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## The Chinese Decade

**The coronavirus has given Beijing a strategic opportunity — but one that might not last.**

By Ross Douthat

It is quite extraordinary that a pandemic originating in a Chinese province, a disease whose initial cover-up briefly seemed likely to deal a grave blow to the Communist regime, has instead given China a geopolitical opportunity unlike any enjoyed by an American rival since at least the Vietnam War.

This opportunity has been a long time building. Across the 2000s and early 2010s, China's ruling party reaped the benefits of globalization without paying the cost, in political liberalization, that confident Westerners expected the economic opening to impose. This richer-but-not-freer China proved that it was possible for an authoritarian power to tame the internet, to make its citizens hardworking capitalists without granting them substantial political freedoms, to buy allies across the developing world, and to establish beachheads of influence — in Hollywood, Silicon Valley, American academia, the NBA, Washington, D.C. — in the power centers of its superpower rival.

Eventually, America responded to all this as you would expect a superpower to react: It elected a China hawk who promised to get tough on Beijing, to bring back jobs lost to the China shock, and to shift foreign policy priorities from the Middle East to the Pacific. But there was one small difficulty: This hawk was no Truman or Reagan, but rather a reality-television mountebank whose real attitude toward China policy was, basically, whatever gets me re-elected works. A mountebank, and also a world-historical incompetent, who was presented with exactly the challenge that his nationalism was supposed to answer — a dangerous disease carried by global trade routes from our leading rival — and managed to turn it into an American calamity instead.

So China has won twice over: First rising with the active collaboration of naïve American centrists, and then consolidating its gains with the de facto collaboration of a feckless American populist. Four months into the coronavirus era, Xi Jinping's government is throttling Hong Kong, taking tiny bites out of India, saber-rattling with its other neighbors, and perpetrating a near-genocide in its Muslim West. Meanwhile America is rudderless and leaderless, consumed by protests and elite psychodrama and a moral crusade whose zeal seems turned entirely inward, with no time to spare for a rival power's crimes.

Furthermore, Trump's likely successor is a figure whose record and instincts and family connections all belong to the recent period of American illusions about China. Joe Biden speaks more hawkishly than he did five years ago, but the very thing that makes him effective as a foil to Trump — his promise of a return to Obama-era normalcy — also makes him an unlikely person to drastically re-evaluate the choices that gave China its advantages today.

If you were scripting a historical moment when a rising power overtakes a fading hegemon, the cascade from establishment naïveté through Trumpian folly to the coronavirus disaster would be almost too on-the-nose. And foreign policy hands who fear a "Thucydides trap" — a scenario where a rising and an established power end up, like Athens and Sparta, in a war — have good reasons to be nervous about how the current combination of Chinese ambition and American decline might play out in, say, the Taiwan Strait.

But there is another way to look at things. It's possible that we're nearing a peak of U.S.-China tension not because China is poised to permanently overtake the United States as a global power, but because China itself is peaking — with a slowing growth rate that may leave it short of the prosperity achieved by its Pacific neighbors, a swiftly aging population, and a combination of self-limiting soft power and maxed-out hard power that's likely to diminish, relative to the U.S. and India and others, in the 2040s and beyond.

Instead of a Chinese Century, in other words, the coronavirus might be ushering in a Chinese Decade, in which Xi Jinping's government behaves with maximal aggression because it sees an opportunity that won't come again.

That aggression has inward and outward manifestations. The inward form is the attempt to lock in Han pre-eminence in China by forcibly suppressing non-Han birthrates, so that population decline doesn't lead to swings in ethnic power. The outward form is what you see in Hong Kong and might see with Taiwan soon — an attempt to reach greedily for Greater China goals because the odds of success look better now than in the further future.

If this is China's true strategic calculus, it won't make the 2020s any less dangerous. (History is thick with reckless decisions made because great powers felt that long-term trends had turned against them.) But it should condition the U.S. policy response, whether under a President Biden or a future Republican with more capabilities than Trump, toward a balance between resolve and caution, hawkishness and restraint.

If we show too much indecision and weakness, or just too obvious a desire for the pre-Trump status quo, then Beijing's escalation will continue, and the risks of war will rise.

But if we find a way to contain China for a decade, the Chinese century could be permanently postponed.

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