

WHY CHINA'S RISE WILL CONTINUE

Wang Wen

A FEW American scholars have blindly forecast recently, “The End of China’s Rise”, “China Is a Declining Power.” When Chinese scholars hear this, many smile wide, suppressing chuckles. To them, these erroneous end-of-China slogans only reveal knee-jerk jealousy, and nothing more.

After all, these blowhard oracles are only displaying their raw ignorance. They are not worth refuting. This is why Chinese scholars have not spent a nickel’s worth of free advice to disabuse Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, who published long articles on these topics in *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy* in late 2021. Over the past 20 years, there have been a slew of distorted remarks concocted about China by American scholars, which includes, for instance, the work of David Shambaugh or Gordon G. Chang’s *The Coming Collapse of China* (2001). Each time, they were

vigorously countered by Chinese scholars. This time, the Chinese intellectual community is obviously remaining calm and confident.

However, American intellectuals should not be entertaining these highly deceptive viewpoints. They should instead be brighter and far more sophisticated. Especially if they are to postulate points for policymakers, businesses, and the American public to negotiate properly with China. Predicting China’s decline carries similar risks as predicting its collapse. Both deviate from China’s common sense with strategic misjudgments. Any theoretical analysis should not go against common sense. China’s rise is irreversible. Its rise is not unhelpful to American interests. Nor is it frightening. Instead, either ignoring or demonizing the rise of China is extremely worrying. It misses the ball entirely—and China is all about playing ball.

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Photo: Guiliver Image

Binge-building as China’s signature take on infrastructure development

THE BASICS OF CHINA’S SUSTAINED RISE

The inertia of China’s development over the past four decades of reform and opening has made the country’s future development trends less difficult to predict. Many strategists who know how to invest in China usually look sinecure development tracks in the Five-Year Plans, Party Congress Reports, and government work reports. Even those who doubt the Communist Party document cannot avoid the following three basic facts that underpin China’s continued rise.

The first basic fact is this: all Chinese people seek a better life. This is the

driving force behind sustained rise. Compared with the time of former President Mao Zedong, Chinese people are no longer willing to endure poverty for revolutionary ideals. Pursuing better material benefits and spiritual enjoyment has become the biggest national dream of China since the era of Deng Xiaoping in 1978. It also presently carries the broadest national consensus. On his first day in office in 2012, President Xi Jinping declared that the people’s desire for a better life is the goal of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

China is now firmly the world’s second-largest economy, compared with

1978 when it was one of the poorest countries in the world. This growth is tangible everywhere across the country. For example, China's urban housing per capita is only 39 square meters, but this is five times that of the 8.1 square meters in 1978. This is still less than two-thirds that of Americans (about 65 square meters). Also, the average Chinese owns just 0.21 cars per person, a fifth as many as Americans. China's urbanization rate is only 57 percent, compared with 82 percent in the United States. The average annual consumption of consumer goods in China is about \$4,600, only a quarter of that in the United States.

Other statistics are more illuminating. As of 2021, China had about 600 airports, while the United States had more than 13,500. In China, there are still a billion citizens who have never flown in the sky. And 200 million Chinese still do not have western toilets in their homes, using basic squat toilets instead. Only 4 percent of Chinese have a college education, compared with about 25 percent in the United States.

However, in the first 20 years of the twenty-first century, China created 200

million new middle class citizens. The world today witnesses with wide-eyes China's prosperity through the high-rise buildings of Shenzhen and Shanghai, particularly Pudong district. But it should not be forgotten that Shenzhen and Pudong were poor places 20 years ago. In fact, many parts of China today resemble these two places from before they developed. These other parts of the country will change too, soaring to the clouds. Common sense tells us that as long as diligent Chinese people want to eat better, live better, and dress better, this will ensure that their personal dreams are gradually realized. The translation? China will have another 200 million middle class residents by 2035. The volume of the world's second-largest economy cannot be the upper limit of China's development.

Certain Western naysayers need to think hard about this. Some will question whether China can introduce policies to sustain this effervescent growth. This is the second basic fact that Americans struggle to grasp: the continuity of Chinese policy. The policy of reform and opening up, established during Deng Xiaoping's reign, continued well under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao,

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and thrives today under Xi Jinping. The difference is that some adjustments have been made based on realistic challenges as times changed dramatically. For example, the one-child policy was adhered to for more than 30 years. With the emergence of an aging population, the policy has been changed to a two-child and three-child policy under Xi Jinping. On the basis of lifting 800 million people out of absolute poverty, China is nurturing rural revitalization plans. After establishing policies that put science and technology as the primary productive forces, China is carrying out policies for independent power in science and technology. This is successfully being implemented despite facing the technological blockades from the United States.

In the wake of the real estate bubble, China has implemented the policy of "no speculation in housing." It has also instituted a pilot property tax to ensure that prices remain stable over a period of five years. Moreover, China became the world's largest recipient of foreign capital for the first time in 2020. It did so by gradually advancing financial opening-up measures while ensuring financial stability.

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These reforms and measures aimed at gradual opening were skillfully set in motion in accordance with the actual conditions of state policies established during the Deng Xiaoping era. Chinese leaders are constantly alert and self-aware. They do not have a sense of crisis to prevent from losing their country. On average, every two months, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee (25 people in total), as the highest decisionmaking body, will collectively study the situational landscape. In 2021, collective learning included eight themes, covering the digital economy, blockchain, and biosafety. During each study session, Xi stressed the importance of meeting the needs of the people. All Chinese people know that the Chinese path towards 2035 and 2050 must meet the needs of the people. Sure, the path is twisty, muddy, and bumpy. But the direction is certain.

Can external forces stop the pursuit of a better life and interrupt the continuity of Chinese policy? No outside force dares to invade China. This is the third element of basic common sense. To put this into historical perspective, Iran's rise after the 1979

Islamic Revolution was interrupted by the Iran-Iraq War. The invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was the beginning of the Soviet Union's last spasm and eventual decline. Many contented that the Afghan war in 2001 was the point at which American hegemony fell.

In this same 40-year stretch, China was the only major economy that remained uninvolved in a war. Instead, China reaped the growing peace dividend, just as the United States did in the first half of the twentieth century when it moved away from World War I and World War II. China has meanwhile developed and invested in state-of-the-art aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and intercontinental missiles. However, unlike the United States—which has hundreds of military bases overseas—China has kept a precise balance between not waging war and preventing foreign invasion.

At present, if the province of Taiwan declares independence, the Mainland will deploy military force. Beijing will not hesitate to be an enemy of any external forces to help defend the Taiwan Province, which is presently the biggest risk for sparking an armed conflict in

the region. This tests the wisdom of the Chinese people. It also informs the wisdom and rationality of the whole world, especially Americans, to mitigate and prevent risks. China is doing its best to avoid incidents similar to the Ukraine

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crisis in the Taiwan Strait, but it must also resolutely defend China's core interests and national unity. In August 2022, the reaction to U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan fully demonstrated this resolve.

Based on these facts, the likelihood of China's rise ending any time soon is quite low.

FIVE MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT

The basis for speculating about the end of China's rise rests upon this salient detail: the continuous decline of China's GDP growth rate over the past decade. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, China's average annual GDP growth was about 10.4 percent, but it dropped to 7.7 percent in the second decade. It is estimated to fall to around 5 percent in the third decade. But remember, China's GDP base is increasing. A slower growth rate does not mean a lower increment. For example, China's

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The first misjudgment is to regard the decline in China's GDP growth rate as an economic recession. In fact, even with a 5 percent growth rate in the third decade of the twenty-first century, China is still one of the fastest-growing major economies. It is likely to overtake the United States as the largest economy in 2030.

Since 2012, China has been fighting corruption. More than 200 officials at or above the provincial and ministerial levels have been convicted for corruption. More than 600,000 officials were punished. Some have even been sentenced to death. In the "pre-modernized" society, corruption was often the lubricant of economic growth. Some officials took bribes to relax regulations or speed up project approvals. However, with the modernization of state governance, China needs a clean political environment. The people's war against anti-corruption has greatly reversed China's economic inertia, which used

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to revolve around power and money. While its ledgers show GDP growth rate is declining, it is also abundantly clear that popular support for the party is mounting.

Since 2017, China has defined "three tough battles," which entail preventing and defusing major risks, accurately eliminating poverty, as well as mitigating and managing pollution. Like a physical examination to cure a disease, China is committed to healthy economic development. Of course, one should not deny economic problems. Additionally, the Chinese experience since Deng Xiaoping has involved resolving problems as the driving force for sustained economic growth and social prosperity.

The second misjudgment is to regard the bankruptcy of some large private enterprises in China as market economy stagnation. As a matter of fact, the bankruptcy and reorganization of major private enterprise groups—such as Anbang, HNA and CEFC, or the current rectification of Evergrande—demonstrates that the country's economic policy is not about "promoting communism," as some American media said.

This is about regulating the disorderly expansion of capital in accordance with the law.

In China, the legal operation of private companies (such as Huawei, Tencent, Alibaba, and ByteDance) is strictly protected by law. Over the past decade, China has registered more than 10,000 new market players every day. The prosperity and bankruptcy of private enterprises is a normal economic law in and of itself. The implementation of laws governing labor, property, as well as civil and commercial matters, reflect the legal efforts of the Chinese people to maintain ownership rights. A stark case in point: during the COVID-19 outbreak, the Chinese government rescued the people at all costs. When the pandemic first broke out, the death rate per million was the lowest in the entire world. China also exported 50 percent of the masks it produced, including also 20 percent of ventilators, and 60 percent of its COVID-19 vaccines to the rest of the world. This testifies to the Chinese people's respect for life. This is a fact that everyone must admit.

The third misjudgment is to regard the centralized power as a “state dicta-

torship.” Some American scholars are in the bad habit of using models of fascism and Soviet communism to evaluate China. Summing up the experience of the CPC over the course of the past 100 years is not easy. Still, it boils down

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to this: the authority of the Central Committee and leadership of the CPC is the strongest guarantee for the effective governance of 1.4 billion Chinese people. This means managing a diverse society, numerous nationalities, and complex regions.

Americans should appreciate this. After all, the first paragraph of Article IV of the Ameri-

can Constitution reads: “each state should give complete trust and respect to the public bills, records and judicial procedures of other states.” In this respect, why do Americans often have no basic trust and respect for China's governance process? Every year, the Pew Research Center in the United States makes a global adjustment of people's satisfaction with their government. In it, China is ranked above 80 percent, which is among the highest in the world. China is not the Soviet Union, much less Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan. On the contrary, Chinese policymakers are constantly wary of a return to autocracy.

They define China's future in its constitution as a “prosperous, democratic, and civilized country.”

The fourth misjudgment is to regard the complaints made by certain members of China's elite as a sign of backsliding. Elites often monopolize the right to speak on national development. However, Washington's political complaints often make people lose sight of the romance, quietness, and peace of the American Midwest. Similarly, in China, some middle- and high-income groups will complain about the high tax, the introduction of property taxes, and the strictest “eight regulations” in history, which lasted for nearly 10 years.

But the implementation of the policy of “two guarantees and three assurances” (the guarantees being food and clothing, and the assurances referring to compulsory education, basic medical care, and housing safety) for low-income people is often neglected. The society owned, governed, and enjoyed by the one percent that Stiglitz criticized is something against which China is firmly on guard. Measured by household income, China's Gini coefficient

has shown a trend of fluctuation and decline, from the peak of 0.491 in 2008 to 0.468 in 2020. To control and narrow the gap between the rich and poor, China still faces tremendous challenges. This will not be achieved without com-

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plaints, but these should be articulated with solutions and proper courses of action.

The fifth misjudgment is to regard patrols of Taiwan as the harbingers of imminent invasion. Both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to China, with which most of the world agrees. It is central to the bilateral consensus in the three China-U.S. communiques. The

conundrum is that the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government of Taiwan is taking risks by slicing its way to *de jure* independence with the help of the United States. I have repeatedly told my American friends not to touch the Taiwan red line, just as Mao Zedong warned MacArthur not to cross the Military Demarcation Line in 1950. No Chinese citizen will allow Taiwan to become independent.

There are additional bellwether signals that the Taiwan issue cannot be dragged on indefinitely. No great power can truly rise with territorial disunity.

China will not give up its efforts for a final peaceful settlement of the cross-strait issue until Taiwan makes the Mainland use its fully operational forces. If the West misjudges the determination of the Chinese people, it will pay a greater price than it did on the Korean battlefield in the 1950s. It will suffer more than on the battlefields of Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. It will awaken stunned, much like it was with the issue of Crimea in 2014.

CHINESE (NOT U.S.)-LED DEVELOPMENT

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, China has more control over the pace of development than ever before. Unlike Japan, China cannot be lectured and manipulated by the United States. China is not Iran either, which pursues a completely anti-American strategy. China maintains its power against the United States, and can defend its core interests without being led by Washington's heavy-handed will.

An important example of this transpired in the previous presidential administration. Trump, Pompeo, and others constantly provoked China with the most vicious language. Except for

the necessary counter-measures and criticisms made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the top decision-making level of China never countered the "Trumpkins" with harsh words. China diplomatically avoided provoking the

Americans more seriously. This prevented China and the United States from falling into a new "Cold War" trap.

Of course, the United States should not take any chances. If cases similar to the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999, or the 2001 collision between Chinese and American military aircraft over the South China Sea were to happen again, the

United States would surely face a strong response. That would be a disaster for Sino-American relations, and a tragedy for humanity. In this regard, the Washington Post reported that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley had a phone call with highest-ranking officers in the Chinese military and promised not to launch an attack on China. If true and genuine, such military rationality and calmness should be appreciated.

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U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's policy toward China, the world has seen Beijing maintain its ability to strike back at others with anti-sanction measures. If the United States imposes 25 percent tariffs on Chinese goods, China will impose 25 percent tariffs on American goods. Should the Americans close the Chinese Consulate General in Houston, China will reciprocate by closing the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu. If Washington sanctions Chinese officials, Beijing will retaliate against American officials.

China is an opponent of the same order as the United States. I agree with Dr. Henry Kissinger's latest statement that no country has the potential to dominate the world. There should be no illusions that the United States can dominate China.

China's global strategic goal is still to maintain the stability of the international order. According to Professor Alastair Iain Johnston of Harvard University, China is a country that likes to maintain the status quo. It has joined most international treaties and organizations since World War II. China has acceded to some international treaties, but the United States has not, such as the International Convention on the Law of the Sea. From others—like the Arms Trade Treaty that China recently joined—the United States withdrew.

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China is the biggest supporter of the Paris Agreement in climate change. Overall, China and the United States maintain a highly consistent strategy on climate change, as well as combating money laundering, terrorism, and cyber-crime.

During the 2008 global financial crisis, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came to China, hoping to get the two nations to "help each other." Secretary Clinton asked China to increase its holdings of U.S. Treasury bonds, and China did. Since

2013, China has promoted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategy, even inviting the United States to join it many times. Now, it is also advocating cooperation with the Build Back Better World (B3W) program—an American economic initiative designed to serve as an alternative to BRI. Total U.S. assets in China have exceeded \$2.2 trillion. The average annual profit margin of American companies in China remains above 15 percent. In fact, the Federal Reserve Board, which controls more than \$600 billion, has repeatedly vowed to increase investment in Chinese capital markets. From this point of view, it is not in line with the facts if we exaggerate the strategic differences between China and the United States.

There is also an often-overlooked fact; in no legal documents or official reports does the Chinese government set to surpass other countries as its strategic goal. In 2014, both the IMF and the World Bank released a study stating that China's economic size had surpassed that of the United States in purchasing power parity terms. However, the Chinese government did not accept this statement. On the contrary, China has always stressed that it will always be a developing country. It will not accept G2 membership, or join the rich countries club. No other country in the history of the world has ever been as self-disciplined as China with its rise. China declares that it will never seek hegemony, that it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons, and that it will never invade other countries. It has consciously written these declarations into its constitution. Indeed, over the course of the past 500 years of globalization, is there any country whose rise has been more civilized than China's daring ascent?

RESHAPING SINO-AMERICAN COMPETITION

Human civilization is approaching the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. What kind of a competition do China and the United States

need if they are to advance global civilization in their great power competition?

In my opinion, China and the United States should first compete to solve the dilemma of global development. The United States was once regarded as a "lighthouse state," making significant contributions to economic recovery, financial stability, social development,

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and technological innovation of various countries after World War II. But just as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt worried, the United States in the twenty-first century has failed to promote national health, the creation of new enterprises, and the continuous improvement of employment opportunities in the world. In the eyes of many Chinese people, the fall of the American myth began with the 2008 financial crisis. The Trump presidency, especially the failure of COVID-19 prevention and control, have dealt a full blow to the long-established "national identity" of the United States. According to the September 2020 Pew Research Center global survey, the U.S. national image and that of then-President Donald Trump degraded from poor to abysmal. This was directly due to the American government's poor response to the pandemic. Only 16 percent believed Trump would "do the right thing in world affairs."

By contrast, the successful hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games accelerated the rise of China's national reputation. Since then, high-speed rail construction, e-commerce, e-payments, poverty eradication, corruption and pollution prevention and control have greatly boosted the attractiveness of China's development model to developing countries. This has made China's path an alternative solution to the global development dilemma. Just as in the third wave of democratization in the 1970s, dozens of countries took the United States as an example to promote their political transformation. In the 2020s, Africa and Asia also witnessed the germination of learning from China's hard-won experience. In the eyes of many countries, the democratic transformation of the past half-century has completely changed the fate of a small number of countries. Yet the majority of poor countries are still poor. However, China's counter-attack road from poverty to wealth makes China appear competitive enough to the U.S. model.)

In 2021, America led the G7 in launching the B3W strategy to support infrastructure construction

in developing countries. This revealed America's first recognition of BRI as an effective undertaking. It reflected the rational response the United States was forced to make to compete with the Chinese model. The essence of the

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competition between China and the United States to solve the global development dilemma lies in this question: which country can offer more effective solutions to world development? More importantly, which country can best manage the convenience of life, the well-being of its people, social stability, and economic recovery?

Second, China and the United States should compete to deal with global climate change.

Climate change has reached a critical moment. More and more climate scientists believe that if the global mean temperature continues to rise without taking substantive and effective measures, the twenty-first century could be the last complete century of human civilization. Many do not rule this out. The climate crisis will also be accompanied by other sharp crises: energy, financial, and social. These will be of much greater magnitude than the suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

By the end of 2020, some 130 countries had pledged to reach carbon neutrality over the next 20 to 40 years. This included the United States by 2050 and China by 2060. Yet the world has obviously overestimated the prospects for cooperation between the two countries in addressing climate change. China and the United States account for about 45 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, and can provide more than 60 percent of the world's financial resources. If the two countries continue to maintain tensions over geopolitics, economics and trade, regional security, and other fields, their joint efforts to deal with climate change will be severely damaged. This will test U.S. President Joe Biden's China policy. Already, the Biden administration has tried to direct cooperation, competition, and confrontation between two nations to work in the service of humanity's future.

On this matter, I spoke with China's climate envoy Xie Zhenhua. China very much welcomes the Biden administration's effort to lead the United States back to the framework of Climate Governance. However, it is also concerned about the back-and-forth of U.S. climate policy in the post-Biden era. China and the United States should lead the world to compete in the field of climate change. This should include (but not be limited to) providing climate remote sensing satellites for Africa, building low-carbon

demonstration zones for Southeast Asia, and installing energy-saving lamps for small island countries in the South Pacific. The two need to provide credit and funds for more green infrastructure, energy, transportation, and technology for the world. The world expects the China-U.S. competition to make global cooperation on climate change more practical and lasting.

Moreover, China and the United States should compete to promote global technological innovation. Developing intelligent technology is like opening "Pandora's box." Will human beings become stronger or weaker in the face of artificial intelligence technology? Towards new prosperity, or extinction? These will be the ultimate tests of humanity's thinking.

On November 17th, 1944, President Roosevelt asked Dr. Vannevar Bush about the future role of science in peacetime. Here is a moving line from that conversation: "Before us are new frontiers of thought, and if we use them with the same vision and courage and drive that we used to fight this war, we can create jobs and lives that are fuller and richer." Eight months later, Dr. Bush responded to the president's inquiry with a report titled, "Science: The Endless Frontier." The report became the great document that drove the development of science and technology in the United States

after World War II. Seventy-five years later, when the report was published in Chinese, hundreds of Chinese scientists and IT entrepreneurs praised it and debated what China could learn from it. The race for the "endless frontier" is already underway in China and the United States.

However, for Chinese social science scholars like me, the scope of the "competition for endless frontiers" between China and the United States is

probably broader and more complex than it was in the days of Dr. Bush. The United States is not necessarily losing this competition. Nor is China destined to win it. More precisely, as long as one country loses, the other cannot win. Just as with COVID-19, as long as the virus is not under control, it is impossible to say who is winning the war against the pandemic. This is myopic thinking, and we truly both need to put our heads together to correct facts, and forge win-win initiatives.

We can deduce this much: 2021 is a landmark year in the history of Sino-American relations. The United States has ended its vacillation on China's strategic positioning since the twenty-first century commenced. It formally regards

China as a "primary competitor" in a hope to maintain American hegemony. The word "competition" is not rejected by Chinese policymakers. However, they do not understand it in the same way the American policymakers do. In

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2018, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "if there is competition between China and the United States, it should also be a healthy and positive one." In January 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping hinted at the prospect of competition

between China and the United States in a video speech at Davos. President Xi said, "we should promote competitions based on fairness and justice, and carry out competitions that seek to catch up with each other and improve together, rather than engage in a fight that attacks each other."

If the two countries have to compete, I hope it will not be a boxing match. I hope it will be more like golf. Whoever wins will need to support global civilization, and development of the world. From this point of view, the real test of the two countries' competitive civilization has just begun. At this new starting point, talking about the end of China's rise is incredibly shortsighted—if not altogether blind. ●