted, the final decision-making authority may still remain with the incumbent leader.

Therefore, the key is not to presuppose which path will inevitably occur, but to understand how leadership transition and foreign policy affect each other: could Taiwan policy be used to validate authority, manage risks, or shape bargaining leverage? Under a backdrop of limited leadership transition, whether a successor’s decisions on Taiwan might be linked to the “2027 combat readiness” timetable also needs to be discussed cautiously and in layers, rather than asserted in advance.

THE 2027 CLOCK

The “2027 combat readiness order” itself is a hardline policy declaration, but it does not necessarily amount to abandoning peaceful unification, nor does it mean abandoning “Peaceful Unification by Coercive Strategy.” Preparing for combat can both serve genuine capability building and function as coercive leverage: by making military buildup and risk creation visible, it raises an opponent’s expectations of future costs, thereby generating pressure at the negotiating level. The danger is that once a timetable is politicized and normalized, it may produce a “hardening effect.” First, organizational hardening.

A readiness milestone can be translated by the military and the security system into constraints on resource allocation and performance assessment; training and exercises then roll forward around the milestone, and the timetable shifts from a political order into a security reality. Second, narrative hardening. Because the Taiwan issue carries high symbolic significance, public opinion may bind “toughness” to “effective governance,” making any de-escalation harder to explain and making strategic flexibility easier to compress. As the milestone draws nearer, outsiders are more likely to interpret each exercise and each statement as irreversible escalation, even if the true intent remains “pressure to compel talks.”

Against this backdrop, two external and internal factors may affect Beijing’s reassessment of the timetable, but the extent of their impact does not follow automatically; it depends on whether they change Beijing’s judgments about risks and benefits and about the space for tradable bargains.

WHO INHERITS TAIWAN?

The reason succession questions can magnify Taiwan Strait risks lies first in the non-institutionalized nature of the succession mechanism and the room

for flexibility. Aside from the relatively smooth “intergenerational designation” during the eras of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, the CCP has not historically had a stable, fixed “designated successor position.” Jiang Zemin rose from Shanghai Party Secretary to the top post; Hua Guofeng and Zhao Ziyang also moved from serving as Premier of the State Council to becoming General Secretary, showing that the pathway is not singular.

After the CCP’s 18th National Congress, this flexibility has further expanded: unconventional leaps in the style of He Weidong and Qin Gang, together with over-age continuations in office by figures such as Zhang Youxia and Wang Yi, indicate an adjustable “flexible gap” in age and credential rules. Yet the CCP’s 20th Congress chronicle still invoked the long-ambiguous political concept of “comrades who meet the age requirements,” suggesting that conventions have not been fully abandoned but remain in a state of being “interpretable and adjustable.”

In relatively smooth transitions, potential successors are often “seen” through high-intensity foreign affairs activity, and their international influence and roles are long taken seriously. For example, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping both carried out relatively frequent foreign affairs activities while serving as Vice President. If one follows this clue and analyzes the current leadership roster item by item, the “identifiable” candidates can be concentrated among a small number of figures: Li Qiang, the Premier of the State Council, and Chen Jining, the Shanghai Party Secretary.

A comparison between the two should proceed along three dimensions: age structure, the height of their positions, and their political connections with the incumbent leader; on that basis, one should then examine the political significance represented by the intensity of external activities. Beyond his age advantage, the current Shanghai Party Secretary’s strengths lie in positional pathway and city location: Shanghai is an international window, and during his tenure it has hosted dense visits by foreign guests; moreover, the Shanghai Party Secretary post has long been regarded as a popular stepping stone into the Politburo Standing Committee—apart from Chen Liangyu, multiple Shanghai Party Secretaries ultimately entered the Standing Committee—so the post carries high institutional weight.

Taiwan will not simply be ‘handed to the successor.

In recent years, however, his external visibility has been more of a “passive reception” window; proactive overseas travel has been relatively limited, and external perceptions of his national-level role often need to wait for stronger signals. Premier Li

Qiang’s advantages are more concentrated: his political association with Xi Jinping in Zhejiang is more direct, and the premiership naturally sits at a higher level and bears responsibility for coordinating the economic agenda; more importantly, his frequent overseas travel and external economic communication have led some scholars to describe him as Xi Jinping’s “economic envoy.”

This label does not necessarily equate to a succession arrangement, but it means that in diplomatic activity, Li Qiang is more readily endowed with representative status and visible political weight. Considering the four factors

—age, positional height, political connection, and intensity of external activity—the successor option is still difficult to determine as a single path. But if 2027 is taken as a possible time point for a transfer of power or a limited transfer of power, current political signals indicate that Premier Li Qiang is relatively in the lead.

This brings the analysis back to the core issue: will the Taiwan issue be “left to the successor”? This depends not primarily on whether the top Party and state positions change hands, but on whether military authority is transferred simultaneously. Given that the current leader still wields great influence, and that the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission has no clear term limit, amid a continuing rise in emphasis on military anti-corruption and “political military-building,” and in circumstances where shocks such as the “Zhang Youxia case” are regarded as requiring stronger control, the stability of the military is more likely to be treated as the ballast stone of overall stability.

This yields a key judgment: even if Party and government posts change around 2027, the ultimate decision-making authority on the Taiwan issue remains highly concentrated in the hands of the incumbent core; the successor is more likely to take on roles in implementation and external communication rather than rewriting the decision logic. The two possible paths are thus reordered: either Xi does not retire and handles the Taiwan Strait personally; or even if there is a party-and-government-level handover, an asynchronous transfer of military authority will keep Taiwan Strait decisions under the incumbent core, and Taiwan will not simply be “handed to the successor.”

THE TRANSACTION TRAP

Assessments of the external environment likewise reveal two structural contradictions. First, the United States is not a unitary actor; the executive branch and Congress often differ in tempo and intensity on Taiwan-related issues. For Beijing, long-term efforts to “persuade the United States to support peaceful unification” are widely judged to have a low probability of success, yet there have still been probing attempts. For example, during the 2023 San Francisco meeting, Xi Jinping expressed to Joe Biden the hope that the U.S. side would oppose Taiwan independence and support China’s peaceful unification, but no clear response was obtained. After Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan, Beijing continued to intensify military pressure on Taiwan, and in the direction Beijing hoped for, Biden’s statements largely remained at “not supporting Taiwan independence,” without rising to an explicit commitment to “opposing Taiwan independence.”

This gap has encouraged Beijing to believe that if political persuasion is unlikely to work, the weight of coercive measures will rise. Second, in a context where a transaction-oriented government comes to power, Beijing may believe there is some feasibility in negotiating with U.S. government departments or exchanging interests on Taiwan-related matters. Signs of compromise in the rare earth–trade war and signals that sales of Nvidia chips to China have resumed are easily read as examples that “things can be talked



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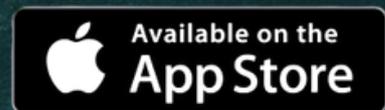
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about and also traded.” Accordingly, if the 1972 remark about preferring to deal with America’s “right wing” is brought back to the present, Trump may be precisely the “American right wing” in this context: his policy style emphasizes deals and prices, thereby opening space for contact and probing.

But the risk comes precisely from the U.S. internal structure: Congress may remain persistently hawkish, pushing more related legislation to send signals and attempting to incorporate Taiwan commitments into a legal framework. Such behavior highlights divisions among different actors in Washington and makes deals harder to implement. For Beijing, a political structure in which the executive branch can negotiate while Congress stays hawkish increases the uncertainty that “a window exists but can close at any time,” which in turn can more easily induce stronger pressure to test red lines and extract commitments. Thus, within a foreseeable time horizon, Beijing may both attempt negotiation and interest exchanges with the United States and simultaneously intensify military pressure on Taiwan in order to obtain greater leverage in negotiations.

THE THRESHOLD QUESTION

Under a structure of “2027 milestone hardening + opaque succession + fractured U.S. signals,” Taiwan policy can broadly fall into three scenarios and is more likely to appear in combination. The first is an escalation path. If Beijing judges that bargaining space with the United States is being squeezed by Congress’s legal codification of commitments, and if internally there is a need to prove resolve and governance capacity through a tough posture, the probability of military risk-taking will rise. Escalation may not mean immediate war; it is more likely to manifest as higher-intensity, higher-frequency gray-zone actions aimed at changing the opponent’s expectations and negotiating position. But escalation boundaries are the hardest to control: if external actors interpret pressure as a prelude to war, countermeasures may be triggered in advance, and the risk of misperception will surge.

The second is a restraint path. If Beijing judges that a window still exists for negotiation or exchange with U.S. government departments, and if domestic stability and economic repair are higher priorities, a strategy of “strong rhetoric, steady action” may take shape: maintaining a tough narrative while avoiding crossing irreversible thresholds in action in order to preserve strategic room for maneuver and long-term competitive space. The political difficulty of restraint lies in explaining “no immediate action” without being seen as weak, especially as a moment long discussed by public opinion keeps drawing nearer.

The third is an ambiguity path. If Beijing believes the optimal approach is to sustain uncertainty over the long term, keep Taipei and Washington under continuing pressure, and at the same time avoid bearing the costs of war, it will lean more toward mixed signals: readiness continues, pressure is adjustable, and decisions remain unclear. Ambiguity can buy flexibility, but it also accumulates structural risk—it demands extremely high crisis-management capacity, and leadership transition and fractured signals from the United States will precisely undermine that capacity.

Politicizing the timetable will harden policy imagination and compress future flexibility.

No matter how these three scenarios shift, one bottom-line constraint remains unavoidable: if military authority is not transferred, changes at the Party-and-government level do not automatically alter the ultimate decision logic in the Taiwan Strait. Even if a successor more frequently undertakes foreign affairs activities, the role may still be more about execution, communication, and external presentation rather than truly deciding whether to cross the threshold.

THE NARROWING CORRIDOR

Placing Taiwan within the “post–Xi Jinping” framework is not primarily about judging an individual’s choices, but about identifying structural constraints. The 2027 combat readiness order is not equivalent to abandoning peace; it can run in parallel with the logic of coercive peaceful unification. But politicizing the timetable will harden policy imagination and compress future flexibility. For Beijing, if a transaction-oriented government is truly seen as a window, it will bundle pressure on Taiwan with negotiation with the United States to raise leverage amid uncertainty; but the uncontrollable variable of a hawkish Congress may constrain deal implementation and induce stronger probing and higher misperception risks.

For the United States, the room for choice is not wide: Elbridge Colby’s emphasis that Taiwan is not a core U.S. interest points to a more fundamental question—what cost is the United States willing to bear for peace in the Taiwan Strait, or is it more inclined to avoid being drawn into conflict over China’s core interests, thereby reaching a limited deal? Under Washington’s political atmosphere and the strong lobbying structure of the Democratic Progressive Party, the space for deals seems likely to be constrained; but if a more realist line is pursued, deal-oriented thinking may still be pushed to the forefront of Taiwan Strait policy.

A clearer path ahead will depend on whether high-level China–U.S. interactions can form reliable boundaries between deterrence and de-escalation, and on whether Beijing will treat Taiwan as a priority issue. The real danger is not the timetable itself, but the way the timetable and international public opinion lock into each other, forcing all parties to make decisions in an ever-narrowing corridor.

The Myth of Russian Decline

Why a Weak Russia Is Still Dangerous

MATTHEW ORR

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many prominent geopolitical analysts, political scientists, policymakers, economists, and businesspeople insisted that Russia was on a trajectory for terminal decline as a major geopolitical power. They used demographic, economic, and political arguments to claim that Russia would never again be a global political player compared to many other rising powers—let alone the serious threat to Europe and the United States it once posed. However, the 21st century revealed the exact opposite to be the case. On the contrary, it is precisely because of Russia’s challenging geostrategic position that the Kremlin, under Vladimir Putin, became—and is likely to remain for the foreseeable future—one of the most disruptive and strategically consequential actors in global politics.

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While the metrics of national strength—a shrinking population and labor force, an economy tethered to volatile global commodity prices, and aging infrastructure—pointed toward status erosion, the Kremlin’s footprint on the world stage has only grown more disruptive since Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012. This disruption began most starkly with the 2014 annexation of Crimea and start of the war against Ukraine in the Donbas, culminating in the 2022 full-scale invasion. These actions have come at immense cost for Russia, but Moscow seems to show no sign of changing, raising a basic question: Why does Russia remain so dangerous even as its material foundations degrade?

It may be logical to assume that as a state’s economic base diminishes – as Russia’s stagflating economy long has – that its foreign policy should become more constrained, cautious and inward-looking. But political malaise, economic stagnation, and demographic decline of the past decade have only sharpened, rather than softened, the Kremlin’s behavior. Driven by a “use it or lose it” mentality—and, increasingly, perceptions of sunk costs—the Kremlin views external threats as the only way to offset internal fragility and maintain its seat at the table of great powers – in particular given the consequences of its decision to invade Ukraine.

Unraveling this seeming paradox lies in accepting years of Western misunderstandings about Russia and remembering the tendency for geopolitical decline to fuel revanchism. By understanding the Kremlin’s perceived geopolitical imperatives, we can see that a state in decline, like Russia, can be just as—if not more—consequential than one on the rise.

RUSSIA’S STRUCTURAL WEAKNESSES

Russia’s primary structural weaknesses are longstanding: the first being demography and state capacity, and the second being its economic and technological stagnation. The Kremlin’s decision to invade Ukraine has only solidified or deepened each of these weaknesses. Russia is currently weathering a demographic “perfect storm” that predates the war against Ukraine but has been catastrophically accelerated by it. For decades, the nation has faced a shrinking population, with fertility rates hovering around 1.4 to 1.5—well below the replacement level of 2.1. The statistics are stark: in addition to the hundreds of thousands of casualties on the front lines, an estimated 500,000 to 1 million of Russia’s most educated and mobile citizens—the “brain drain” of IT specialists, engineers, and scientists—fled the country in the wake of the 2022 mobilization. The majority of them are unlikely to return.

Combat casualties and labor market changes have resulted in a record labor shortage; in July 2025, Labor Minister Anton Kotyakov told President Putin that by 2030, when Russia’s population will shrink to around 140 million, the labor shortage is projected to near 11 million. This deficit will be only partially made up with politically unpopular immigration and guest workers from Central Asia or even farther abroad. This strain tests the very fabric of Russian state capacity. While the Kremlin projects an illusion of resilience through heavy-handed social engineering and propaganda (such as

maternal capital programs and social benefits for war veterans and their families), the reality is one of institutional cannibalization. The state can “absorb” high casualty rates due to a vast, if crumbling, Soviet-era mobilization apparatus, but it cannot easily replace the technical and administrative talent required to govern a modern state, while the need to elevate and privilege war veterans will increase internal frictions. This creates a brittle system where the appearance of strength only makes the country less competitive in the long run.

Economically, Russia has entered a period of regressive transition. The long-term consequences of Western sanctions since 2014 have forced a “primitive” industrial shift. By severing ties with Europe, Russia has effectively traded its previous dependence on the West for a deepening asymmetric dependence on China. In 2025, China accounted for nearly 57% of Russia’s imports, increasingly transforming the ruble into a satellite currency of the yuan. This shift has created a massive innovation deficit. Deprived of Western semiconductors, precision machinery, and software, Russian industry has been forced to “de-modernize,” relying on older, less efficient technologies or sanctioned dual-use goods smuggled through third parties. But, crucially, this economic decay has failed to constrain the Kremlin’s ambition. Because the Kremlin is primarily focused on political survival and geopolitical status rather than GDP growth, the leadership is willing to sacrifice long-term prosperity for immediate tactical survival.

Russia’s decline is also seen in its foreign relations. The fall of Bashar al-Assad in 2024, the loss of the European market for its natural gas, and, most recently, J.D. Vance’s visit to Armenia and Azerbaijan, which saw strategic partnership agreements with those states that will likely impinge upon Russia’s influence in the region, are all signs of Russia sacrificing its influence over other key geographies in service of the war.

DECLINE AS A DRIVER OF AGGRESSION

Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine fits into a pattern seen before in history. Putin felt that time was working against his system and the legacy of his rule and that he needed to take bold action to shake up the entire landscape of international politics. This logic is not merely a matter of personal ego; it is rooted in a calculated strategy for regime survival and the cultivation of internal and external legitimacy. At the heart of this strategy is a Russian variation of the “stab in the back myth,” strikingly similar to the narrative that plagued Weimar Germany. Putin has long cultivated the belief that the Soviet Union did not lose the Cold War on its merits but was instead betrayed by a decadent, liberal elite—men like Gorbachev and Yeltsin who, in the Kremlin’s telling, sold out the Motherland for Western approval. For Putin, the regime’s *raison d’être* is to act as the antithesis of that perceived betrayal. His legitimacy depends on him doing exactly what his liberal detractors would never do: asserting Russian power through force and kinetic action abroad, regardless of the global outcry.

This behavior is well documented in the literature of political science. In his seminal work *War and Punishment*, Hein Goemans argues that for leaders in

semi-repressive or autocratic systems, the cost of admitting defeat is existential. If a leader believes that losing a war will lead not just to political removal but to imprisonment or death, they are incentivized to “gamble for resurrection.” By escalating the conflict in Ukraine, Putin is not just fighting for territory; he is fighting for the survival of his system.



RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN DELIVERS HIS ANNUAL SPEECH TO THE FEDERAL ASSEMBLY AT GRAND KREMLIN PALACE ON DECEMBER 1, 2016 IN MOSCOW, RUSSIA. PUTIN SPOKE FAVORABLY TOWARDS FUTURE BILATERAL TIES WITH THE US ONCE DONALD TRUMP TAKES OFFICE IN JANUARY. (PHOTO BY MIKHAIL SVETLOV/GETTY IMAGES)

Recent scholarly work, such as the 2022 analysis on the “Rational Origins of Revisionist War,” suggests that throughout history, states often launch aggressive wars when they perceive a closing window of opportunity. Putin’s fear that Ukraine was slipping permanently into the Western orbit created a “use it or lose it” pressure on his regional influence. This risk-taking is further lubricated by resource wealth. Research by Maria Snegovaya has found a direct correlation between rising oil revenues and the aggressiveness of Russian foreign-policy rhetoric. High energy prices provided the Kremlin with a “geopolitical war chest” that increased risk tolerance and reduced accountability to domestic constituencies.

It is the continued existence of Russia’s national wealth fund, built up over many years through oil and gas sales and the liquid portion of which Russia claimed as 4.2 trillion rubles (\$55.8 billion), that allows Russia to continue funding the war against Ukraine while maintaining economic normalcy. The fund is now being burned at a record pace and could be exhausted within 1 or 2 years if current oil prices persist, analysts at Gazprombank estimated in January. The fund’s near exhaustion—after being built up over years using the savings of Russia’s mineral sales—is perhaps the rawest, most material indicator of Moscow’s willingness to accept decline and burn its resources in exchange for the perceived benefits of the war.

OVERTHROWING THE CHESSBOARD

Putin chose to overthrow the chessboard because playing the game of “liberal democracy” was never one the Kremlin felt it could win at—quite the opposite, appearing to be a normal actor in the system would only draw attention to the Kremlin’s failure to secure greater economic improvements and political freedoms. In other words, Russia’s leadership never believed they could “win” at the game that policymakers in the U.S. and other parts of the

world believed would decide the 21st century, namely economics and ideas. Ultimately, the invasion is an attempt to secure a better position vis-à-vis the West before the Kremlin's perception of Russia's decline made such an undertaking impossible. In the Kremlin's view, Putin's revanchist Russia is preferable to a stable, liberalizing one dependent on the West—this is what Putin has referred to in his speeches as the West seeking to “enslave” Russia and allegedly treating it “like a colony.”

One of the reasons that Russia's invasion of Ukraine surprised the world is that many observers still appeared to believe that Russia was a troubled democracy that had merely gone somewhat astray under Putin's personalist rule. But Russia under Putin had never been seriously playing this game all along. In the words of Timothy Snyder, Russia was an alternative to democracy that pretended to be a democracy and used its foreign policy to undermine and destroy the democracies around it that were more real than it was. Much of the rest of Russia's political system was merely a perfunctory imitation to secure Western economic investment.

Those listening closely had understood this much earlier. Prominent Russian pro-democracy parliamentarian Galina Starovoytova had been warning as early as 1997 that the conditions in Russia were similar to those that led to Hitler's rise in Germany in the 1930s and that a revanchist leader would likely assume power. She was assassinated in November 1998. When Putin assumed power in 2000, within a year, in 2001, the Kremlin launched a campaign to turn the independent NTV channel into a loyal pro-regime propaganda channel, which many saw as the clear sign that serious political speech and challenges to the Kremlin would not be tolerated in the years ahead.

**A state in decline
is not a state that
retreats but one
that lashes out.**

For decades, Western observers viewed the 1990s and early 2000s through a teleological lens, assuming that market reforms and a weakened state were merely growing pains on the path to liberalization. The vast majority of Western political science literature on Russia assumed there had been

a “change of elite” in Russia in the 1990s. But in reality, as Maria Snegovaya and other scholars have now shown, the post-Soviet democratic breakthrough was an illusion. The old Soviet nomenklatura and security networks maintained their grip on power throughout the 1990s; the structural foundations for a genuine democracy were never laid because Soviet elites became the elites of the new Russia; there was no “change of the elite,” as the oligarchs never formed a true alternative political power center to the Kremlin.

Because the system's foundations remained rooted in these authoritarian, state-centric networks, the Kremlin was never truly incentivized to seek legitimacy through economic modernization or democratic accountability. Instead, as material power erodes, the regime has doubled down on propaganda, nationalism, and the manufacturing of narratives about Russia being besieged by enemies. By framing the West as an existential predator intent on Russia's dismemberment, the Kremlin transforms domestic failure

into a heroic struggle for survival. This explains why Moscow turns outward when the system weakens at home: when a regime can no longer provide prosperity or progress, it must provide an enemy to explain why. Aggression becomes a mandatory tool for internal cohesion, proving that for the Kremlin, a state in decline is not a state that retreats but one that lashes out to justify its own existence.

USE IT LOSE IT

To bridge the gap between its hollowed-out material base and its imperial ambitions, the Kremlin operates under the urgent logic of *ispol'zuy, ili poteryayesh'* (“use it or lose it!”), or, as Russians would say more colloquially, *beri, poka dayut*, “take it while you still can!”. This mindset views Russia’s levers of influence and intelligence expertise, inherited from the Soviet era, as perishable assets that must be deployed aggressively before they further erode. Fundamentally, Russia invaded Ukraine because Putin believed he could get away with it, which was a lesson he learned following the extremely minimal international reaction to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and believed the cost would only grow in the future.

Russia’s primary tool for international disruption is the modernization of Soviet-era “Active Measures.” Deeply rooted in the KGB background of the current elite, this strategy seeks to paralyze Western decision-making by supporting “friendly” or disruptive elements abroad. Rather than building its own attractive model, the Kremlin exports instability, cultivating ties with anti-establishment parties and factions in the United States, Europe, and the broader globe. By providing financial lifelines and amplifying divisive rhetoric through state-funded media, Moscow exploits existing societal fractures. This is not mere diplomacy; it is a covert intelligence operation designed to dismantle Western unity and NATO cohesion from within. These tactics reflect a security-state culture that views international politics as a zero-sum battlefield where victory is achieved through the subversion of the adversary’s domestic legitimacy.

Another key concept in Russia’s playbook is the idea of “Reflexive Control”—the idea of getting your adversary to think like you do, proceed from your viewpoint, and base their own actions on your perception of reality. This approach has made significant inroads among certain figures in the Trump administration and some European political parties, which often echo Kremlin narratives about the reasons for and ways to resolve the Russia-Ukraine war.

But when political interference and cognitive subversion fail, the Kremlin turns to military adventurism to rewrite the geopolitical map. Moscow’s military doctrine relies on rapid escalation—often involving nuclear weapons—to force the West into a *fait accompli*. This strategy was reportedly key in getting the Biden administration to back down on greater support to Ukraine in late 2022 and early 2023, when Russia began threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons. Because Russia cannot win a prolonged conventional war against a unified NATO, it uses nuclear signaling as a strategic equalizer. By lowering the perceived threshold for nuclear use—a concept often termed “escalate to de-escalate.” These economic threats are bundled with hybrid tools—

“escalate to de-escalate.” Putin leverages the West’s fear of war to compensate for Russia’s conventional shortcomings and maintain a sphere of influence through intimidation.

This helps explain Putin’s obsession with the “super weapons,” six of which he unveiled at his 2018 State of the Nation address: the Poseidon nuclear-powered underwater drone; Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile; Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle; Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile; Kinzhal air-launched hypersonic missile; and Peresvet laser system. This has only continued in recent years, with Putin publicly highlighting the Tsirkon ship-launched hypersonic cruise missile, which was demonstrably deployed in an electronic test off the U.S. coast in June 2024, and, most recently, the Oreshnik medium-range ballistic missile. These weapons—and the Kremlin’s messaging and use of strategic communications about them—highlight Moscow’s desire to use threats toward adversarial audiences to maximum effect.

Moscow weaponizes its status as a “hydrocarbon state,” using gas and oil exports to coerce neighbors and divide the EU. These economic threats are bundled with hybrid tools—including Wagner Group mercenaries, sophisticated cyberattacks, and sabotage operations—allowing a weakened Russia to punch far above its weight by creating “gray zone” conflicts that avoid the high costs of total war. Russia’s hybrid campaign against Europe has entered a bolder and more reckless phase, pivoting to high-impact, low-cost sabotage. Leveraging disposable proxies and cyberattacks, Moscow exploits the gap in NATO’s Article 5, gambling that sub-threshold violence will paralyze Western decision-making. Ultimately, as its material power erodes, Russia views this shadow war as a key tool for geopolitical relevance, the goal of which is to impose costs and empower forces calling for de-escalation and concessions to Moscow.

UKRAINE AS A CASE STUDY

Moscow views the war in Ukraine as a viable path to achieving political acceptance in the West of Russia’s status and subjugating Ukraine. The war’s continuation should not be dismissed as a sign of Russia’s weakness but as a sign of Moscow’s sincere belief that its continuation will reverse Russia’s decline by causing Ukraine and establishment governments in the West to collapse first, increasing Russia’s relative power and room for policy maneuver and expansion in its periphery, Europe, and around the globe. This strategic persistence highlights a fundamental truth about modern Russian power: tactical failures do not automatically erode strategic capabilities. While Western observers often focus on the staggering cost of minimal gains—with Russia losing an estimated 100 to 150 troops for every square kilometer seized—the Kremlin operates on a timeline that transcends quarterly data or election cycles. The war reveals a regime willing to absorb losses that would be politically fatal for almost any other contemporary power.

Western strategic blind spots often stem from a “pendulum of perception.” If the West overestimated Russia before 2022, it risks dangerously underestimating it now. The fatal flaw in the “decline thesis” is the

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assumption that diminishing material capacity must naturally translate into a moderated, inward-looking foreign policy. In 2026, the primary lesson is that while Russia's capacity is undeniably eroding, its political will remains a potent, bridge-gapping force that allows it to remain a global disruptor despite its rot. Because Russia has not experienced a decisive defeat in Ukraine, Russia is likely to remain in its threatening current state in the coming years. While a successor to Putin could emerge in several years and attempt to use widespread war exhaustion to gain legitimacy, by far the most likely scenario is that Russia's geopolitical compulsions will remain largely the same—to threaten the West with escalation until Western politicians accept a more conciliatory line toward Moscow. A true “change of elite” appears extremely remote.

The goal cannot simply be to wait for a Russian collapse.

This reality necessitates a shift from classical containment to a strategy of stabilization. Unlike the 20th-century model designed to box in a rising Soviet giant, today's policy must manage a state that remains nuclear-armed and hyper-sensitive to status. By March 2026, with Russian casualties likely

surpassing 1 million and the economy facing a severe fiscal crunch as interest rates hover near 19%, the Kremlin's desperation will increase its reliance on asymmetric disruption.

Long-term Western pressure must be paired with sophisticated escalation control. Deterrence is not just about stopping Russia's territorial advances; it is about imposing costs for hybrid sabotage and ensuring Moscow does not view “limited” nuclear signaling as a viable escape from conventional stagnation. Furthermore, the West must prepare for further aggression no matter how the Ukraine war concludes. Putin or his successor might feel compelled to “gamble for resurrection” by threatening Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, or the Baltic states. Planning for a Russia that is more unpredictable precisely because it is weaker requires a permanently resilient NATO and a refusal to assume that Russia's internal challenges will automatically lead to external moderation.

NOT STRONGER — MORE RECKLESS

The preceding analysis underscores a sobering reality for the 21st-century international order: Russia's weakness does not diminish the threat it poses; it fundamentally reshapes it. For decades, the West operated under the comforting assumption that a state in structural decay would eventually be forced into a “strategic pause” or a pivot toward domestic reform. Instead, the Kremlin has reacted to its eroding material base by doubling down on disruption.

This brings us to the central paradox of modern Russian power: as the state's conventional capabilities and economic foundations diminish, its willingness to use high-risk, asymmetric tools—from nuclear brinkmanship to hybrid subversion—only increases. Moscow's aggression is not a symptom of a rising power's confidence but the survival mechanism of a declining regime that views geopolitical relevance as an existential necessity.

Ultimately, the most pressing challenge for Western policymakers is an unresolved question: Can the West contain not Russian strength but Russian desperation? If the Kremlin perceives that time and demography are its greatest enemies, it will remain incentivized to “shake the table” of international politics at every opportunity. Moving forward, the goal cannot simply be to wait for a Russian collapse but to actively prepare for a Russia interested in continuing to exploit the West’s political and security vulnerabilities in the coming decade.

A Superpower Against Itself

The Strategic Cost of America's Confidence Crisis

KAITLYN KING

Few nations in history have spoken so anxiously about their future while simultaneously holding so much power in the present. While the United States is the central pillar of the international system, it is also said system's most fearful participant. The United States remains the world's most powerful nation by nearly every material measure. It possesses the largest economy by nominal GDP, the largest and most technologically sophisticated military, global financial influence through the dollar, institutional leverage through its leadership in key international organizations, and an extensive and integrated network of alliances. By these conventional metrics of power, the United States comfortably occupies a leading position without historical precedent.

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Yet, U.S. political discourse and foreign policy agendas increasingly assume decline, vulnerability, and encirclement, often framed around fears of displacement by rising competitors. Rather than projecting the confidence and consistency of a secure hegemon, U.S. strategy is often animated by reactionary urgency and defensiveness. This contradiction of enduring material strength against pervasive pessimistic narratives has become a defining feature of contemporary U.S. statecraft and shapes policy choices that often do not align with its structural position or the leadership ethos traditionally associated with unilateralism, including the exceptionalist narratives invoked by presidents who rhetorically emphasize American dominance. With the U.S. prioritizing protectionism, re-shoring, and industrial hoarding, and alliance-straining unilateralism, a pressing question emerges: Why does a country like the U.S., which remains structurally dominant by margins far exceeding those of peer competitors, behave as though it is on the brink of strategic loss?

The answer lies in part in the presence of a credible number-two power across many material indicators: China. China's rapid economic and technological advancements, industrial capacity, and growing international footprint have been both swift and notably great. Its state capacity has allowed it to position itself as a competitor with potential—at least in theory—to rival aspects of U.S. power. Reflecting this perception, U.S. National Security Strategy documents now identify China as a “pacing challenge” and primary long-term threat to the U.S. and its national interests. While Beijing's intentions remain under debate, Washington has interpreted its rise in international presence and capability as symbolizing a potentially existential disruption to long-standing assumptions about American primacy.

The way the United States talks about China thus becomes a mirror that reflects deeper anxieties about America's own trajectory. Narratives of decline do more than describe reality—they actively shape it. They influence state strategy and priorities, legitimize particular policy tools, and structure foreign relations, thereby also informing domestic and international perceptions. As a result, even while the U.S. retains overwhelming power and a highly favorable systemic position, its policy is increasingly driven by fear rather than confidence.

This is not an alarmist claim about imminent collapse. Rather, it highlights the subtler anxieties about erosion, competition, and missed opportunities that lead to a level of strategic incoherence. These fears lead to overcorrection in policy, misalignment with allies, and greater uncertainty—dynamics that can, paradoxically, produce the very risks the United States fears. The challenge, therefore, is not to deny competition with China or understate genuine risks, but to respond to them with confidence, cooperation, and a steady hand. Understanding the power of narratives is therefore essential to sustaining U.S. leadership in an era of competition and rapid global change.

THE END OF AMERICAN CONFIDENCE

For much of the postwar period, U.S. presidential leadership has rested on a strategy of confidence, projecting strength, optimism, and inevitability even

amid tense competition and conflict. During the early Cold War, presidents framed rivalry not as evidence of American weakness or decline, but as confirmation of U.S. centrality to international affairs. Kennedy's "New Frontier" approach, for one, framed competition with communism as a moral and essential challenge the United States was uniquely equipped to meet.

This period was undeniably shaped by fear—the Red Scare, nuclear brinksmanship, and proxy wars fueled anxieties about the spread of communism and Soviet technological advances. Worries of encroachment and challenge characterized this era of tension with the Soviet Union as the powers raced to develop superior nuclear and spaceflight capabilities. Yet even during this period of intense competition and fear, in which policymakers were deeply worried about Soviet expansion and the nuclear threat, the dominant narrative maintained that time and structural and inherent advantages favored the United States.

This persisted into the late Cold War era, with Reagan's rhetoric marking a renewed emphasis on national revival over irreversible decline. While acknowledging perceived stagnation and strategic drift in the 1970s, Reagan framed American power as temporarily constrained rather than fundamentally eroded. His language of renewal, embodied in his "Morning in America" campaign, reasserted faith in markets, democracy, and U.S. moral leadership. Competition with the Soviet Union was portrayed not as a desperate struggle for survival, but as a test that the United States would ultimately win through endurance, innovation, and ideological appeal. Even as the Soviet Union sparked renewed tensions through the invasion of Afghanistan and heightened nuclear brinksmanship, Reagan responded with a confident vision and military and arms control cooperation with allies. This optimism was not merely rhetorical—it reinforced alliance cohesion, sustained domestic support for international engagement, and framed U.S. leadership as forward-looking rather than defensive.

Even Obama, governing amid a financial crisis and prolonged wars, emphasized resilience, adaptability, and long-term renewal. His "politics of hope" framed American leadership as adaptive rather than exhausted. Obama acknowledged limits, warned against overextension, and emphasized multilateralism, but consistently rejected narratives of terminal decline. He consistently rejected the idea that globalization meant American decline and framed challenges such as China's rapid development or climate change as tests of leadership, rather than insurmountable existential threats. While emphasizing strategic restraint and burden-sharing, Obama maintained that U.S. primacy remained indispensable on the international stage. Throughout these administrations, optimism functioned not only as rhetoric, but as a strategic tool to manage and sustain the international system by normalizing support for an open and rules-based international order, deterring adversaries, and reinforcing the credibility of long-term U.S. commitments. Anxieties existed, of course, but they were cyclical rather than pervasive and existential, and were balanced by a belief in eventual renewal and ultimately success.

The year 2016 marked a decisive break from this optimism. Trump's rhetoric, characterized by fearmongering, misinformation, and an incoherent

policy agenda, fundamentally altered both domestic and international narratives. His inaugural address, invoking “American carnage,” normalized decline as a central political message. The United States was portrayed as hollowed out by globalization, exploited by allies, undermined by elites, and losing to foreign competitors. This shift replaced optimism and cooperation with anger, suspicion, and rejection. Domestically, it reinforced alarmist beliefs about immigrants, trade, and international institutions, deepened distrust of government, and fostered hostility toward allies long central to U.S. prosperity and security. International engagement was reframed as a liability rather than an asset, with allies and adversaries alike depicted as burdens or threats rather than partners. China, in particular, was cast as an existential enemy responsible for domestic economic dislocation and an aggressive challenger to U.S. production, growth, and dominance.



SILHOUETTED IN FRONT OF THE AMERICAN FLAG, ILLINOIS SENATOR BARACK OBAMA TALKS TO THE AUDIENCE DURING A TOWN HALL MEETING AND CAMPAIGN STOP AT THE POLK COUNTY CONVENTION COMPLEX IN DES MOINES, IOWA ON WEDNESDAY EVENING. (PHOTO BY MARK HIRSCH/WIREIMAGE)

These narratives legitimized and intensified anxiety, pushing a turn toward overcorrection. The “America First” rhetoric—revived from early twentieth-century isolationist and nativist movements—reframed international engagement as a liability rather than an asset, arguing that U.S. allies were burdens that were not carrying their weight and undercutting mutual trust and cooperation. Amid these shifts, U.S. leadership increasingly depicted China as an existential threat responsible for domestic economic dislocation and an active, aggressive challenge to U.S. economic growth and dominance. This was amplified by growing economic inequality, cultural and political polarization, and widespread misinformation that were further inflamed by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, racialized rhetoric—such as references to the “China virus”—fueled antagonism and blurred public health concerns with geopolitical blame that embedded anti-China sentiment domestically and in conjunction with fear-based narratives of national decline.

While the Biden administration campaigned on themes of restoration, competence, and renewal, its governing agenda often leaned on urgency and existential competition. In practice, this has translated into repeatedly framing China as an adversary that must be contained and countered at almost every turn—from trade and technology to security partnerships and legislative priorities—amplifying the sense of urgency. China is presented

simultaneously as both a rival and systemic threat requiring joint action, rallying domestic support and allied cooperation to contain China and limit its reach. The result is a paradox of optimism in tone with pessimism in the overarching framing.

All of this has culminated in a two-decade collapse in national confidence, with shifts in public sentiment aligning with these declinist narratives. A 2025 Pew Research poll shows a steady erosion of confidence and optimism, with 62% of respondents reporting dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working in the United States, citing economic conditions as a key factor. Concern is present across generations, but younger generations appear particularly pessimistic about America's future, as a 2026 Gallup report revealed that 32% of respondents ages 18–34 named economic issues as the top national concern. Views on China have also hardened across partisan and demographic lines, while faith in the government and institutions has fallen. Only 17% of Americans say they trust their government to do what is right, marking the lowest level of trust in decades.

Unlike earlier moments of doubt—such as the Vietnam War or periods of economic recession—today's pessimism is widely presented as structural and irreversible. Whereas past crises were often framed as temporary setbacks within an overarching narrative of eventual American resurgence, today's discourse frequently asserts that U.S. influence has peaked and that global conditions no longer favor American leadership. Furthered by widespread anxiety over climate change, economic instability, and global political unrest, younger generations in particular worry it is already “too late” to prevent catastrophic outcomes, feeding a sense of irreversible decline. Republicans emphasize cultural decay and industrial decline, while Democrats warn of democratic fragility and global authoritarian advance. Despite ideological differences, both sides converge on a baseline emotion of fear and anxiety. This political climate both reflects and reinforces declinist and antagonistic narratives that work to erode confidence in U.S. leadership.

THE COST OF FEAR

Declinism has tangible policy consequences, with one of the most visible being the resurgence of economic protectionism. Tariffs now stand at levels not seen since the 1930s, justified less by economic logic and more by national security claims. The United States has imposed significant tariffs on Chinese goods, burdening U.S. consumers and prompting retaliatory tariffs. Trade has been reframed from a source of mutual gain into a zero-sum competition for survival. This narrows U.S. policy approaches and limits cooperative solutions, encouraging isolationist reflexes that weaken allied trust and coordination through uncertainty.

Industrial policy has followed suit, similarly shifting from a corrective—and temporary—tool to a default approach. Subsidies, reshoring incentives, and “Buy American” provisions are increasingly becoming permanent, systemic features of U.S. economic policy. The 2022 CHIPS and Science Act and Inflation Reduction Act exemplify this shift, as while both aimed to secure supply chains and strengthen U.S. production, they also indirectly impacted Japanese and South Korean industries through their restrictive requirements.

While these policies aim to enhance resilience, they are often compounded by domestic narratives that cast foreign involvement—even by allies—as risky and wholly unnecessary.

The deeper danger lies in mistaking perceived weakness for actual vulnerability.

High-profile incidents, such as disruptions to allied investment projects or the termination of cooperative supply chain arrangements, illustrate the ways in which fear-based politics can undermine economic and political goals. For instance, the 2025 ICE raid of Hyundai's EV investment project in Georgia kicked off an extended investigation and disruption, interrupting what was supposed to be a boon that would create thousands of local jobs. Suspicion toward foreigners and foreign firms, even from close allies, can significantly undermine economic goals. Additionally, tightening technology-sharing efforts, coupled with the retreat from joint production frameworks in favor of exclusive domestic reshoring, have weakened and disrupted previously integrated supply chains.

This logic increasingly overrides efficiency and alliance coordination. As allies face discriminatory rules, fragmented supply chains, and conflicting signals from the U.S., they grow increasingly alienated and mistrustful. Technology controls and industrial subsidies designed to constrain China frequently also penalize European, Canadian, and Asian allies, driving wedges even among long-standing partners. Foreign policy driven by fear and anxiety risks treating friends as rivals, weakening collective capacity and communication. The deeper danger lies in mistaking perceived weakness for actual vulnerability. Defensive, short-sighted behaviors can undermine innovation and economic growth, fuel alienation from global partners, and reduce U.S. leverage; in this way, the United States may inadvertently hasten the very erosion that it fears.

STRONGER THAN IT THINKS

Despite pervasive declinist narratives, the United States retains significant economic, security, and technological primacy. U.S. income levels and growth rates continue to outperform most other advanced economies, and the economy has demonstrated strong resilience to systemic shocks in the long run. Nine of the ten most valuable global companies are American, reflecting deep advantages in scale, corporate and business leadership, and innovation. The U.S. leads in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and frontier research, supported by great R&D investment and entrepreneurial capacity.

The energy sector provides a key example of U.S. leadership. The United States is the world's largest oil and gas producer, granting significant leverage in the race to ensure energy security and export capacity. Alongside fossil fuel dominance, the U.S. is also a leading investor in renewable energy development and clean technology innovation. Advanced nuclear capabilities and regulatory leadership further position the U.S. to play a central role in decarbonization efforts, allied energy security cooperation, and global climate mitigation. Demographically, the United States enjoys human capital

advantages relative to other aging powers, benefiting from a large working-age population and leading industries that attract talent worldwide. Immigration also remains a hidden strength, bolstering the workforce and economy and sustaining development and innovation—an advantage at risk if xenophobic and fear-based narratives continue to dominate domestic policy.

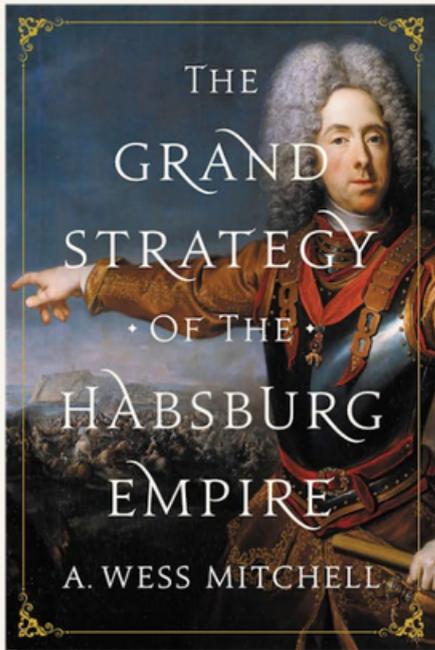
Financial power is another sphere where U.S. dominance is apparent—the dollar remains unrivaled as the world’s reserve currency, facilitating global trade and investment, and granting immense international leverage. U.S. leadership within financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund continues to inform global rules, norms, and the setting of priorities and conditions. Structurally, the United States benefits from its established role in shaping and maintaining the international order. Given this, withdrawal or disengagement from these institutions both unsettles the system and, importantly, weakens American influence within it. With favorable geography and no peer competitor in the Western Hemisphere, coupled with a deep and extensive alliance network that spans regions, the U.S. holds a structural advantage. The problem, then, is not a lack of power, but a crisis of perception.

TRANSACTIONAL AMERICA

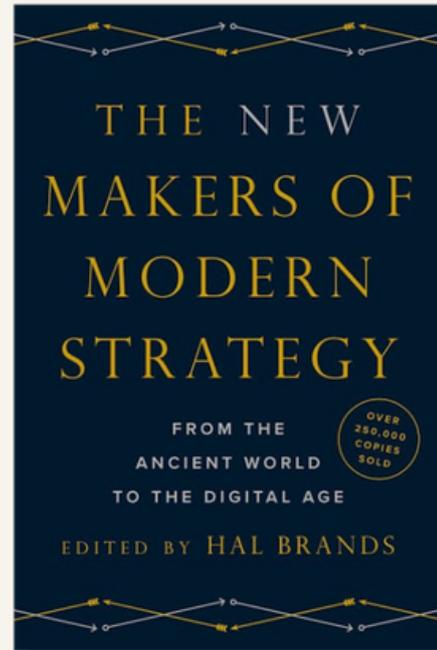
Declinism carries strategic costs, notably in alienating allies and empowering adversaries. In the face of antagonistic and inconsistent shifts in policy, allies increasingly question U.S. reliability when partnership rhetoric clashes with protectionist practices. Despite observing moments of deepening security and short-term cooperation among select allies—like within the trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan framework—sustained efforts fray under the pressures of mistrust and uncertainty.

Fear-driven overcorrection has strained alliance cohesion by imposing unilateral costs without reciprocation or consultation, weakening trust in U.S. reliability and judgment. Semiconductor and EV restrictions aimed at constraining China have imposed significant costs on Japanese and South Korean firms, contributing to supply-chain delays, reduced competitiveness, and political resentment. This has been particularly true in the case of China-aimed export controls on advanced semiconductors, the application of which also disadvantaged allied Dutch, Japanese, and South Korean firms. These measures erode trust and weaken institutionalized cooperation, exacerbating alienation and distrust among key allies.

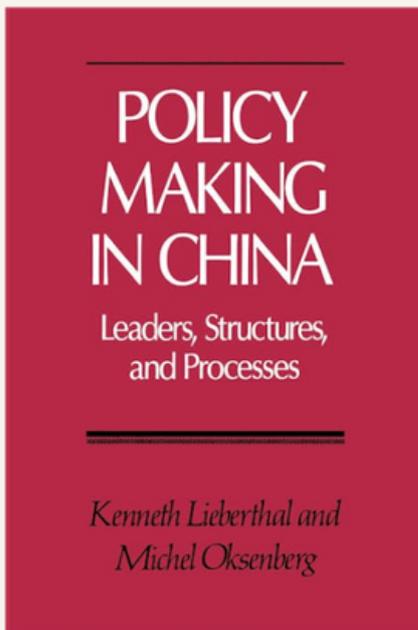
Normative inconsistency—championing a “rules-based order” and a free and open Indo-Pacific while violating the spirit of openness and collaboration—erodes U.S. credibility and fuels uncertainty. These contradictions empower rivals such as China and Russia to exploit U.S. hypocrisy and decline in credibility to advance alternative narratives. They portray liberal democracy as exhausted and American leadership as self-interested, which provides a window of opportunity and narrative ammunition for the creation of a new international order. China’s promotion of a “Beijing Consensus,” along with Russian and North Korean revisionist propaganda, exploits perceived inconsistencies to rally other sidelined nations toward overturning the



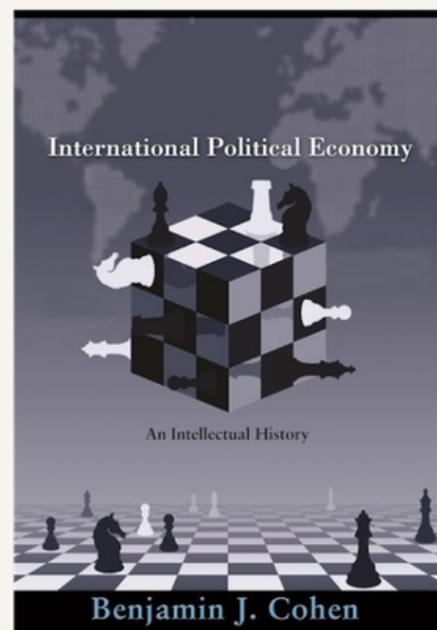
"The story of the Habsburg Empire, which shaped key episodes of European history for several centuries, is one of endurance and finesse. A gripping and insightful work that yields lessons for statecraft in our own time."—Henry A. Kissinger



"[Brands] gathers a college of 45 such experts. All are wise after the facts of their field, and each attempts the historian's equivalent of the owl's neck rotation—a sweep that, taking in past and present, looks to the future . . . the scholarship on strategy has become internationalized, and Mr. Brands broadens his sights beyond the familiar theorists and practitioners—and beyond the battlefield."—Dominic Green, *Wall Street Journal*



"Show[s] the system to be made up of real human beings engaged in high-stakes political activity, impossible to capture on an organization chart. . . . A major work that no serious student of politics should miss."—Michael Gasster, *Annals of American Academy of Political & Social Science*



"Benjamin Cohen has written a marvelous brief introduction to the development of International Political Economy (IPE) as an academic discipline. . . . It will be read widely but needs, and deserves, to be read critically."—Bill Dunn, *Journal of Australian Political Economy*

current U.S.-led order. Domestic pessimism compounds this by further weakening the ideological appeal of U.S. leadership abroad, reducing incentives at home to sustain global engagement. Without a confident vision, U.S. leadership risks becoming purely transactional. Fear-driven policy reduces America to “just another power,” rather than a rule-setter, prompting allies to pursue hedging strategies over alignment and deeper cooperation. Status and influence are eroded not just through material loss or decline, but through diminished trust and unreliable perceptions.

Correcting overcorrection is an essential piece of this. Measures aimed at constraining China should not unnecessarily harm allies or fragment shared industrial bases. As discussed above, recent semiconductor and EV restrictions targeted toward China have disproportionately

burdened allied industries, fragmenting production networks, increasing long-term costs, and reducing strategic flexibility. Instead, a confidence-based approach should embrace interconnectivity and invest in strengthening joint competitiveness toward shared goals.

Such a confidence-based strategy must distinguish between managing China and empowering allies, rather than conflating the two. This should acknowledge the difficult realities of our geopolitical situation, while still allowing for selective cooperation with China, particularly on mutual challenges such as climate and energy. For example, areas such as emissions reduction, global green energy initiatives, and climate finance offer concrete opportunities for cooperation without sacrificing a strategic edge. Treating China neither lightly nor apocalyptically—but as it actually is—is vital for avoiding escalation spirals and creates space for pragmatic engagement. China undoubtedly seeks greater advancement, influence, and leverage, but evidence suggests it aims more to secure a position for itself through reshaping the margins of the existing order, rather than seeking to imminently undercut or replace the U.S. The distinction between reality and our imposed perceptions is an important one to make, and we must be sure not to assign intention simply where we want to see it.

Finally, leadership by example requires closing the gap between values and actions. Predictability and consistency are strategic assets that should be emphasized to reduce miscalculation, strengthen allied confidence, and signal U.S. decisiveness. Alliances should be treated as the valuable assets they are, not as dependencies or liabilities. Competing on outcomes, rather than fear, and centering shared production, innovation, and security allows the United States an opportunity to reassert its confidence and leadership without fanning the flames of the anxieties that undermine it. Along these lines, the United States must articulate and commit to a positive, forward-looking agenda that replaces panic with confidence and purposeful leadership.

**The greatest danger
for America is not
losing strength, but
losing faith in itself.**

FEAR OF DECLINE IS THE REAL DECLINE

The United States does not face imminent collapse, but it does face a crisis of confidence. This narrative of decline and anxiety distorts national strategy,

A Superpower Against Itself

alienates partners, and undermines American leadership. Reclaiming confidence—grounded in reality rather than nostalgia or denial—is therefore not naïve optimism, but strategic necessity. The greatest danger for America is not losing strength, but losing faith in itself.

Atlantic Past, Pacific Future

Redefining U.S. Security in a Two-Front World

ANTON PONOMARENKO

During the 2026 Davos Forum, Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada sent a reverberating message to the world leaders about “the end of a pleasant fiction and the beginning of a brutal reality where the geopolitics of the great powers is not subject to any constraint.” Within this new reality, perhaps the major catalyst for such a statement was Vladimir Putin’s “no constraint” full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or perhaps it was the increasing strategic independence and emboldened national security policies of Canada’s southern neighbor, affecting European allies and the established order of the Atlantic security architecture. Regardless, Mr. Carney concluded his speech with a succinct yet assertive prognosis: “Great powers can afford now to go it alone.”

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Evidently, Mr. Carney alluded to such a future, stating that “the middle powers must act together because if you are not at the table, we are on the menu.” Unquestionably, such statements coming from a PM of a NATO member state raise concerns over the foundations of the architecture of the existing Atlantic security order, evermore emphasizing how individualistic intentions of great powers and great power competition are dominating the global trends. Indeed, the last four years have shown a dramatic increase in great power competition and the overspill of this competition on the security landscape. With war in Ukraine becoming a catalyst of accelerated collusion between Beijing and Moscow, the role of traditional deterrence-focused alliances such as NATO has also been under scrutiny. On the other hand, Beijing’s multi-contoured resource security networks, Moscow’s sanctions evasion networks, as well as an extensive military alliance with Pyongyang have shown prowess in adaptation, resilience, and asymmetrical approaches in alliance-building of the authoritarian powers.

The common pattern across these developments is that great powers constantly balance self-sufficiency and national interests with reliance on allies in an increasingly fragmented world. However, while the China-Russia cooperation is largely pragmatic, it appears that Washington’s vision of the future security landscape is rather different. In reaction to the emerging Beijing-Moscow axis and the dilemma of the two-front order, with the necessity to simultaneously balance both China and Russia, Washington’s new independent national security course appears to be an adaptation to both the changing scope and changing geography of global alliances.

Geographically, Washington’s pivot towards the Pacific is grounded in a functional separation of security responsibilities between the United States and its European NATO partners in Europe. Re-prioritization and changing scope are further supported by the emergence of targeted, mission-specific pillars such as AUKUS and QUAD, allowing for sustaining U.S. leadership and balancing in the region. Undoubtedly, as Washington deepens its pivot to the Pacific, the center of gravity of global security is shifting accordingly. Yet this transition is neither abrupt nor disconnected from the past. Rather, NATO’s Atlantic legacy and lessons learned in Ukraine will continue to reverberate through the emerging Indo-Pacific security network, shaping its structures, practices, and strategic logic. Understanding this transition and the underlying mechanisms that prompted this transition to materialize is essential to assessing the future architecture of collective defense and the evolving foundations of U.S. leadership in the international system.

NATO AND THE ATLANTIC SECURITY ORDER

The roots of the emerging transition from the Atlantic to the Pacific security order could be traced to several moving and interconnected catalysts, including the evolving role of the Organization in relation to Russia, the role of Ukraine in the European security order, and the realignment of the U.S.-NATO relationship under the current administration. Historically, born as a response of post-World War II Western Europe and the United States to the rising threat of Soviet political and military expansion, NATO became the embodiment of collective defense during the Cold War. Bound by mutual

defense clauses, such as Article 5, the Organization guaranteed protection and provided ironclad security guarantees to its member states. Geographically, however, the alliance remained limited to the Atlantic, forming what is known today as the Atlantic security order.

Built upon a shared identity and collective approach to deterrence and defense, the Organization offered an integrated command structure, resource allocation, intelligence sharing, and contingency planning. Collectivity also implied that each member state within the organization was responsible for the success of the alliance and the stability of the continent. Throughout the 20th century, NATO's collective structure, therefore, had a proven track record of success, showing sustained growth via enlargement. Despite the economic and political divergences of its member states, NATO's streamlined command structure also allowed the organization not only to expand but also to successfully outlast the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, NATO's political and ideological role in deterring Moscow also changed. In the eyes of European leaders, the Russian threat ceased to exist, and a weakened Russian Federation was no longer a danger to the strategic stability of the continent. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact also opened up the possibilities for the first post-Soviet enlargement without triggering any responses from a weakened Russia.

The turn of the century, nonetheless, presented new challenges such as 9/11 and the consequent war on terrorism. Crucially, these events were the only time when NATO's Article 5 was invoked. Simultaneously, throughout the mid- to late 2000s, the Kremlin's tone and stance on NATO also started to alter. The change was rooted in a two-fold issue of domestic and regional balancing and power projection. Domestically, Putin was concentrating on establishing a strongman leadership via consolidation of power and suppression of domestic opposition. Regionally, Russia's foreign policies began to resemble those of a traditional regional power, emphasizing the restoration of political influence in its so-called sphere of influence through efforts to shape elections and regimes in neighboring countries.

Albeit with some success in interfering in the politics of Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia, the people of these countries chose an alternative course. Democratization and independent foreign and security policies in formerly Soviet Ukraine and Georgia, thus, combined with rising demands for domestic democratization in Russia itself, instilled fear in the Kremlin. In the perception of Russian elites, regime democratization was irrevocably tied to the rising influence of the West. Fearing both the threat of the overspill of Western-induced "color revolutions" to Russia and support of such revolutions by the domestic opposition, Moscow's stance on NATO changed, directly linking democratization to NATO expansion. Following the 2008 Bucharest Summit, which brought the possibility of future Ukrainian NATO membership, and the suppression of the corresponding rise of democratic movements within Russia, the political course towards future confrontation with the "outside enemy" became the cornerstone of the Kremlin's actions and policies.

Justified by the need to shield the country from Western regime change and, yet predictably, NATO expansion, Moscow's foreign policy started to explicitly shift towards military intervention and suppression. The annexation

annexation of Crimea and the following intervention into Ukraine's Donbas were explicit warnings to Europe. The EU and U.S. both condemned these events and showed "unanimity" in political rhetoric; however, they failed to translate that consensus into coordinated strategic and military pressure. Nonetheless, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO has once again gone into a transitional period of revival in response to direct threats to European stability. The alliance needed a push. Alongside increased spending, arms supplies to Kyiv, and integrated intelligence-sharing networks, the alliance reinvigorated its collective determination to stand up to the aggression from which it was originally designed to defend the continent.

Despite NATO's more rigid stance, the Russian invasion has revealed a plethora of substantial rifts within the alliance's collective defense structures. The majority of all arms and military supplies sent to Ukraine since 2022 have come from the U.S., highlighting the scale of the alliance's dependence on its largest member. The flaws in the collective approach to defense were further exacerbated when the Trump administration demanded NATO member states raise their defense spending to five percent of GDP, putting pressure on the economies of the member states to commit to burden-sharing and burden-shifting. The alliance itself also remains highly dependent on U.S. weapon systems, technologies, and security guarantees en large.



IN 2025 NATO SUMMIT, WHICH BRINGS TOGETHER HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT FROM ACROSS THE MILITARY ALLIANCE, IS BEING HELD IN THE NETHERLANDS FOR THE FIRST TIME. AMONG OTHER MATTERS, MEMBERS ARE TO APPROVE A NEW DEFENSE INVESTMENT PLAN THAT RAISES TARGET FOR DEFENSE SPENDING TO 5% OF GDP. (PHOTO BY ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES)

However, when viewed through the calculus of dual-front balancing, alongside the new National Security Strategy and expedited U.S.-Russia negotiations over peace in Ukraine, decoupling or strategic independence implies a more autonomous and European-centric NATO. It also supports the thesis of Washington's reprioritization of its geographical areas of interest. Within this new landscape of interdependency and decoupling, NATO will remain a functional security organization, emphasizing collective defense and enduring as the centerpiece of the continent's deterrence architecture. However, the alliance's role in containing Russia will depend on how effectively European leaders respond to the widening U.S.-NATO decoupling and work on strengthening the alliance's self-reliance. Furthermore, its role will remain largely confined to the continent, with a diminishing global presence beyond the Atlantic.

The future of security appears increasingly oriented toward alternative, tailored, and mission-specific partnership formats. Situational and more fragmented, alliances such as AUKUS and QUAD are quite different from NATO's collective security frameworks. Thus, by situating these pillars within a single analytical lens, alongside broader geopolitical dynamics, structural connections between European and Asian security can illustrate how interlinked yet increasingly independent theaters may redefine the balance of power in the twenty-first century.

THE INDO-PACIFIC TURN: AUKUS AND QUAD

The second point of contention within the dual-front order, therefore, is in the Asia-Pacific. On the surface level, throughout the last 20 years, the region has seen an unprecedented change due to Beijing's economic, political, and military rise. Kissinger mainly alludes to this rise as a consequence of the post-Cold War unipolarity that allowed for a peaceful rise of the region. And while politically, unipolarity was not the most desirable outcome for Beijing, which "did not accept the interpretation of the end of the Cold War as ushering in a period of America as a hyperpower," economically, it allowed for a very fruitful relationship with the U.S. and the West.

Jiang Zemin's low-profile foreign policy mirrored this sentiment—China remained non-confrontational, while successful economic reforms and participation in the globalized economy further integrated the country into the global value chains. Post-Cold War China became the largest trade partner of the U.S., the EU, and ASEAN nations, concurrently incorporating dependency on China and its markets into the economies of the West. With a better economic footing, Beijing's leaders have leveraged this unprecedented integration and interdependence with the rest of the world. With Xi Jinping's "great rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation, assertiveness and nationalism in foreign policy are no longer just talk. Since 2010, China has increasingly sought to reshape global governance institutions in ways that reflect Beijing's priorities and values, positioning itself as an alternative model to the West.

Washington's understanding of these challenges is consequently reflected in the new National Security Strategy and in domestic "America First" policies, ranging from tariffs to regional security alliances. Shifting away from the Biden-era threat-based framing, these policies treat China as a near-peer strategic competitor with comparable economic and technological weight, reflecting a preference for containment via competition rather than via direct suppression.

AUKUS becomes a mechanism for the creation of controlled deterrence via escalation.

Therefore, in terms of security in the region, several steps have been taken towards more pragmatic and tailored approaches to the security question. Unlike the NATO containment of Russia, rooted primarily in ideological rivalry and the threat of a collective response under Article 5, the U.S.-China strategic competition requires asymmetry in alliances. The new

NSS explicitly alludes to such asymmetry, underlining deterrence and containment without formal encirclement. In addition to the traditional U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral partnership, the most promising structures within the Indo-Pacific that offer asymmetry and flexibility are AUKUS and QUAD.

Split between two pillars, AUKUS is a technological and strategic pact between Australia, the UK, and the U.S. The alliance, first and foremost, acts as a strategic tool aimed at shifting the regional balance of power through enhanced deterrence. With the nuclear submarine deal (Pillar I) and advanced defense cooperation (Pillar II) acting as the symbols of trust between its members, AUKUS becomes a mechanism for the creation of controlled deterrence via escalation. Advanced intelligence-sharing and technology-sharing between its members also bring this formation closer to NATO's standardized approach to command and control. Therefore, with the reinforcement of military integration and reinvigoration under the new U.S. administration, AUKUS has very viable potential to become one of the key asymmetric tools in Washington's Indo-Pacific arsenal.

QUAD, on the other hand, encompasses loose coordination among the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, aimed at China-induced threats to maritime security and supply chain resilience. With limited institutional depth, QUAD offers working-group frameworks ranging from cybersecurity to infrastructural projects, lacking in-depth security engagement. Although some observers expected the Trump administration to expand the Quad's security role, it has remained a loose dialogue among the region's largest democracies. Furthermore, India's independent foreign policy, the complexities of China-India and Russia-India relations, as well as the individual security partnerships of its members, such as the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, further weigh down on the possibility of the formation of a fully fledged alliance.

Both AUKUS and QUAD signal sustained American engagement in the region and reflect the pattern in which this engagement is likely to be structured in the future. Given the growing presence of authoritarian powers in the Asia-Pacific, these arrangements, however, could benefit from greater interconnectivity with regional security alliances such as U.S.-Japan-Korea cooperation, as well as deeper institutional linkages with NATO and, potentially, even Ukraine.

EUROPE MEETS ASIA

The theoretical as well as practical bridging of the existing Atlantic security structure with emerging Indo-Pacific demands has long been at the forefront of security studies. Whether through structural adaptation, innovation, or complete deviation from the current legacy-based networks, success in the Pacific is directly linked to responses to adversary alliance networks such as the Russia-China and North Korea-Russia partnerships. As the war in Ukraine has shown, these flexible, pragmatic, and ideologically charged alliances have far-reaching implications not only for Europe but for Asia as well.

For instance, Russia's "limitless partnership" with China has exposed shortcomings of the sanctions on the energy resource and banking sectors, which were used as one of the key pillars of the initial response to the

invasion. In response to sanctions, Beijing and Moscow have established pragmatic cooperation that covers key demands on both sides in a direct bilateral exchange of goods, critical technologies such as drones, trade in national currencies, and is supported by parallel import schemes. As a result, four years after the beginning of the invasion, Russian drone and missile factories still have access to Chinese-supplied critical components used in attacks on Ukraine's critical infrastructure. Beijing, meanwhile, has solidified and expanded its discounted energy resource procurement from Russia.

Security threats embedded in the China-Russia partnership became deeper than bilateral trade and sanctions evasion. In terms of preparing for future conflicts, Beijing has been actively involved in extracting critical lessons from both the invasion and, potentially, from the captured U.S.- and NATO-supplied military equipment in Ukraine. Moscow, on the other hand, has been keen to participate in show-of-force military exercises in the Pacific, joining Beijing in naval and air patrols near Japan and Taiwan. Examples of such practical cooperation clearly demonstrate cross-theater learning.

On the ground, the unprecedented level of technological cooperation between Moscow, Pyongyang, and Beijing that now covers ICBM technologies, long-range drones, and nuclear propulsion technology further exacerbates the negative externalities of such alliances on stability in the region. In these dual-route relationships, North Korean troops have emerged near European borders; Moscow has received millions of artillery shells, hundreds of KN-23 ballistic missiles, and Chinese components for its drones. Meanwhile, Pyongyang continues to advance its long-range strike capabilities and all three components of its nuclear triad, and Beijing has retained a force multiplier in the region.

Finally, keeping in mind an additional layer of complexities in maintaining commitments in both theaters requires the incorporation of American Asia-Pacific allies into the emerging strategy of responses to the authoritarian alliances. Seeing volatile North Korean and Chinese actions in the region, allies such as Japan and South Korea, for once, have responded with pledges and concrete steps toward rearmament. However, with allied strategic calculations hinging on balancing the probability of abandonment versus entrapment, this rearmament is rather enforced by a mixture of security concerns and over-reliance on the United States. The strategic interdependence between Europe and Asia and the need to adapt to emerging threats are, therefore, as important as ever. In this frame of reference, the U.S.-NATO decoupling explains the rationality behind the current administration's security foresight, as it creates more room for American resources to be poured into the Asia-Pacific region and into the resuscitation of regional security alliances.

TOWARD A PACIFIC-CENTERED SECURITY ORDER?

Supported by economic and trade data, all these developments point toward the emergence of a unique Pacific-centered security order, as the world's economic and military power is increasingly concentrated in the region. Structural trends also make the Pacific a testbed for new forms of alliance politics. For instance, 21st-century authoritarian alliances in the region have

already shown the success and resilience of mission-specific alliance politics. China, for instance, remains Russia's largest buyer of natural gas and oil, despite threats of tariffs and sanctions from the Trump administration. North Korean troops remain on rotation in Russia's Kursk region, allowing Moscow to use reinforcements at will, as well as providing Pyongyang with a fresh source of 21st-century combat experience.

On the other hand, U.S.-centered security structures that will maintain order in the region still lack strategic depth and integration. AUKUS and QUAD, despite their promising mission-specific and asymmetric nature, lack NATO's systematic approach to deterrence and security guarantees. A more traditional U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral partnership, while providing

boots on the ground, is contingent upon allied solutions to the dilemma of the aforementioned abandonment versus entrapment in their relationship with the U.S. Crucially, in parallel with a thaw in U.S.–Russia relations against the background of deepening North Korea–Russia and China–Russia partnerships, negotiations with the aggressor weigh on allies' confidence in American security commitments. For these middle powers of the region, a peace deal secured at the cost of territorial concessions in Ukraine would call into question both the depth of U.S. leadership and the reliability of allied support.

Considering rising tensions over Taiwan, in the South China Sea, and on the Korean Peninsula, the less ironclad U.S. security commitments are, the more volatile and fragmented the security environment will become. In the long run, pragmatism may affect the endurance of U.S. leadership; however, this may not produce the expected outcome. On the contrary, without concrete steps toward sustained commitment and the reassurance of allies in that commitment, so-called cost-optimization may not necessarily translate into long-term security or leadership.

WRITING THE FUTURE OF SECURITY IN THE PACIFIC

As the world continues to fragment, the endurance of U.S. leadership, therefore, depends on balancing continuity in the Atlantic with innovation in the Pacific. To some, however, the Atlantic and NATO symbolize the past, while AUKUS and QUAD embody the future. Yet the question of which is superior remains open. Despite growing tensions within its cooperation with the U.S., NATO remains an alliance with ironclad security guarantees. From the perspective of the European member states, NATO's collective interdependence and selective decoupling also prompt the alliance to become more self-reliant and streamlined. Self-sustainability, in return, fosters much-needed innovation that could be applied to the Pacific.

The European theater, thus, should not be treated as a secondary one but rather play an independent yet connected role. Maintaining U.S. primacy would imply maintaining at least neutral relationships with the EU and

The endurance of U.S. leadership depends on balancing continuity in the Atlantic with innovation in the Pacific.

The Asia-Pacific region, by contrast, aligns more closely with the emerging security politics of the United States. However, without stronger commitments to Japan and Korea, enhanced support for AUKUS and QUAD, and long-term interconnectivity with NATO, Washington risks failing to maintain effective deterrence in either region. Decoupling from NATO, while a pragmatic response to dual-front risks, should not come at the expense of abandoning the established Atlantic security order. Doing so would increase the risks of a potential credibility gap and undermine the sustainability of U.S. primacy.

Any innovation in the Pacific, therefore, requires a careful assessment of NATO's lessons and structures. The most effective path for the future of security in the Pacific is to adapt AUKUS and QUAD alongside NATO as complementary pillars of a U.S.-centric global order, tailored to address direct, mission-specific threats such as the China-Russia and Russia-North Korea partnerships. Ensuring that lessons from the European theater inform strategic actions across both fronts would reinforce credibility, deterrence, and long-term U.S. primacy, ultimately shaping the balance of power in the twenty-first century.

A Pole in the Making

India's Autonomy in a Coercive Era

ANSHU MEGHE

The geopolitics of the twenty-first century is changing fast enough to feel like experiencing Paul Kennedy's "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" unfold in real time. The post-Cold War order, once framed as stable, liberal, and U.S.-led, is showing visible strain: norms are contested, institutions are stressed, and power is redistributing across regions and domains. The United States that anchored what many called the "unipolar moment" is increasingly absorbed by domestic polarization and strategic retrenchment, while China expands its economic, military, and diplomatic footprint. Meanwhile, Russia has revived expansionist instincts, and Europe is confronting the limits of its security assumptions.

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India sits at the hinge of this transition: not an old power in restoration nor a status-quo superpower, but an aspiring one. It is demographically young, economically consequential, and strategically exposed. If a sharper U.S.–China rivalry hardens into a de facto bipolar structure, the pressure on middle and rising powers to “choose sides” will grow. Yet India has long treated autonomy not as rhetoric but as statecraft, first through non-alignment, later through issue-based partnerships designed to preserve room for maneuver. Unlike the Cold War era, however, India now operates with greater economic weight, deeper external partnerships, and higher ambitions, even as it confronts persistent domestic constraints and a volatile neighborhood.

In the contemporary scenario, India’s main goal is not to stay equally close to Washington and Beijing but to protect its freedom of action by building real national strength. In practice, that means partnering more closely on security when it serves India’s interests, staying economically engaged but carefully managing dependence, and widening its options through ties with other major and middle powers. The argument—and the hypothesis tested here—is that this strategy can work only if India keeps its links with both the United States and China strong enough to matter yet limited enough to avoid being pressured or strong-armed by either side. Ultimately, success will depend less on diplomatic messaging and more on whether India can quickly strengthen its domestic industrial base, technology ecosystem, and military capability while managing border tensions and stabilizing its immediate neighborhood.

FREEDOM OF ACTION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

India interprets the contemporary international order as moving toward multipolarity and, crucially, casts itself not merely as a participant but as a prospective pole within that system. This self-conception coexists with a clear-eyed assessment of relative constraints: compared to larger powers, the U.S. and China, India faces disadvantages in aggregate economic power, persistent security dependencies, and acute geographic vulnerabilities, especially along contested land borders and within a demanding regional environment. Yet these constraints have not diluted India’s long-standing preference for avoiding rigid bloc commitments. Instead, they have made the pursuit of autonomy more central to India’s strategic imagination.

In this context, India’s guiding doctrine is commonly described as strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy refers to a state’s ability to make sovereign decisions in foreign policy and defense without being structurally constrained by external pressure or binding alliance obligations. It is not synonymous with isolationism or neutrality. Rather, it denotes flexibility and independence: the capacity to cooperate with multiple powers while retaining freedom of action and preserving bargaining leverage. For India, the concept carries deep historical resonance: colonial subjugation instilled an enduring determination that no external actor should “decide India’s place in the world.”

Strategic autonomy also represents continuity through adaptation. From Jawaharlal Nehru’s non-alignment during the Cold War to the current government’s emphasis on “multi-alignment,” successive Indian administrations have sought to preserve room for maneuver while

responding to shifting distributions of power. Conceptually, it offers a middle path between rigid bloc politics and passive disengagement: a strategy aimed at reducing the risk of coercion by any single power or coalition by calibrating security partnerships, economic interdependence, and diplomatic positioning. Crucially, it also requires strengthening the domestic foundations of autonomy: economic resilience, technological and industrial capacity, and social cohesion, without which external flexibility becomes performative rather than durable.

At the same time, strategic autonomy differs from Cold War-era non-alignment in important ways. Non-alignment emerged in a bipolar system in which India was materially weaker and sought to avoid entrapment. Today, India's larger economic scale, global partnerships, and great-power aspirations make autonomy less about abstention and more about selective alignment—the ability to cooperate or resist depending on issue area and national interest. In that sense, strategic autonomy is not simply a defensive posture; it is also a statement of status. It signals that India does not accept the category of a “mere middle power” but seeks to operate as a consequential actor capable of shaping outcomes and, at the margins, shifting the balance within an evolving global order.

Whether India can translate this ambition into a durable strategy will depend on the prudence, pragmatism, and patience of its policymakers. It is unrealistic to expect India to be fully aligned with both Washington and Beijing at once; the more plausible goal is to remain a pivotal actor that can work with each side without becoming dependent on either. The real test, therefore, lies in the bilateral relationships themselves—how India has managed its ties with the United States and China over time, what each side expects from India today, and where the points of convergence and friction are most likely to emerge.

India's relationships with the United States and China have moved through cycles of cooperation and tension. Unlike India's long-standing ties with Russia, often described as an “all-weather” partnership, both Washington and Beijing have, at different points, clashed with New Delhi over core interests and policy choices. The result has been alternating phases of warmth and pressure, shaped less by sentiment and more by shifting strategic calculations.

Of the two, India–U.S. ties have generally been easier to expand because they lack the structural friction of a disputed land border and are increasingly supported by overlapping interests in the Indo-Pacific, technology, and defense cooperation. India–China relations, by contrast, are burdened by geography and history. Unresolved border disputes rooted in the legacies of the British Empire and compounded by decades of failed settlement continue to generate mistrust and crisis risk. The absence of a shared regional vision and the persistence of competing security goals in Asia have therefore made China not just a neighbor but a primary strategic challenger for India. Therefore, the interests, expectations, and constraints that shape each bilateral relationship are different and have evolved separately.

THE LIMITS OF ALIGNMENT

India's relationship with the United States has never unfolded as a straightforward progression from distance to intimacy; rather, it has evolved through an ongoing and often delicate negotiation between India's commitment to strategic autonomy and America's preference for alliance-centered statecraft. Over time, this negotiation has been repeatedly shaped by recurring dynamics. At moments of regional security crises—particularly those involving Pakistan—the bilateral relationship has tended to recalibrate under pressure. At the same time, India's pursuit of capital and advanced technology has created new avenues for cooperation, drawing the two countries closer in practical terms. Yet these convergences have consistently coexisted with a structural tension: while Washington often expects clearer political alignment, New Delhi continues to insist on preserving its independent decision-making. It is within this interplay of crisis, opportunity, and divergence that the true character of the U.S.–India relationship can be understood.

During the Cold War, the relationship ran on limited cooperation and recurring mistrust. Washington's early tilt toward Pakistan—visible in its positions on Kashmir and debates at the United Nations Security Council—made New Delhi doubt U.S. reliability as a security partner. That tilt was rooted in Cold War logic: Pakistan was treated as a useful security ally against Soviet influence and as a channel into a broader Muslim world during a period shaped by the creation of Israel. Even so, the relationship was never fully frozen. Economic and development cooperation—especially food support through PL-480—kept an important baseline of engagement alive despite political estrangement.

Security cooperation spiked only when threat perceptions briefly aligned, most notably after the 1962 India–China war, but those moments rarely lasted. The sharpest Cold War low came in 1971: India signed a Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, and the United States deployed a naval task force into the Bay of Bengal during the Bangladesh crisis—reinforcing New Delhi's belief that U.S. power could be used coercively in South Asia. In the 1980s, ties warmed cautiously as regional upheaval after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan raised South Asia's strategic importance and as India sought technology and capability inputs, but nuclear disagreements and U.S. assistance to Pakistan capped trust.

After 1991, the relationship shifted from ideological distance to pragmatic convergence—without erasing the autonomy tension. India's economic reforms created far more room for trade, investment, and technology ties, but the early post–Cold War years still carried the non-proliferation shadow. The 1998 nuclear tests triggered U.S. sanctions under the Glenn Amendment, which many in India interpreted as punitive and unequal—an attempt to police India's strategic choices rather than accommodate its security realities. Yet even this low point became part of the later reset: the Kargil conflict in 1999 signaled a meaningful U.S. recalibration, with Washington pressing Pakistan to withdraw and implicitly treating India's position as the more stabilizing one.

The deeper transformation came when strategic logic and technology needs finally aligned. The 2008 civil nuclear breakthrough and the subsequent international enabling steps were widely seen as a watershed because they opened pathways for civil nuclear cooperation and symbolically treated India as an exceptional case outside the NPT framework. In the 2010s and 2020s, security cooperation became more operational: enabling agreements such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) institutionalized logistics cooperation, secure communications, and geospatial data-sharing—building habits of cooperation that look much closer to interoperability than earlier decades allowed.

This strategic convergence has also been reinforced by minilateral diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. India's participation in the consultations that revived the Quad framework in 2017 illustrates the pattern: India seeks coalition value and deterrence signaling but prefers flexible arrangements that stop short of alliance obligations. And in the 2020s, the relationship increasingly fused security with advanced technology, visible in initiatives like the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), which explicitly aims to deepen cooperation across critical and emerging technologies as part of the broader strategic partnership.



NARENDRA MODI, INDIA'S PRIME MINISTER, WAITS TO RECEIVE LUIZ INACIO LULA DA SILVA, BRAZIL'S PRESIDENT, NOT PICTURED, AHEAD OF A MEETING AT HYDERABAD HOUSE IN NEW DELHI, INDIA, ON SATURDAY, FEB. 21, 2026. BRAZIL AND INDIA ARE SET TO STRENGTHEN COOPERATION ON CRITICAL MINERALS AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AT THE MEETING, AS THE TWO NATIONS POSITION THEMSELVES AS LEADING VOICES FOR THE DEVELOPING WORLD AMID A FRAGILE GLOBAL ORDER. PHOTOGRAPHER: PRAKASH SINGH/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Still, the “autonomy test” never disappeared; it simply moved into new arenas. In security, it shows up when U.S. sanctions frameworks intersect with India's legacy defense ties. In economics, it shows up more bluntly through leverage. The 2025 tariff escalation, explicitly linked in U.S. messaging to India's Russian oil imports, demonstrated how quickly economic instruments can be used to push strategic behavior. The February 2026 interim framework that lowered tariffs to 18% and referenced India's “intention” to scale up purchases illustrates both the resilience and the fragility of the partnership: it is important enough to rescue but also susceptible to sharp swings when U.S. policy turns unilateral.

Finally, people-to-people ties have become a quiet stabilizer in a way they were not during the Cold War. The Indian diaspora in the United States anchors dense networks in higher education, entrepreneurship, and

technology, and remittances are one measurable indicator of this broader social and economic linkage. The World Bank lists India as the world's largest recipient of remittances, including \$125 billion in 2023. These ties do not eliminate strategic disagreements, but they make the relationship harder to fully reverse because cooperation is no longer only a government-to-government choice; it is embedded in society and markets.

Taken together, the long arc is clear: India–U.S. relations evolved from Cold War-era mistrust—managed through selective economic cooperation—into a post-1991 strategic partnership driven by shared interests in Asian stability and technology-driven power. Yet the partnership remains structurally “managed,” not unconditional: it deepens when it builds Indian capability, and it frays when U.S. leverage politics threatens to turn interdependence into constraint.

PARTNERSHIP ON INDIA'S TERMS

To understand where the India–U.S. partnership can deepen—and where it will repeatedly face friction—it is useful to be clear about what each side ultimately seeks from the other. From Washington's perspective, India is valuable as a strategic counterweight in Asia and as a partner in shaping the Indo-Pacific balance. The United States benefits when India is sufficiently capable to complicate Chinese coercion, contribute to regional deterrence, and cooperate through flexible arrangements in the Indo-Pacific—without requiring a formal alliance. At the same time, U.S. policy often carries an implicit preference that India's security dependence does not disappear entirely: access, interoperability, and defense-industrial cooperation become stronger levers when India continues to rely on U.S. and partner ecosystems for key capabilities. Alongside the strategic logic sits an economic one. The United States also wants India to function as a major economic partner and market, especially for energy, advanced technology, defense platforms, and agricultural goods—an expectation reinforced by Washington's tendency to view global competition increasingly through a U.S.–China lens.

India's objectives are related but not identical. India values the United States as a capability partner, a source of technology, investment, and security cooperation that can strengthen deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and offset the risks created by a more powerful China. Yet India's larger goal is not alignment; it is leverage and flexibility. New Delhi does not want to become over-dependent on the United States for security, technology, or trade because dependence creates vulnerability, particularly when U.S. domestic politics or unilateral economic tools can rapidly reshape policy. Recent trade frictions have reinforced this lesson: reliability is not guaranteed, and India's bargaining position improves only when it has alternatives and can credibly resist pressure. In practice, then, India seeks a partnership with Washington that enhances its capabilities while preserving room for independent choices, cooperating where interests converge but avoiding commitments that could turn partnership into constraint.

Seen this way, the India–U.S. relationship is best described as strategic convergence with negotiated autonomy: a partnership that grows when it strengthens India's capacity and options and strains when either side tries to

convert interdependence into discipline. This sets up the contrast with China: where India's core challenge is not managing a partner's expectations but managing a competitor's proximity, coercive capacity, and unresolved border risks.

GEOGRAPHY AS DESTINY

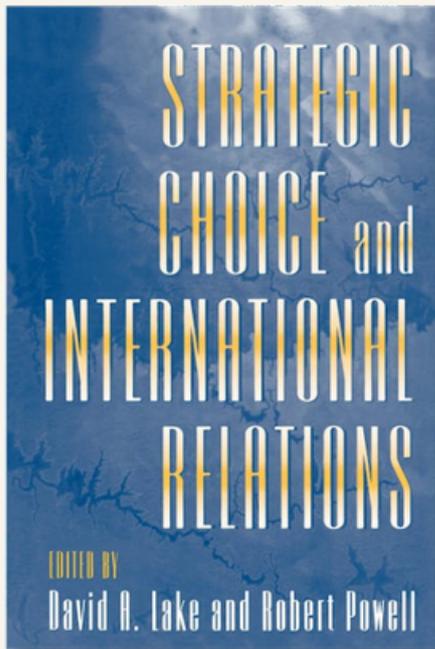
India–China relations have traveled a long distance from the optimism of the early 1950s to the guarded, high-stakes relationship India manages today. If India–U.S. ties evolved from mistrust into a capability-oriented partnership, India–China ties evolved from fraternity into a form of managed rivalry, one that mixes deep economic interdependence with recurring security crises. For India's broader strategy of strategic autonomy, China is the harder test because the relationship is shaped not only by interests but by geography: contested borders, proximity, and the ever-present risk that a political disagreement can become a military incident.

The relationship began with genuine postcolonial hope. India was among the first major non-communist countries to recognize the People's Republic of China in December 1949, and the early years were defined by the language of Asian solidarity and peaceful coexistence. But the foundations were fragile. China's consolidation of control over Tibet after 1950 transformed the strategic geography of the Himalayas and brought two large states into direct contact. India tried to preserve stable ties, relinquishing inherited colonial-era privileges in Tibet, but the central problem was never resolved: a boundary that neither side accepted as fully settled, inherited from the ambiguities of British imperial cartography and diplomacy. The dispute in the western sector around Aksai Chin and the contestation in the eastern sector associated with what India administers as Arunachal Pradesh were not simply technical disagreements over lines on a map. They reflected incompatible historical narratives and competing security imperatives along a difficult frontier.

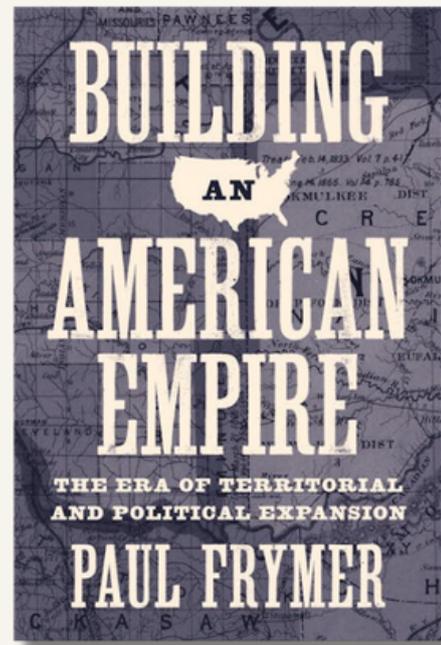
The more plausible goal is to remain a pivotal actor that can work with each side without becoming dependent on either.

By the late 1950s, mistrust deepened. China's tightening grip in Tibet and India's decision to grant asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959 hardened positions, and diplomatic efforts to bridge differences failed. The 1962 war ruptured the relationship and set the terms of rivalry for decades to come. After 1962, political engagement largely froze, and China's growing strategic cooperation with Pakistan reinforced India's sense

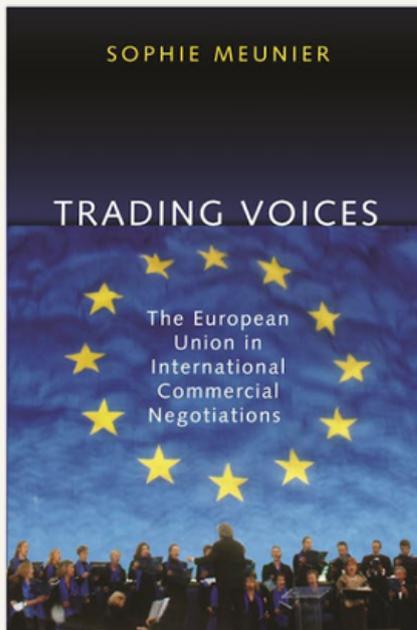
that Beijing was willing to constrain India's strategic space through regional partnerships. When normalization resumed in the late 1970s and 1980s, it did not remove the dispute; it reorganized the relationship around a practical compromise: the border would remain unresolved, but it would be managed so that limited cooperation could continue.



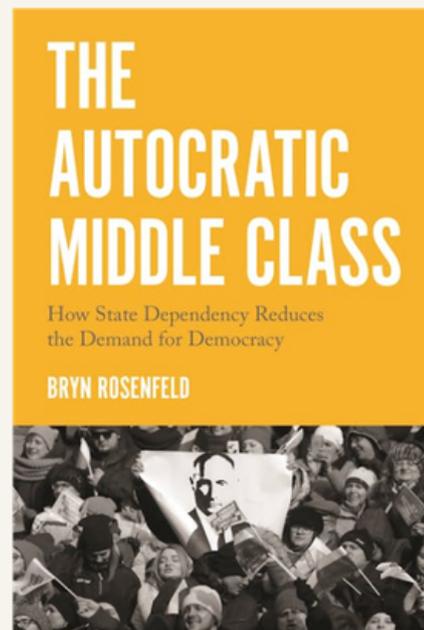
"Lake skillfully investigates an important dimension of international behavior unduly neglected by traditional theory, and his analysis of the early Cold War is particularly insightful. This is, on balance, an innovative and challenging work that deepens our understanding of American internationalism in the twentieth century."—Frank Ninkovich, *American Historical Review*



"[Brands] gathers a college of 45 such experts. All are wise after the facts of their field, and each attempts the historian's equivalent of the owl's neck rotation—a sweep that, taking in past and present, looks to the future . . . the scholarship on strategy has become internationalized, and Mr. Brands broadens his sights beyond the familiar theorists and practitioners—and beyond the battlefield."—Dominic Green, *Wall Street Journal*



"The book develops a comprehensive, conceptually sophisticated, and very compelling account of the role the EU plays in international trade negotiations. *Trading Voices* sets the standard for future research on EU trade policy making."—Matthias Kaelberer, *Comparative Political Studies*



"Rosenfeld's book is essential reading for anyone interested in questions of development and democratisation. In its successful effort to illuminate the role of the middle class in promoting democracy, it should serve as an important reference point for future scholarship in the field. As such, it deserves wide attention."—Europe-Asia Studies, *Zuzanna Brunarska*

That logic shaped the post–Cold War phase. Through the 1990s and 2000s, India and China sought to maintain stability along the Line of Actual Control through confidence-building agreements and dialogue mechanisms. The aim was straightforward: keep the frontier calm enough to allow trade and diplomacy to expand. For a time, this produced a workable arrangement—an uneasy but functional coexistence in which political signaling and military restraint created space for economic engagement.

The problem was that this “management model” relied on the assumption that peace on the border could be preserved through understandings and restraint. In the 2010s, that assumption began to weaken. The Doklam standoff in 2017 signaled that crisis behavior had returned, and the Galwan clash in 2020 marked a more serious turning point. From India’s perspective, this was not simply another dispute; it was evidence that the border could be used as a tool of pressure. The response in New Delhi was a shift toward stronger deterrence—accelerated infrastructure at the frontier, changes in force posture, and a wider reassessment of China as India’s primary continental security challenge. This shift carries real costs. High-altitude preparedness demands sustained resources, and every additional rupee spent to harden the Himalayan frontier competes with naval modernization and maritime presence—capabilities India sees as essential for sustaining influence in the Indian Ocean.

Yet even amid rivalry, economic interdependence has continued. Trade between the two countries has expanded alongside strategic mistrust, creating a relationship that is neither simple hostility nor genuine partnership. For India, the key concern is not trade per se, but asymmetric dependence, especially in sectors that touch national security and industrial resilience. In recent years, India’s trade deficit with China has widened dramatically, reinforcing worries that economic ties can become a strategic vulnerability. India’s trade deficit with China hit a record level in 2024/25, alongside rising concerns about dumping and dependence. India’s post-2020 restrictions in the digital domain—along with broader de-risking measures—reflect an attempt to reduce exposure where dependence could translate into coercion, without pretending that full economic decoupling is feasible in the near term.

Diplomatically, India has kept channels open, even in periods of heightened tension. Both countries continue to share space in forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and they periodically signal interest in stabilizing ties. A limited stabilization effort has been visible since late 2024, particularly through border management understandings and resumed dialogues; India’s Ministry of External Affairs has publicly indicated that disengagement understandings reached in October 2024 were holding in relevant areas. But this remains a tactical thaw rather than a strategic reset. The deeper drivers—border contestation, China–Pakistan coordination, and competition for influence across Asia and the Indian Ocean region—continue to shape India’s view of China as a strategic challenger, not simply a difficult neighbor.

The broader analytical point is that India–China relations now operate under a dual reality. Economically, the incentives to trade and remain connected are strong; strategically, the incentives to deter, hedge, and reduce

vulnerability are stronger than at any point since the Cold War. This is why China is central to India's contemporary balancing problem. With the United States, India's challenge is to gain capabilities without being pulled into alliance discipline. With China, India's challenge is more basic: to prevent proximity from becoming coercion and to manage rivalry without allowing each border crisis to foreclose diplomacy or derail India's wider development agenda.

LEVERAGE AND LIMITS

To see why India–China ties remain both economically connected and strategically brittle, it is important to clarify what each side ultimately seeks—and what each fears—from the other. From Beijing's perspective, China often speaks the language of multipolarity, but it is less clear that it welcomes India as a fully equal pole in Asia. At a minimum, China prefers an India that does not challenge Beijing's claim to primacy in the regional order. Geography gives China enduring leverage: as India's continental neighbor with a disputed border, proximity to India's periphery, and deep partnerships in South Asia, Beijing can apply pressure through a mix of military signaling, diplomacy, and economic tools. A stronger, more autonomous India complicates China's strategic bandwidth because it forces Beijing to allocate resources to the Himalayan frontier and the Indian Ocean at the very moment it seeks to concentrate capabilities for long-term competition with the United States in the Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, China has incentives to keep the relationship from collapsing into permanent confrontation. It benefits from trade with India, from access to a large market, and from presenting a Global South narrative in multilateral forums where both countries have influence. Beijing has also shown periodic willingness to compartmentalize disputes and cooperate on functional areas—such as clean energy, certain technology domains, and critical mineral supply chains—when that serves its broader geopolitical aim of reducing U.S. influence. Yet cooperation has clear limits: China often acts to slow or complicate India's rise in areas that touch national power, particularly where India seeks to build independent manufacturing capacity and reduce strategic dependence.

India's interests start from a different premise. New Delhi does not want a relationship defined only by hostility because the costs of continuous escalation on the border are high and because China remains a major economic actor in India's supply chains. India has therefore repeatedly signaled willingness to engage diplomatically and cooperate in multilateral settings, even during periods of tension. But India's core objective is to prevent China from becoming so dominant that India loses bargaining space. The unresolved boundary remains the structural constraint: it creates an environment in which trust is thin, crises recur, and military preparedness absorbs scarce resources.

For India, reducing vulnerability is therefore central. That means limiting dependence on China in sensitive sectors, especially critical minerals and high-end manufacturing inputs, by building domestic capacity and diversifying supply chains. It also means widening India's external options:

strengthening partnerships in both the Global North and the Global South and presenting India as a stable, reliable alternative for trade, investment, and technology cooperation. In practice, India treats China not only as a competitor but as a strategic rival whose actions can directly impede India's larger ambitions. Managing this relationship, then, is less about achieving "normal" bilateral ties and more about sustaining a stable baseline—enough to avoid crisis and keep room for growth—while steadily building the leverage India needs to negotiate with China from a position of greater strength.

THE TEST OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

India's strategic autonomy will be decided in the coming decade, not because India lacks ambition, but because the international environment is becoming less forgiving. As U.S.–China competition sharpens, the room for middle and rising powers to remain flexible shrinks, and pressure increasingly travels through trade, technology, finance, and security partnerships. For India, managing two dominant powers at once will therefore require more than careful diplomacy. Autonomy will depend on whether India can build the domestic and external foundations that make independent choice credible under stress.

The core theory is simple: India sustains autonomy when it has capability at home and options abroad. Even if India becomes the world's third-largest economy in the near future, the absolute and per capita gaps with the United States and China will remain large. India's strategic capital is not only size; it is momentum, the ability to sustain high growth and convert it into power-relevant capacity. That means building domestic strength in the sectors that determine leverage in a coercive era: advanced manufacturing, defense production, AI and digital infrastructure, semiconductor and electronics ecosystems, critical minerals and processing, and energy resilience. Autonomy also requires domestic stability. If growth is uneven and social fault lines widen, external actors gain opportunities to apply pressure indirectly. In other words, inclusive growth and social cohesion are not just development goals; they are strategic defenses.

Operationally, India's toolkit has three parts. The first is capability-building: accelerating industrial upgrading, reducing single-point import dependence in critical sectors, and ensuring the military can deter and absorb pressure on land and at sea without consuming national resources indefinitely. The second is coalition diversification: widening India's external options beyond Washington and Beijing through deeper economic and strategic partnerships with Europe, Japan, ASEAN, the Gulf, Australia, and key African partners. The objective is not symbolic "multi-alignment," but practical insurance so no single relationship becomes a chokepoint. The third is geographic consolidation: sustaining influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, because India's autonomy weakens if its neighborhood becomes permeable to external leverage or if it cannot protect the maritime corridors on which its economy depends.

The stress tests will show whether this strategy is working. The first is a hardened U.S.–China binary: if rivalry tightens further, India will face rising demands to align. Success would look like India remaining a pivotal partner to both—cooperating with the United States on security and technology while keeping China relations stable enough to avoid constant crisis—without accepting alliance-style discipline from either side. Failure would look like

strategic enclosure: India formally independent but materially constrained by sanctions threats, tariff coercion, technology restrictions, or border pressure.

Second, and often overlooked, stress test is the opposite scenario: a partial U.S.–China détente or bargain in which Washington and Beijing become closer partners than either is with India, even if competition persists elsewhere. In such a setting, India risks being treated as a secondary variable—pressed to accommodate terms set by the two larger powers. That is precisely why India’s balancing logic also contains a structural imperative: India must stay close enough to both powers that its bilateral relationships remain more valuable on key issues than their relationship with each other, so it is not bypassed in moments of great-power bargaining. Failure to maintain workable ties with either side would then be doubly costly, shrinking India’s channels of influence and narrowing its room to hedge.

Third is the border itself. If escalatory incidents recur frequently, India may be forced into costly permanent mobilization, diverting resources from maritime modernization and economic upgradation—the very engines of long-term autonomy. Fourth is economic coercion and supply-chain shocks. India’s resilience will be measured by whether it can absorb pressures such as tariffs, export controls, and investment screening without making strategic concessions. Fifth is internal cohesion and implementation capacity: if growth slows, inequalities widen, or governance bottlenecks persist, India’s bargaining position erodes regardless of diplomatic skill.

In the best case, India sustains rapid growth, upgrades its technology and industrial base, strengthens deterrence, stabilizes its neighborhood, and builds a diversified partnership portfolio. That combination would allow it to keep workable relations with both the United States and China while steadily expanding its influence as a consequential power. In the worst case, India remains dependent in critical sectors, faces recurring border crises, and becomes vulnerable to external leverage, reducing strategic autonomy from an organizing doctrine to a rhetorical preference. The difference between these futures will be determined less by how India describes the world order and more by how quickly it can build capability, preserve cohesion, and keep crises from consuming the resources needed to rise.

India’s approach has become neither non-alignment in the old sense nor alliance in the new one, but a constant effort to widen options.

BETWEEN TWO ELEPHANTS

India's foreign policy story in the twenty-first century is the story of a rising power trying to keep its hands on the steering wheel in a world that increasingly wants to grab it. The United States offers partnership and capability, yet occasionally reminds India that economic and political leverage can be applied quickly when interests diverge. China offers scale and proximity—yet the unresolved border and recurring coercion ensure that competition is never far from the surface. Between these two powers, India's approach has become neither non-alignment in the old sense nor alliance in the new one, but a constant effort to widen options: cooperate where interests converge, hedge where dependence becomes risky, and build partnerships beyond the two giants to avoid being boxed in.

And because, as the saying goes, when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers, India's task is to ensure it is never just grass. In the end, the endurance of this strategy will not be decided by declarations of autonomy but by the strength that sustains it. If India can keep growing, translate growth into technological and military capability, hold its society together, and stabilize its neighborhood and maritime space, it can remain a pivotal actor—close enough to both powers to matter, yet independent enough to choose. If it cannot, the pressure of a more coercive world will steadily narrow its room for maneuver until autonomy survives more as aspiration than as practice.

Power at the Wrong Moment

Failure Through Weakness

ALAYNA CICCHETTI

In international politics, overreach is associated with decline rather than ascent, which drives instability. This instability depletes the number of decisions a state can make, which rivals interpret as an opportunity. As their dominance erodes, states cling to expansive commitments, widening the gap between perceived strength and actual capacity. Rising powers are similarly susceptible to this gap, as short-term gains are often misperceived as durable advantages. Economic growth, military modernization, and diplomatic influence generate momentum, but their conversion to durable strategic power is not linear. Misjudging relative gains as absolute power shapes state behavior and fosters strategic overstretch, as states' commitments, ambitions, and confrontations exceed capacity. Despite conventional scholarship, the overstretch trap is not an indicator of decline but a structural risk embedded in the dynamics of growth. From prewar Germany and interwar Japan to the Soviet Union and modern-day China, Russia, Iran, and India, a state's most precarious moments occur when ambition outpaces capability.

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THE LOGIC OF OVERSTRETCH

In the overstretch trap, states misread their own strength, treating relative gains as absolute power rather than isolated successes. Relative gains signal that a state is potentially growing faster than its competitors, but absolute power is the ability to shape outcomes. While small victories create the perception of power, they do not eliminate underlying limitations. Economic expansion is a common source of this illusion. While growth strengthens states, the conversion of wealth to power is not immediate. Wealth becomes power when states can mobilize resources toward strategic ends, whereas power relies on institutional competence and the ability to absorb shocks. Cognitive bias compounds this problem, as early successes become reference points for strategy. Consequently, leaders overestimate their ability to shape outcomes and misread economic expansion as strategic capability.

Leadership narratives reinforce this illusion in times of growth. Leaders herald ascent as inevitable and rooted in historical destiny, reducing sensitivity to risk and recasting restraint as weakness. This momentum amplifies historical tales of expansion and exaggerates threat perception, skewing policy toward unmanageable offensive strategies and compressing timelines. In Maoist China, leaders interpreted relative gains as evidence of restored historical status, dismissed resistance as temporary, and justified simultaneous confrontations with the U.S. and the Soviet Union as necessary engagements, thereby overstretching China's capacity through multi-front competition.

Growth cultivates confidence and encourages leaders to take on additional commitments. For rising powers, this manifests in transitioning from securing the immediate periphery to regional dominance. Overstretch becomes visible when ambitions outpace bureaucratic depth, alliance management, and domestic economic resilience. Rising powers underestimate the friction between ambitions and capacity by assuming that development keeps pace with objectives. In reality, the absence of means accelerates vulnerability, not dominance. With newfound confidence, strategy is driven by opportunity and reaction. Escalating objectives and insufficient infrastructure embolden the pursuit of multiple goals and expanded commitments simultaneously. Along with confidence, early successes reinforce this pattern, prompting leaders to undertake unsustainable ventures. As commitments grow, leaders underestimate the costs of competition and resort to reactive crisis management. The result is a widening gap between expanding ends and insufficient means, a core mechanism of the overstretch trap.

GROWTH AS VULNERABILITY

While rising powers use nationalism to legitimize foreign policy, nationalist narratives equate expansion with strength and restraint with weakness, feeding overstretch. As leaders invoke historical myths of guaranteed growth to justify risk-taking and silence dissent, they reframe expansion as necessary and opposition as disloyal. Furthermore, leaders use nationalist narratives to reduce domestic resistance to policies and, when initiatives falter, double

down to reaffirm legitimacy. In the 1930s, Japan sought to redefine the East Asian security order by cultivating domestic support for expansion and American retrenchment. These actions underpinned the nationalist belief that assertiveness validates great-power status.

Growth arrives in cycles: when it surges, domestic populations rejoice, and when it slows, dissatisfaction runs rampant. To combat frustration and renew legitimacy, leaders seek to expand. Furthermore, slowed ascent also increases the likelihood of conflict. With domestic support, leaders pursue expansion without the necessary capacity to sustain it, accelerating foreign commitments. This dynamic feeds strategic overreach and contributes to rising powers falling prey to the overstretch trap. Centralized decision-making and weakened institutional constraints intensify domestic support for expansion. As authority consolidates, dissenting voices are silenced, and leaders rely on loyalists to reinforce assumptions and suppress dissent regarding long-term costs. With fewer institutional checks, decision-making accelerates as scrutiny declines. This emboldens leaders to act on perceived momentum without restriction. Under these conditions, foreign policy becomes easier to initiate and harder to restrain, increasing the likelihood that states overextend beyond their capacity.

Misperception of rival actions also encourages strategic overreach. Rising powers often misperceive the actions of rivals; what rival states see as precautionary balancing, rising powers often see as threats. The misperception of actions creates a security dilemma in which efforts by one state to enhance security provoke countermeasures and escalation from another. In the face of perceived threats, rising powers escalate by pursuing foreign policy to dominate their rivals. For example, the Soviet Union interpreted Western defensive initiatives as direct threats, prompting aggressive responses that exceeded their capacity and deepened confrontation.

Overconfidence in deterrence and escalation feeds misperception. Strong deterrence measures rely on capacity, yet in periods of growth, leaders misperceive limited successes as mastery. Small victories encourage leaders to overestimate their ability to manage rivals and serve as proof of competence. The perception of control creates a feedback loop: apparent mastery encourages further escalation, commitments multiply, and the costs of misperception rise. As behavior becomes more assertive, underlying vulnerabilities emerge.

Historical analogies further compound the overstretch trap, as leaders map past successes onto new contexts. As Khong demonstrates, U.S. leaders generalized early successes and lessons from World War II in Europe onto the Vietnam War. Leadership mistook short-term gains for lasting strategic superiority and committed to a conflict without the structural conditions for success. Tactical victories also encourage overconfidence when misread as structural advantages. Success in specific engagements often reflects effective policy, organization, or timing rather than enduring structural superiority. By overgeneralizing limited tactical success, states assume broader strategic advantage and expand obligations, widening the gap between capacity and commitments. Finally, underestimation of long-term economic, military, and reputational costs exacerbates the overstretch trap. Instead of adapting when

constraints emerge, leaders often double down, turning manageable risks into cumulative vulnerabilities. Growth generates the illusion of permanent advantage: early successes obscure structural pressures, while expanding commitments lock states into trajectories that widen the divide between ambition and ability.

CONTEMPORARY PATHWAYS TO OVERREACH

China's ambitions have expanded faster than its strategic maturity. Its cumulative pressures and domestic constraints have narrowed its ability to maneuver, while assertiveness has masked escalation risks. China's ambitions have centered on reshaping the regional order in Southeast Asia, reintegrating Taiwan, securing economic infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), reducing American primacy, and shaping norms in international institutions. These ambitions reveal a growing tension between China's global reach and strategic maturity.

The BRI exemplifies this imbalance. Intended to convert economic strength into strategic leverage, the BRI has generated debt disputes, elite resistance, and reputational costs, reflecting ambition without sufficient institutional and financial maturity. China's growing exposure across multiple pressure points further encourages overstretch. Simultaneous engagement in the South

China Sea, coercion against Taiwan, and competition with the U.S. require military readiness and extensive crisis management capacity. While China has modernized select military capabilities, its ability to project power and manage escalation across multiple theaters simultaneously remains imbalanced. These external ambitions are colliding with mounting structural constraints. Slowing economic growth, demographic decline, and environmental stress hinder China's ability to sustain competition. Rising labor costs erode comparative advantage, an aging workforce constrains future growth, and resource pressures narrow policy flexibility. These constraints reduce China's ability to sustain commitments and heighten vulnerability to overstretch.

The risk for China is not imminent collapse, but gradual overstretch, as expanding commitments outpace the institutional, economic, and strategic foundations required to manage them. China's trajectory demonstrates that growth creates opportunity, but it also compresses timelines, expands obligations, and magnifies the consequences of miscalculation. The central question is whether China's ambitions have advanced faster than its capacity to sustain them.

Russia's recent economic stabilization encouraged a significant rise in status. In misreading relative recovery as absolute power, confidence in coercion and escalation control proved misguided, producing long-term isolation and attrition. Russia's actions in Georgia, Crimea, and Syria reinforced perceptions of effectiveness, demonstrating that limited force

By misreading short-term gains as enduring advantages, a rising Russia stumbled before its peak.

posturing could achieve political outcomes. However, these successes masked structural constraints. The economy remained dependent on energy exports, lacking the logistical depth to sustain conflict. This overconfidence was applied to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and reflected this overconfidence. A cost-benefit analysis assumed rapid military success, collapse in Kyiv, limited Western retaliation, and effective nuclear signaling to deter intervention. These assumptions failed; rather than consolidation, Russian actions generated prolonged attrition and economic and reputational costs.

Russia's reputation as a modern power created a halo effect in which isolated successes were read as structural transformations. Limited victories in Georgia, Crimea, and Syria reinforced the perception that post-Soviet deficiencies had been overcome but did not translate into sustainable readiness. As losses continue to mount, sunk-cost dynamics and concerns about regime legitimacy discourage de-escalation and have incentivized energy coercion and nuclear rhetoric, deepening international isolation. Without the logistical depth and integration required for sustained conflict, Russia's war in Ukraine forced its military reputation to collide with its structural limitations, mirroring the overconfidence trap. Russia also underestimated the cumulative costs of conflict. Rather than fracturing Western solidarity, the invasion hardened alliances and imposed constraints on Russia's economic base. What began as an effort to restore influence resulted in accelerated strategic marginalization, binding Russia to a narrow set of partners and competition with the West.

On the eve of the war in Ukraine, Russia was not a weak power, but its commitments expanded faster than its structural capacity could sustain. By misreading short-term gains as enduring advantages, a rising Russia stumbled before its peak. Russia's future is likely to be shaped by narrowing options as declining capacity collides with sustained commitments. While China and Russia manifest overstretch at the Great Power level, Iran and India demonstrate how regional ambition collides with structural constraints. Revolutionary ideology and geopolitical opportunity have encouraged Iran to expand via proxy networks to counterbalance rivals and promote its preferred regional order. While delivering tactical victories, proxies have imposed burdens that have outpaced capacity. Reliance on proxy networks like the Qods Force and Hezbollah has bred perpetual confrontation and economic strain. Structural limitations, including economic fragility and diplomatic isolation, have constrained Iran's ability to convert influence into durable regional leadership.

India's overstretch risk stems from multifront deterrence and evolving institutional capacity. Rivalry with Pakistan and border skirmishes with China have stretched India's military planning and bureaucratic capacity. Unlike traditional rising powers driven by expansion, India faces cumulative strain from managing multiple deterrence relationships simultaneously without fully developed institutional mechanisms to sustain them. Iran and India demonstrate the costs of regional leadership without consolidation. In both cases, ambition risks outpacing capacity. Iran's proxy strategy masks economic fragility and diplomatic isolation, while India's projection as a stabilizing regional leader is fraught with competing priorities. Over time, these structural constraints have exposed both states to costs that erode the leverage their ambitions seek to secure.

OVERSTRETCH AS A SYSTEMIC PATTERN,
NOT A POLICY FAILURE

Rising powers overestimate their ability to convert growth into dominance. As ascent accelerates, expansionary impulses that deliver immediate gains are rewarded, and long-term costs are concealed. Relative gains are misread as absolute power, and confidence in deterrence hides the costs of expansion. While China, Russia, Iran, and India exemplify these dynamics, historical precedent illustrates that the combination of confidence and constrained capacity produces vulnerability. Overstretch historically emerges from structural incentives that prioritize action over restraint.

Prewar Germany faced industrialization and modernization that incentivized aggressive strategy. Leaders believed early victories would secure great-power status, ignoring overextension in a two-front war against France and Russia. Imperial Japan similarly assumed that territorial gains would cement security and economic advantages, but growing cumulative commitments ultimately led to the empire's fall. Finally, the Soviet Union's institutional rigidity and ideological confidence magnified overreach; its intervention in Afghanistan reflected global ambition and overestimation of capacity. Soviet leaders misread relative parity with the U.S. and NATO as sufficient to sustain commitments. These historical cases illustrate that ambition has repeatedly outpaced ability, even in the absence of immediate existential threats.

Human nature also encourages overstretch, as leaders interpret contradictory assessments as threats to a state's trajectory, and dissenting voices face resistance. Structural incentives within the international system compound this dynamic. In competitive environments, defensive actions convince leaders that failing to consolidate gains risks vulnerability. Restraint appears dangerous rather than prudent. Across different regions, eras, and resource endowments, periods of ascent produce vulnerability as confidence accelerates faster than capacity. Overstretch is not a series of policy failures; it is a structural risk embedded in the trajectory of rising powers, a consequence of growth, ambition, and misperception.

The international system amplifies overstretch dynamics. As restraint appears weak, rising powers interpret uncertainty as a window to consolidate influence. While appealing, these conditions increase the risk of strategic error as states face multiple competitors and overlapping commitments. In this current moment of multipolarity, these opportunities and miscalculations have intensified. Power vacuums exacerbate these dynamics. When dominant powers disengage from regions, rising powers perceive opportunity, flooding the vacuum with competing states, proxy conflicts, and balancing responses. These environments are read as strategically enticing until existing powers mobilize to counterbalance actions once their interests are threatened. Power vacuums also compress decision-making timelines by rewarding early movers. In these environments, hesitation is punished, while expansion appears decisive, pushing rising powers toward overextension.

The international system also distorts threat perception and containment narratives. States rarely interpret rival actions as intended. Once hostility is perceived, ambiguous signals confirm prior suspicions, reinforcing cycles of

escalation. As security dilemmas emerge, states adopt defensive postures to prevent encirclement, intensifying rival threat perceptions. Rising powers perceive restraint as an invitation to future constraint, allowing containment narratives to gain traction without overt aggression. Furthermore, the international system rewards short-term gains and penalizes long-term stability. For rising powers, this asymmetry reinforces illusions of control during ascent and encourages commitments before capacity matures or limitations materialize. The international system magnifies these risks; China, Russia, Iran, and India are each facing dimensions of the overstretch trap that, in tandem with the international system, prioritize action over endurance.

WHY STATES FAIL BEFORE THEY PEAK

The assumption that states are most unstable in decline obscures a consequential reality: strategic errors occur just before a state reaches its apex, when ambition outpaces the structural foundations required to sustain it. Furthermore, growth does not insulate states from risk; it amplifies vulnerability by distorting perceptions and accelerating commitments. As periods of ascent widen the gap between ambition and capacity, economic expansion and military modernization generate expectations of dominance that exceed structural depth. Coupled with early successes that encourage escalation and hidden long-term costs, strategic overreach is a predictable outcome of misjudged strength during ascent.

Strategic errors occur just before a state reaches its apex, when ambition outpaces the structural foundations required to sustain it.

Historical parallels echo this sentiment. Prewar Germany, interwar Japan, and the Soviet Union all expanded their commitments, believing that relative gains signaled durable advantages. In each case, optimism silenced dissent, compressed timelines, and privileged expansion over consolidation, with overreach emerging when leaders took advantage of a strategic window. The

international system magnifies these tendencies. Multipolarity, power vacuums, and containment dynamics reward short-term advances while obscuring long-term constraints, so restraint appears perilous and ambition rational.

Power accumulation is not linear. Growth phases are often the most fragile points in a state's trajectory because the miscalculation of hidden costs makes course correction difficult. Understanding overreach as a structural risk rather than a series of isolated policy failures shifts the analytical lens from decline to the limitations of ascent. In an era of intensified competition, restraint may be the most undervalued form of power for rising states.



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