



China: A Necessary Rival to the US

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Ever since America's rivalry with the Soviets came to an end in the 1990s, the US has struggled to determine what its global position should be. It could be that a rival is necessary for the US to clarify its goals and revitalize its stagnating position on the world stage. China could play the role of necessary rival.

The US went through a long and arduous Cold War with the Soviet Union and served as a security guarantor for smaller liberal countries, which put up with occasional excesses of American power in exchange for protection. While American power was often irritating, it did not cause structural failures within liberal internationalism. The fear of being gobbled up by the rival communist ideology and overrun by Soviet military power served as the glue holding together America-led alliances and structures, including NATO and financial bodies of the period.

Much of this has changed since the 1990s. The great motivator—the threat of communism—that enabled a smoothly functional and cohesive form of international liberalism has receded. The exclusive liberal order has become globalized, which, through the extremely rapid pace of inclusion of new members, has drained the system of the efficiency that once characterized it.

There are many theories that try to explain the decline of American global clout and the liberal order. To this should be added the rise of challengers.

China and, to a lesser degree, Russia are undoubtedly the primary challengers. China in particular could be a necessary rival. Without a large and competitive competitor in the field, the hope for a successful and continuous US-led liberal order, with its various treaties, bargains, and alliances, would be futile.

The 1990s and early 2000s, the era of American unilateralism, showed that when acting alone, America loses prestige and creates rifts among its allies. When faced with all-encompassing enemies, the US-led order operates more smoothly.

China appeared at a crucial time: just when liberal internationalism was experiencing crisis and needed motivation to persevere. The Russian threat is no longer sufficiently great to unite Westerners and America-allied Asian democracies, but China is. It represents a challenge in that it assists many states around the globe that hold America in contempt for its unipolarity. Those states use China to improve their bargaining positions.

We are living through a period of transition. There is talk of China's imminent victory over the US, but there are also upbeat sentiments in the collective West to the effect that the China challenge is of only short-term significance. The sides are testing each other and gearing up for stiffer competition. This does not mean a direct military clash will take place, but it does not preclude proxy wars in third-party countries, primarily in the Indo-Pacific region.

China-US competition will also increase the pace of regionalization of the international system. Some might even argue that we are witnessing the emergence of new spheres of influence.

The China challenge is fundamental for other reasons as well. Unlike the Soviet Union, China operates from within the order upheld by the US. This makes it difficult for Washington to build an immediate coalition against Beijing, as too much blowback, both economic and geopolitical, is likely to follow for America and its allies. But "operating from within" also makes China vulnerable, as it has to adhere to rules when pressured collectively and consistently.

The China challenge is about something greater as well. It has shown it can harness modernity. Progress, which was once deemed an asset peculiar to the West because it was thought to be the direct result of liberal norms, has been harnessed by illiberal China.

Illiberal states headed by China now have a movement of their own. Illiberalism is being elevated to the level of a new ideology. Surprisingly, this is a boon for the US, its motivations, and its ability to restructure the world order lest it lose influence because of inactivity or the pursuit of unipolarity. Casting competition from a rival in [ideological terms](#) is an important component in generating American resolve. This happened during the Cold War and in the Bush era, when the crusade against terrorism was announced.

Though denigrated as unstable, modern illiberalism, with its trappings of modern technology, is more resilient and could prove to be a longer-term challenge than communism. The failure to deliver on its promises killed the communist dream, but an authoritarian failure to deliver might not bring down the illiberal order as quickly as some might think. It is essentially the rise of a counter-Enlightenment in which the primacy of the state is back and democratic bickering is considered time-consuming and pointless.

The necessary China challenge will help the US keep and restructure its alliance system. Threats to the US in Eurasia will persist and even increase. As this unfolds, so will the logic of alliance-building. Eventually, powerful China will help mend trans-Atlantic ties. It could even be argued that in the longer term a certain rapprochement with Russia might take place. This would be short of luring Moscow into a full-blown alliance against the Chinese, but the Kremlin would welcome the chance to be more maneuverable in its foreign policy. After all, with the fixation on the West now gone, no one in Moscow wants a new geopolitical fixation on China.

America's failures are often exaggerated. The US, despite losing wars and facing resistance from within its alliances, has managed to preserve its omnipotence. This position undoubtedly causes jealousy, attempts at balancing by other powers, and even outright hostility, but the scholarly trend toward describing American power as on the wane could be as incorrect as an assertion of an unchanged continuity in Washington's geopolitical stature.

With China as a competitor, the US could revitalize its pursuit of a liberal order. The latter might expand as in the 1990s, but consolidation in democratic lands is likely to follow. For the US to operate in a unipolar manner would be more damaging than when it faces rivals. China could make the US operate within the boundaries of the liberal order as much as it did in the Cold War era. This brings respect from its democratic peers and shows the necessity to work with Washington.

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