

The New Cold War on China

John Bellamy Foster

On March 24, 2021, a high-profile article proclaiming “There Will Not Be a New Cold War” appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship publication of the Council on Foreign Relations, the principal think tank for U.S. grand strategy. The author, Thomas Christensen, a professor of international affairs at Columbia

“the Trump administration basically declared a cold war on China.” But, no New Cold War would actually materialise, since Washington with Biden could not see an aggressive power but one interested in economic competition.

University and former deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs in the George W. Bush administration, went so far as to acknowledge that “the [Donald] Trump administration basically declared a cold war on China.”¹ Nevertheless, no New Cold War, Christensen optimistically indicated, would actually materialise, since Washington under Joe Biden would presumably back away from Trump’s extreme policies toward China given its “vital position in the global value chain.”² Beijing could not be seen as an aggressive power in ideological or geopolitical terms, but was simply interested in economic competition.

Yet, what Christensen’s analysis excluded was any mention of the imperialist world system, crowned by U.S. hegemony, which is now threatened by China’s seemingly inexorable rise and pursuit of its own distinctive sovereign project.³ In this respect, the Trump administration’s prosecution of a New Cold War on China was no anomaly, but rather the



Beijing has continually sought to defuse the tensions and avert the new Cold War that many are predicting. Credit: [“US-China competition can avoid confrontation: China Daily editorial.”](#) China Daily, October 28, 2018.

¹ ↪ Thomas J. Christensen, “There Will Not Be a New Cold War,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 24, 2021. On the Council on Foreign Relations and the Biden administration, see Laurence H. Shoup, “The Council on Foreign Relations, the Biden Team, and Key Policy Outcomes,” *Monthly Review* 73, no. 1 (May 2021): 1–21.

² ↪ Christensen, “There Will Not Be a New Cold War.” Most of Christensen’s arguments rely on the unspoken assumption that a New Cold War would take exactly the same form as the old Cold War. This is of course a misnomer. History does not repeat itself in that way.

³ ↪ For a persuasive depiction of the prevailing imperialist order, see Cheng Enfu and Lu Baolin, “Five Characteristics of Neoimperialism,” *Monthly Review* 73, no. 1 (May 2021): 22–58.

inevitable U.S. response to China's rise and the end of Washington's unipolar moment. Just as the United States declared a Cold War against the Soviet Union and China in the 1940s and '50s, as part of a grand strategy to secure its global hegemony in the immediate post-Second World War era, today it is declaring a New Cold War on China in the interest of maintaining that same imperial hegemony.

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Indeed, days before Christensen's Foreign Affairs article went to print declaring that there would be no New Cold War, the Biden administration made it clear that it not only intended to continue the New Cold War, but to accelerate it, pushing it to greater heights. This was evident in the first high-level bilateral talks between the United States and the Peoples' Republic of China following the election of Biden as U.S. president, held on March 18, 2021, in the Captain Cook Hotel in downtown Anchorage, with U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken and national security advisor Jake Sullivan sitting across from China's director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi and Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi.⁴

In the week prior to this high-level meeting, Washington had set the stage, signalling through its actions its intention to promote a hyper-aggressive Cold War 2.0 directed at China. Thus, on March 12, Biden met with the heads of state of Japan, India, and Australia, representing the new Quad military-strategic alliance led by the United States, widely seen as an attempt to construct an Asian analogue to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Quad issued a joint statement the entire subtext of which was enmity toward China.⁵ On the same day, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission blacklisted five Chinese companies including Huawei.⁶ Late on March 16, less than two days before the bilateral talks with China were set to begin, the Biden administration renewed sanctions against twenty-four officials of the Chinese government, in response to the suppression of dissent in Hong Kong.⁷

In a break with diplomatic protocol, Blinken started off the March 18 bilateral talks in Anchorage by bluntly stating that he and the U.S. secretary of defence Lloyd Austin had just returned from a meeting with their counterparts in Japan and Korea, two U.S. leading military allies that share many of Washington's concerns with regard to China. Washington's goal, he said, was "to advance the interests of the United States and to strengthen the rules-based international order." He then entered into a direct challenge to Beijing, referring to "deep concerns with actions by China, including in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, cyberattacks on the United States and economic coercion toward our allies. Each of these actions threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability." The United States was ready not only to be competitive, and in some areas "collaborative," with China, but also to be strongly "adversarial" where necessary.

Sullivan followed up by pointedly referring to Biden's hosting of "the Quad leaders' summit" the previous week, and the Quad military alliance's security concerns in the Indo-Pacific, thereby foregrounding the warlike pact being formed in Asia against Beijing. He added that U.S. allies and partners had expressed "areas of concern" with respect to China's use of "economic and military coercion" in its "assaults on basic values" and that the United States would welcome "stiff competition" with China, but that it was also, he intimated, prepared for full-scale conflict.⁸

⁴ ↪ ["How It Happened: Transcript of the U.S.-China Opening Remarks in Alaska,"](#) NIKKEI Asia, March 19, 2021.

⁵ ↪ ["Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: 'The Spirit of the Quad,'"](#) White House, March 12, 2021.

⁶ ↪ ["US-China Relations in the Biden-Era: A Timeline,"](#) China Briefing, May 13, 2021.

⁷ ↪ ["US Sanctions 24 China and Hong Kong Officials Ahead of Talks,"](#) S. News, March 17, 2021.

⁸ ↪ "How It Happened."

Yang responded by insisting that China firmly upheld “the United Nations-centred international system and the international order underpinned by international law, not what is advocated by a small number of countries [as] the so-called rules-based international order.” “The Chinese people,” he said, “are wholly rallying around the Communist Party of China. Our values are the same as the common values of humanity. Those are: peace, development, fairness, justice, freedom, and democracy.” He stressed the quite different conceptions of democracy represented by China and the United States. Contrasting Beijing’s foreign policy to that of Washington, both historically and in the present, he stated:

We do not believe in invading through the use of force, or to topple other regimes through various means, or to massacre the people of other countries.... The United States has exercised long-arm jurisdiction and suppression and overstretched [its] national security through the use of force or financial hegemony, and this has created obstacles for normal trade activities, and the United States has also been persuading some countries to launch attacks on China.... With [respect to] Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan, they are [each] an inalienable part of China’s territory. China is firmly opposed to U.S. interference in China’s internal affairs. We have expressed our staunch opposition to such interference, and we will take firm actions in response.

Yang insisted that Washington had no basis to lecture Beijing on human rights given its own record, as symbolised by the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement. “The United States itself does not represent international public opinion, and neither does the Western world.” With respect to “cyberattacks,” he stated, “whether it’s the ability to launch cyberattacks or the technologies that could be deployed, the United States is the champion in this regard. You can’t blame this problem on somebody else.”

Wang, in turn, indicated that

China urges the U.S. side to fully abandon the hegemonic practice of wilfully interfering in China’s internal affairs.... And in particular on the 17th of March [the day before the meeting], the United States escalated its so-called sanctions on China regarding Hong Kong, and the Chinese people are outraged by this gross interference in China’s internal affairs and the Chinese side is firmly opposed to it.... Just the other day, before our departure, the United States passed these new sanctions. This is not supposed to be the way one should welcome his guests [in these bilateral talks taking place in Alaska], and we wonder if this is a decision made by the United States to try to gain some advantage in dealing with China.⁹

Blinken retorted by referring again to questions raised by U.S. allies and partners with respect to China’s actions in violation of the rules-based international order. He emphasised Washington’s determination to build strategic alliances directed at China. Sullivan then touted U.S. technological prowess and its landing, a couple weeks before, of another rover on Mars, working with its allies in Europe—a comment designed to deflate in advance China’s planned landing of its rover Tianwen [Questions to Heaven] 1 on Mars, to take place in May. He harshly criticised the Chinese delegation for its “lectures” and “long, winding statements.”¹⁰

Yang responded that he had “felt compelled to make this speech because of the tone on the U.S. side,” in which the U.S. diplomats chose “to speak to China in a condescending way from a position of strength,” with all the appearance of

⁹ ↪ “How It Happened.”

¹⁰ ↪ “How It Happened.”

having carefully “planned” and “orchestrated” this confrontation. Wang followed by returning to Blinken’s veiled reference to Japan and South Korea regarding their concerns about coercion from China. He indicated that it was not clear whether this was actually coming from these countries themselves or was simply a U.S. projection.¹¹

“For an astonished press, witnessing the [entire] exchange,” as Thomas Wright, a Brookings Institution senior fellow, observed shortly after in the Atlantic, it “was like being present at the dawn of a new cold war.”¹² Indeed, as David Stilwell, former assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs under Trump, and Dan Negrea, senior associate of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, wrote ten days later in the National Interest: “Thirty years after the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the world finds itself in a new cold war” centred on China.¹³

Washington continued in the following weeks with its aggressive attacks on China:

- March 22: The United States, along with the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Canada, issued sanctions on four Chinese officials over alleged human rights violations in Xinjiang.¹⁴
- March 24: The foreign ministers of NATO’s thirty states declared that they were ready to oppose the “authoritarian threats to the rules-based international order,” in cooperation with their allies and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific, thereby singling out China as a common foe.
- March 25: A week after the bilateral talks, Biden in a press conference declared that “Xi [Jinping, the president of the People’s Republic of China], doesn’t have a democratic—with a small ‘d’—bone in his body” and referred to him as an “autocrat.”¹⁵
- March 28: U.S. trade representative Katherine Tai announced that the United States had no intention of removing the tariffs that Trump had imposed on Chinese goods imported to the United States, affecting a majority of Chinese exports to the United States, and designed to get multinational corporations to delink their value chains from China.¹⁶
- March 30: The Biden administration unilaterally accused China of “genocide and crimes against humanity,” presenting this formally in its annual human rights report, though lacking any credible evidence to support its charges.¹⁷
- April 8: Washington blacklisted seven Chinese supercomputing firms.¹⁸
- April 30: The Biden administration arranged a public meeting between official U.S. State Department representatives and their Taiwan counterparts. This broke with the agreement with China, going back to the 1970s—known as the

¹¹ ↪ “How It Happened.”

¹² ↪ Thomas Wright, “[The U.S. and China Finally Get Real with Each Other](#),” Atlantic, March 21, 2021.

¹³ ↪ David Stilwell and Dan Negrea, “[Wanted: Alliance Networks for a New Cold War](#),” National Interest, March 28, 2021.

¹⁴ ↪ “US-China Relations in the Biden-Era.”

¹⁵ ↪ “Biden: China’s Xi Jinping Doesn’t Have ‘a Democratic...Bone in His Body,’” USA Today, March 25, 2021.

¹⁶ ↪ “Trade War: Biden Administration Not Ready to ‘Yank’ China Tariffs, but Open to Talks,” Forbes, March 28, 2021; “Biden Has Left Trump’s China Tariffs in Place,” CNN, March 25, 2021; John Bellamy Foster and Intan Suwandi, “[COVID-19 and Catastrophe Capitalism](#),” Jus Semper, September 2020.

¹⁷ ↪ “In Report, Biden Administration Formalizes Genocide Declaration in China,” Seattle Times, March 30, 2021. To say that charges of genocide are false is not of course to deny that repression has taken place. But the issue remains the former. Claims of Chinese “genocide” in Xinjiang constitutes one of the most extreme instances of the Big Lie propaganda technique in modern times. Although repression has been exercised by China in its Xinjiang Autonomous Region in response to terrorist activity in the region, the evidence points to a reality far removed from anything resembling genocide. See “Xinjiang: A Report and Resource Compilation,” Qiao Collective, September 1, 2020; “[The Xinjiang Genocide Determination as Agenda](#),” Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, April 27, 2021; Kim Petersen, “Does the West Repeating Claims That China Committed Genocide in Xinjiang Reify It?,” Dissident Voice, February 22, 2021. Even the Council of Foreign Relations has noted that what indications of repression there are hardly fit the definition of genocide in the Geneva Convention. John B. Bellinger III, “China’s Abuse of the Uighurs: Does the Genocide Label Fit?,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 3, 2021. For an informative discussion of conditions in China today, see Keith Lamb (interviewed by Alexander Norton), “[All the Questions Socialists Have About China but Were Too Afraid to Ask](#),” Challenge, May 24, 2021.

¹⁸ ↪ “US-China Relations in the Biden-Era.”

Three Communiqués—according to which the United States would avoid all official contacts with Taiwan, which China considers to be part of One China, with two governing systems.¹⁹

- May 5: The Group of Seven core capitalist nations, consisting of the United States, Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Canada, presented itself as the global guarantor of the “rules-based international order,” strongly criticising China over its domestic affairs.²⁰
- May 7: In a UN Security Council meeting chaired by Wang Yi, Blinken criticised China and Russia for flouting international law, and while not actually referring to China by name, which he has repeatedly accused of genocide, he stated: “Asserting domestic jurisdiction doesn’t give any state a blank check to enslave, torture, disappear, ethnically cleanse their people, or violate human rights in any other way.”²¹
- May 26: (1) Biden ordered U.S. intelligence agencies to investigate the laboratory theory of the origins of SARS-CoV-2 in China; (2) Kurt Campbell, coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs on the National Security Council, Biden’s Asia tsar, declared that “the period that was broadly described as engagement [with China] has come to an end.”²²

In its first one hundred days, the Biden administration wasted no time in ratcheting up U.S. military pressure on China. From January to April 2021, U.S. military activity along China’s borders increased sharply, with incursions of U.S. military ships in Chinese-claimed territorial waters rising by 20 percent and U.S. military aircraft incursions in Chinese air space growing by 40 percent. In March, Germany deployed a warship in the South China Sea aimed at China, with Washington welcoming “Germany’s support for a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific.” In April, the United States sent an additional carrier strike group to bolster its forces in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Britain is sending its Queen Elizabeth II carrier strike group into the South China Sea in a tilt to the Indo-Pacific. The United States currently has four hundred military bases and some 375,000 command personnel (military and civilian) in the Indo-Pacific encircling China, including more than eighty thousand troops stationed in Japan and South Korea.²³

Viewed in this overall context, the confrontation between Washington and Beijing in Anchorage, rather than simply constituting an angry exchange between irate diplomats, can be seen as revealing the basic contours of the U.S. imperial grand strategy with respect to China, along with the nature of China’s strategic response. Washington’s insistence on what it calls a “rules-based international order,” in contrast to Beijing’s advocacy of a broad UN-based order of sovereign states underpinned by international law (traditionally referred to as the Westphalian system), is more than a dispute over phraseology. Rather, it stands for the current U.S. strategy of compelling China to comply with the hegemonic political-economic order imposed by an alliance of major powers under U.S. leadership, so as to “lock in” current imperial power relationships.²⁴ As China has indicated, if the “rules-based order” is “set by the US alone, then it cannot be called international rules, but rather ‘hegemonic rules.’... If it refers to rules set by the US and a handful of other countries, then

¹⁹ ↪ “China Slams U.S.-China Meeting as Biden Flexes New Diplomatic Muscle Against Beijing,” S. News, May 3, 2021; Peter Beinart, “Biden’s Taiwan Policy Is Truly, Deeply Reckless,” New York Times, May 5, 2021; Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2018), 2; Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 26.

²⁰ ↪ “G7 Foreign and Development Ministers’ Meeting: Communiqué,” European Union External Action, May 5, 2021.

²¹ ↪ “U.S., Russia, China Poke Each Other at UN Security Council,” Reuters, May 7, 2021.

²² ↪ “Biden Orders Review of COVID Origins as Lab Leak Theory Debated,” Reuters, May 27, 2021; “Biden’s Asia Czar Says Era of Engagement with China Is Over,” Bloomberg, May 26, 2021.

²³ ↪ “China Says US Increasing Military Activity Directed at It,” Associated Press News, April 29, 2021; “U.S. Military Activity on China’s Borders Has ‘Sharply Increased’ Since Biden Took Charge,” Morning Star, April, 6, 2021; Sam LaGrone, “S. Carrier Strike Group, Amphibious Warships Massed in South China Sea as Regional Tensions Simmer,” USNI News, April 9, 2021; Rick Rozoff, “International Law vs. Rules-Based International Order: China, Russia Call for UN Security Council Summit,” Anti-Bellum, March 23, 2021; “The US Has a Massive Presence in the Asia-Pacific,” The World, August 11, 2017.

²⁴ ↪ John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 97–98, 144, 207, 234, 273; Joe Biden, “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2020); Stephen M. Walt, “China Wants a Rules-Based International Order, Too,” *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2021. On China and the Westphalian system, see Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2017), 590.

it cannot be called international rules either, but rather ‘clique rules,’ which run counter to the principle of democracy and won’t be accepted by the majority of countries in the world.”²⁵

In particular, the United States and the other capitalist economies at the apex of the world system, notably the triad of the United States/Canada, Western Europe, and Japan, are committed to preserving not only the hegemonic institutions forged in the Cold War era, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, coupled with the system of U.S.-dominated military alliances, but also what is referred to as the post-Westphalian system or liberal international order that emerged during the era of “naked imperialism” from the 1990s to the present, made possible by the vacuum created by the Soviet Union’s disappearance from the world stage and the resulting U.S. “unipolar moment.”²⁶ During the post-Cold War era, a continuing stream of “humanitarian interventions” in the affairs of other states have been carried out by the United States and its allies, generating an era of perpetual war—beginning with the expansion of U.S. (and NATO) power in Eastern Europe with the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, as well as military interventions in the Middle East and Africa—in violation of the sovereignty of states.²⁷ This new aggressive imperial posture has been legitimated in terms of the “responsibility to protect” and the promotion of “democracy” and “humanitarian” values—as these are determined by the United States and other core capitalist powers, standing in for the “rules-based international order.”²⁸

The strategic objective of the New Cold War on China from the standpoint of the United States and its allies is not so much to contain China economically, politically, and militarily, which is not possible, but rather to find ways to constrain it, making it impossible for it to effect changes in the global order despite its emerging power position. The new imperial grand strategy is thus designed to replicate on a global scale (and in the thermonuclear age) the famous “gunboat diplomacy” imposed on the Qing dynasty by the leading imperial powers during China’s “Century of Humiliation,” stretching from the Opium Wars up to the Second World War.²⁹ This was symbolised above all by the British destruction of the emperor’s Summer Palace in 1860, designed to humiliate the Qing dynasty. In 1900, during the so-called Boxer Rebellion (Yihetuan Movement), the great powers invaded China in what was referred to as the Eight-Nation Alliance (then consisting of Britain, the United States, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Japan, and Russia), imposing their authority on the Qing dynasty and forcing further unequal treaties on the country.³⁰ Part of the justification given at the time was that China needed to conform to international rules of trade and conduct.³¹

²⁵ ↪ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on May 6, 2021,”](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 6, 2021.

²⁶ ↪ See John Bellamy Foster, *Naked Imperialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006).

²⁷ ↪ Diana Johnstone, *Fool’s Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO, and Western Delusions* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002); Jean Bricmont, *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006); Horace Campbell, *Global NATO and the Catastrophic Failure in Libya* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013).

²⁸ ↪ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on May 6, 2021.”](#)

²⁹ ↪ Matt Schiavenza, “How Humiliation Drove Modern Chinese History,” *Atlantic*, October 25, 2013; Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 2, 269–70. Chinese narratives do not emphasise the notion of the Century of Humiliation, since this history is well known and painful, preferring to allude to it indirectly, or referring to the Opium Wars. The emphasis is rather placed on rejuvenation. The notion of China’s Century of Humiliation is, however, a central coordinate of U.S. military discussions of China. See Elizabeth C. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3; Major Daniel W. McLaughlin, “[Rewriting the Rules: Analyzing the People’s Republic of China’s Efforts to Establish New International Rules](#),” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs: The Department of the Air Force’s Professional Journal for America’s Priority Theater*, March 8, 2021.

³⁰ ↪ S. Stavrianos, *Global Rift* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 309–32; Dong Wang, “The Discourse of Unequal Treaties in Modern China,” *Pacific Affairs* 76, no. 3 (2003): 399–425. It would be wrong, as Wang Hui has argued, to say that modernisation in China was propelled by the shock of the Opium Wars. Rather, China was already undergoing its own modernisation process. Wang Hui, *The End of Revolution* (London: Verso, 2009), 126–29.

³¹ ↪ Ironically, this imperialist notion was perhaps best expressed by George Bernard Shaw in his drafting of *Fabianism and Empire: A Manifesto by the Fabian Society*, where Shaw declared that Britain was correct in its imperialist wars designed to enforce “international rights of trade and travel.... If the Chinese themselves cannot establish order in our sense, the Powers must establish it for them.” George Bernard Shaw, *Fabianism and Empire: A Manifesto of the Fabian Society* (London: Grant Richards, 1900), 44–47.

In an analogous fashion to the treatment of China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China today, according to current U.S. imperial grand strategy, is to be economically, geopolitically, and militarily constrained by a broad alliance of imperial powers. The object is ultimately that of bringing about the demise of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and tightly binding China to the imperial order of global monopoly-finance capital, while reducing it to permanent subaltern status. The principal means of achieving this will be a system of unequal treaties—the rules-based international order—imposed by a coalition of great powers, with the United States at the top.³²

The chief mechanism for defeating China was spelled out in 2017 by Harvard foreign policy analyst Graham Allison, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, in his book *Destined for War: Can America Escape the Thucydides Trap?*, a work highly praised by Biden, former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger, and former CIA director and former commander of the U.S. Central Command David Petraeus. In Allison's words:

US forces could covertly train and support separatist insurgents. Fissures in the Chinese state already exist. Tibet is essentially occupied territory. Xinjiang, a traditionally Islamic region in western China, already harbours an active Uighur separatist movement responsible for waging a low-level insurgency against Beijing. And Taiwanese who watch Beijing's heavy-handedness in Hong Kong hardly require encouragement to oppose reunification with this increasingly authoritarian government. Could US support for these separatists draw Beijing into conflicts with radical Islamist groups throughout Central Asia and the Middle East? If so, could these become quagmires, mirroring the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan where U.S.-supported mujahideen "freedom fighters" bled the Soviet Union?

A subtle but concentrated effort to accentuate the contradictions at the core of Chinese Communist ideology... could, over time, undermine the regime and encourage independence movements in Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. By splintering China at home and keeping Beijing embroiled in maintaining domestic stability, the US could avert, or at least substantially delay, China's challenge to American dominance.³³

All of this is now New Cold War policy.³⁴ Moreover, by attacking China with allegations of "genocide" and "crimes against humanity" in relation to its internal populations, the United States is able to justify its New Cold War on China, including its actual hybrid warfare, combining an array of political, economic, financial, technological, cyber, and more traditional overt and covert military means.³⁵

The "Rules-Based Order" and New U.S. Imperial Grand Strategy

The foremost U.S. theorist of the rules-based international order is G. John Ikenberry, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, whose work has had a strong influence on the Biden administration.³⁶ In a famous 2004 essay on "Liberalism and Empire," Ikenberry—although not denying that the U.S. past and present had often been characterised by imperial domination (even going so far as to

³² ↪ See John Bellamy Foster, "China 2020: An Introduction," *Monthly Review* 72, no. 5 (October 2020): 1–5.

³³ ↪ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 224–25.

³⁴ ↪ Vijay Prashad and Jie Xiong, "Why Xinjiang Is Emerging as the Epicenter of the US War on China," *People's Dispatch*, April 17, 2021; "Wipe Out China': US-Funded Uyghur Activists Train as Gun-Toting Foot Soldiers for Empire," *Grayzone*, March 31, 2021.

³⁵ ↪ On the bogus, evidence-less "genocide" and "crimes against humanity" charges directed at China with respect to Xinjiang, and the relation of this to U.S. imperial grand strategy, see Max Blumenthal, "Xinjiang Shakedown: U.S. Anti-China Lobby Cashed in on 'Forced Labor' Campaign that Cost Uyghur Worker Their Jobs," *Grayzone*, April 30, 2021; Gareth Porter and Max Blumenthal, "US State Department Accusation of China 'Genocide' Relied on Data Abuse and Baseless Claims by Far-Right Ideologue," *Grayzone*, February 18, 2021.

³⁶ ↪ Michael Hirsh, "Why Liberal Internationalism Is Still Indispensable and Fixable," *Foreign Policy*, December 5, 2012.

cite leading left revisionist historians such as William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, and Joyce Kolko)—nonetheless argued strongly against those in U.S. foreign policy circles who believed that the United States should openly comport itself as an empire.³⁷ A more effective hegemonic strategy, Ikenberry argued at the time, would be to utilise the unipolar moment to establish a rules-based international order that would secure U.S. and Western global domination as a fait accompli well into the future, even in the face of eventual declining U.S. power.³⁸

As China's historic rise became more apparent, Ikenberry wrote a 2008 essay for *Foreign Affairs* on "The Rise of China and the Future of the West," in which he insisted that the "globalised capitalist system" and the Western liberal international order could only be preserved if direct U.S. hegemony gave way to the rules-based order enforced by the collective weight of the United States together with its major allies.³⁹ In this way, an "American-led liberal hegemonic order" could be secured indefinitely.⁴⁰ As U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton put it, it was essential to prevent a more "multi-polar world" from emerging by instituting in its stead a "multi-partner world," a set of U.S.-led alliances and partnerships that would guarantee Washington's continued dominance in the twenty-first century.⁴¹

This conception of a rules-based order as means of organising a global counterrevolution found strong bipartisan support in the United States and, most significantly, within the Pentagon. For Trump's secretary of defence James N. Mattis (known as Mad Dog Mattis), speaking to cabinet secretaries and the joint chiefs of staff on July 20, 2017, "the greatest gift the greatest generation left us was the rules-based postwar international order," which he illustrated by pointing to "color representations of NATO, capital markets and various trade deals to which the United States is signatory," standing not for international law—certainly not the UN system—but rather for the U.S./NATO-dominated liberal international and strategic order.⁴²

Thus, central to the whole conception of a hegemonic rules-based international order, according to Ikenberry, is the surmounting of a UN-based system geared to the sovereign equality of states and a polycentric world, and which includes China and Russia as permanent members of the Security Council. Instead, the rules-based international order is meant to codify the changes introduced in the 1990s, establishing the "contingent character of sovereignty," such that the great powers have a "a right—even a moral obligation—to intervene in troubled states to prevent genocide and mass killing. NATO's interventions in the Balkans and the war against Serbia," he wrote, "were defining actions of this sort."⁴³ The doctrine of humanitarian imperialism based on "the right to protect" thus became key to the definition of the rules-based international order.

³⁷ ↪ John Ikenberry, "Liberalism and Empire: Logics of Order in the American Unipolar Age," *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 4 (2004): 611; Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 297; William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Dell, 1972); Gabriel and Joyce Kolko, *The Limits of Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

³⁸ ↪ See "[Australia's Security and the Rules-Based Order](#)," Lowy Institute, March 12, 2021.

³⁹ ↪ John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 32–34.

⁴⁰ ↪ Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 281.

⁴¹ ↪ Hillary Clinton (speech, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, July 15, 2009), quoted in Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 325.

⁴² ↪ Robert F. Worth, "[Can Jim Mattis Hold the Line in Trump's War Cabinet?](#)," *New York Times Magazine*, March, 26, 2018. Trump's policy from the start was to engage in a New Cold War with China, while reaching a détente with Russia. In the end, the bipartisan result was to attack both China and Russia, treated as a two-headed monster, but with the New Cold War with China as the principal directive of the administration. Although Mattis, as Trump's secretary of defence, sought to weaponise the notion of the rules-based international order, Trump himself did not subscribe to the notion—and was strongly opposed not only by Mattis but also by Blinken, Biden's now secretary of state, on that basis. Steve Bannon, Trump's White House advisor, referring to Mattis's presentation, reportedly stated: "if you stood up and threatened to shoot [Trump] he couldn't say postwar rules-based international order." "[Australia's Security and the Rules-Based Order](#)"; Antony Blinken, "Bannon's Vision of the World Isn't What Makes America Great," *Foreign Policy*, February 28, 2017; John Bellamy Foster, [Trump in the White House](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), 32, 51–52, 84–85.

⁴³ ↪ Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 247; Samuel Moyn, "Soft Sells: On Liberal Internationalism," *Nation*, October 3, 2011, 43.

This notion of the contingent character of sovereignty was clarified by Richard Haass, former deputy secretary of state in charge of policy planning in the George W. Bush presidency and current head of the Council on Foreign Relations, who

Although the United States has recently complained of Chinese aggression and its growing global threat, due to its one foreign military base located in Djibouti in Africa, Washington as the global sheriff has up to a thousand military bases spanning the entire globe, many of these surrounding China.

explained that the shift to more limited conceptions of sovereignty reflected the new hegemonic view that “sovereignty is not a blank check. Rather, sovereign status is contingent on the fulfilment by each state of certain fundamental obligations, both to its own citizens and to the international community. When a regime fails to live up to these responsibilities or abuses its prerogatives, it

risks forfeiting its sovereign privileges including, in extreme cases, its immunity from armed intervention.”⁴⁴ And when it comes to armed intervention, as Haass famously argued elsewhere, the United States is the self-appointed “sheriff” of the international order, while the remainder of the triad is the “posse.”⁴⁵ Although the United States has recently complained of Chinese aggression and its growing global threat, due to its one foreign military base located in Djibouti in Africa, Washington as the global sheriff has up to a thousand military bases spanning the entire globe, many of these surrounding China.⁴⁶

The doctrine of a rules-based international order has been used to justify the continual U.S./NATO military interventions and U.S.-sponsored coups directed at populations in five of the six inhabited continents since the 1990s—all in the name of the promotion of democracy and human rights.⁴⁷ “Liberal internationalism,” Ikenberry, its strongest intellectual defender, indicates in his latest work, “is implicated in almost constant military interventions during the era of American global dominance,” while under neoliberalism, the economic counterpart of this has become a mere “platform of rules and institutions for capitalist transactions,” invariably favouring the powers-that-be.⁴⁸

The People’s Republic of China: An Emerging Sovereign Superpower

Commenting in January 1850 on the first stirrings of the Taiping Revolution (1850–64) in China, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels pointed to the birth of “Chinese socialism.” European reactionaries with their armies, they indicated, might someday arrive at the frontiers of China only to “find there the inscription”:

*République Chinoise,
Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*⁴⁹

⁴⁴ ↪ Richard Haass, “Sovereignty: Existing Rights, Evolving Responsibilities” (lecture, Georgetown University, January 4, 2003), quoted in Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 249. On Haass, see Foster, *Naked Imperialism*, 97–106.

⁴⁵ ↪ Foster, *Naked Imperialism*, 115–16; Richard Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States After the Cold War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1997), 54, 93.

⁴⁶ ↪ Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2018); Nick Turse, “Does the Pentagon Really Have 1,180 Foreign Bases,” *Guernica*, January 9, 2011; “US General Warns China Is Actively Seeking to Set Up an Atlantic Naval Base,” *The Hill*, May 7, 2021; John Reed, “Surrounded: How the U.S. Is Encircling China with Military Bases,” *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2013; Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 213.

⁴⁷ ↪ Ikenberry has recently argued that the new opening to so-called humanitarian interventions is itself built on the Westphalian system of the sovereignty of states. But this goes against the widespread sense that these interventions, which have led to continual warfare under U.S. auspices since the 1990s, constitute in fact a fundamental change in the international order, identified with the notion of the rules-based international order. Perhaps because of the conflict that this poses for Ikenberry’s own conception of liberal internationalism, he has, in his latest work, largely abandoned the term rules-based order that he himself did so much to promote, and that is now associated with a system of liberal-interventionist hegemony enforced by the United States and its allies. Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*, 298.

⁴⁸ ↪ Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*, 245, 253, 276.

⁴⁹ ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 266–67, 672–73. Compare Samir Amin, “China 2013,” *Monthly Review* 64, no. 10 (March 2013): 25. On the Taiping Revolution, see John Newsinger, “The Taiping Peasant Revolt,” *Monthly Review* 52, no. 5 (October 2000): 29–37.

Marx and Engels's extraordinarily prescient insight was a century premature. Six years after they wrote this, the British and French armies attacked China again in the Second Opium War, taking advantage of the disorder created by the Taiping Revolution to extend the European imposition of unequal treaties on China. Here they built on a process initiated by the British in the First Opium War in 1839, at the end of which China had been compelled to cede Hong Kong to Britain in the Treaty of Nanking in 1842.⁵⁰ The Opium Wars introduced the Century of Humiliation in China that was to last until the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949 and the founding of the People's Republic of China.⁵¹ The period of humiliation is seen as having finally ended with Mao Zedong's speech "The Chinese People Have Stood Up," on September 21, 1949, his opening address at the First Plenary of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. On that occasion, Mao declared:

*The Chinese people, comprising one quarter of humanity, have now stood up. The Chinese have always been a great, courageous and industrious nation; it is only in modern times that they have fallen behind. And that was due entirely to oppression and exploitation by foreign imperialism and domestic reactionary governments. For over a century our forefathers never stopped waging unyielding struggles against domestic and foreign oppressors, including the Revolution of 1911 led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, our great forerunner in the Chinese revolution.... We have closed our ranks and defeated both domestic and foreign enemies through the People's War of Liberation and the great people's revolution, and now we are proclaiming the founding of the People's Republic of China.... Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up.... Our national defence will be consolidated and no imperialists will ever again be allowed to invade our land.... Hail the founding of the People's Republic of China!*⁵²

Today, the People's Republic of China remains focused—through what is now seen as a century-long struggle, to culminate in 2049—on overcoming the remaining traces of what Mao called the "history of insult and humiliation" going back to the Opium Wars.⁵³ In doing so, it has initiated a course known as "China's Dream," enunciated by Xi in November 2012, but reflecting the entire path of Chinese postrevolutionary development. "Only by upholding socialism with Chinese characteristics," Xi has declared, "can we bring together and lead the whole Party, the whole nation and the people of all ethnic groups in realising a moderately prosperous society by the centenary of the CPC in 2021 and in turning China into a prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious socialist country by the centenary of the People's Republic of China in 2049."⁵⁴ To this has been added the longer term objective of creating an ecological civilisation and a beautiful China, with ecology seen as "the most inclusive form of public wellbeing."⁵⁵ The first centenary goal, that of 2021, is now seen as fulfilled. But the second centenary goal still needs to be achieved. The centenary of the People's Republic of China, 2049, is to mark via "socialist modernisation" the "national rejuvenation" of China, having finally triumphed over the century or more of foreign and domestic oppression that produced the great divergence between China and the West.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ ↪ Marx was perhaps the foremost European critic of the Second Opium War. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Colonialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 112–25, 212–25, 231–49; Samir Amin, "Forerunners of the Contemporary World: The Paris Commune (1871) and the Taiping Revolution (1851–1864)," *International Critical Thought* 3, no. 2 (2013): 159–64.

⁵¹ ↪ Amin, "China 2013," 25–26.

⁵² ↪ Mao Zedong, "The Chinese People Have Stood Up!" (opening address, First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Beijing, September 21, 1949), available at china.usc.edu.

⁵³ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, 37; Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 14; Allison, *Destined for War*, 122.

⁵⁴ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, 6–22; Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 2, 269.

⁵⁵ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 6, 20, 25, 417–24.

⁵⁶ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 20; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Driven by this sovereign historical project, China has remained an enemy of imperialism and a strong, unwavering defender of the Westphalian system of state sovereignty, not only in terms of the original Peace of Westphalia and the UN Charter, but also backing the anti-imperialist objectives of the Third World Bandung Conference of 1955, which, based partly on V. I. Lenin's principle of the self-determination of nations, asserted the equal rights of developing countries, and the importance of a polycentric world.⁵⁷ Xi articulated this anti-imperialist stance in 2017:

From the principles of equality and sovereignty established in the Peace of Westphalia over 360 years ago to international humanitarianism affirmed in the Geneva Convention more than 150 years ago; from the four purposes and seven principles enshrined in the UN Charter more than 70 years ago to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence championed by the Bandung Conference over 60 years ago, many principles have emerged in the evolution of international relations and have been widely accepted. These principles should guide us in building a community of shared future for [hu]mankind. Sovereign equality has been the most important norm governing state-to-state relations over the past centuries, and the cardinal principle observed by the United Nations and its agencies and institutions. The essence of sovereign equality is that the sovereignty and dignity of all nations, whether big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, must be respected; their internal affairs brook no interference, and they have the right to independently choose their social system and development path.⁵⁸

China's anti-imperialist stance is tied up with its whole developmental path. Its extraordinary advance, including the more than quadrupling of its economy since the late 1970s and the recent elimination of absolute poverty, has been dependent not only on its growing integration into the world economy, but also, and no less importantly, on the limitations that it has been able to impose on the capitalist nature of that integration.⁵⁹ Crucial in this regard is the existence of a number of key socialist-oriented elements distinguishing the Chinese system: (1) social ownership of land, which in the countryside is still partially managed collectively by village communities; (2) state control of money and finance; (3) state ownership of key sectors of industry, including banks, allowing for high rates of investment; and (4) a planning system, complementing the market economy, directed by the CPC by means of five-year plans. There is a continuing emphasis within the CPC on Marxist and dialectical conceptions, which are seen as keys to the fulfilment of China's sovereign project of the creation of a modern, developed "socialist democracy" with Chinese characteristics. A core element in Chinese revolutionary theory, practice, and conception of socialist democracy is the mass line, or the notion of "from the masses to the masses."⁶⁰ Together, these traits mark China as a postrevolutionary society that is neither entirely capitalist nor entirely socialist, but that is following an overall developmental path that holds open the possibility of continued movement toward the latter.⁶¹

⁵⁷ ↪ Vijay Prashad, "[The Internationalist Lenin: Self-Determination and Anti-Colonialism](#)," MR Online, August 10, 2020.

⁵⁸ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 2, 590.

⁵⁹ ↪ Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West," 26; "What Does It Mean to Eradicate Absolute Poverty?," Qiao Collective, December 3, 2020; "China's Economic Development in 40 Years," China Daily, accessed June 4, 2021.

⁶⁰ ↪ Amin, "China 2013," 14–28; Foster, "China 2020"; Wang Hui, *China's Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2016), 140; Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 2, 311–17, 352–58. Xi indicates in the foregoing pages his admiration for Robert Heilbroner's *Marxism: For and Against* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980). See also Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 96–98.

⁶¹ ↪ Amin, "China 2013," 26; Paul M. Sweezy, "Post-Revolutionary Society," *Monthly Review* 32, no. 6 (November 1980). China's political-economic system is sometimes referred to as "state capitalist." Amin adopted this term, for the sake of argument, as a useful but somewhat misleading designation, recognising that it tended to oversimplify. For Amin, state capitalism was a necessary phase in the development of socialism for developing countries. What mattered was the particular character of state capitalism, which in the Chinese case was seen as part of the long route to socialism. More recently, the "state capitalist" designation for China has been embraced by the Council on Foreign Relations. Others, such as Lowell Dittmer, an East Asian specialist at Berkeley, refer to China's present reality, particularly in the Xi era, as "an adoptive Chinese form of state socialism, with limited (and closely monitored) capitalist characteristics." Neither characterisation quite captures the complexity of the current Chinese social formation, which the Chinese leadership refer to as a society in the primary stage of socialism. See Amin, "China 2013," 20; Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 36–37; Lowell Dittmer, "Transformation of the Chinese Political Economy in the New Era," in *China's Political Economy in Xi Jinping's Epoch*, ed. Lowell Dittmer (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2021), 6–8.

The internal dynamism of the Chinese economy, its highly developed infrastructure, and its low unit labor costs (often entailing extreme exploitation in export industries) has attracted enormous investments by multinational corporations, allowing China to become the new workshop of the world in what has been called the Third Industrial Revolution, based on digital technology.⁶² Due to the strength of its planning system, China was able to retain a larger portion of overall surplus value generated than in the case of most developing countries, and to create partnerships with multinationals that allowed it to acquire advanced technology.⁶³

While still a poor country, with per capita income one-fifth that of the United States, China has managed to move to the forefront of what Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, has called the Fourth Industrial Revolution characterised by new technologies that are designed to fuse the physical, digital, and biological worlds.⁶⁴ It is China's technological prowess, its financial controls that limit the power of the U.S.-dominated imperial order, and its geopolitical assertion of a One China, which includes recapturing its historic territory, that have most disturbed the core capitalist countries. The United States and its chief imperial allies would like to see China tightly bound within what Thomas Friedman called the "golden straitjacket" of the prevailing globalised order, which is designed to place constraints on the political and economic freedoms of nations (particularly those outside the core), preventing them from going against the existing rules and relations of global power.⁶⁵

Part of the present rejuvenation of China's historical role as a civilisation, as conceived by Beijing today, is the resurrection of the ancient Silk Road, a trade route that extended from China to South Asia and the Middle East all the way to Europe. In fall 2013, Xi proposed his vast One Belt, One Road project (known in the West as the Belt and Road Initiative) involving building a Silk Road Economic Belt, extending from South and Central Asia to the Middle East and Europe, coupled with a Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road that would connect China to Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe via various sea lanes. In 2017, China further extended its Maritime Silk Road to Latin America. China was to be the principal initiator and founder of One Belt, One Road, providing the seed money, but other countries were invited to join with the financing and planning of infrastructure. Thirty-nine countries in sub-Saharan Africa, thirty-four in Europe and Central Asia, twenty-five in East Asia and the Pacific, eighteen in Latin America and the Caribbean, seventeen in the Middle East and North Africa, and six in South Asia are now affiliated with One Belt, One Road. All told, the Belt and Road Initiative encompasses 139 countries and close to two-thirds of the world population. As the Council of Foreign Relations noted to its chagrin, "Xi Jinping invites heads of state to China for Belt and Road forums, contributing to the view that Beijing is an economic power on par with the United States."⁶⁶

At the Anchorage meeting between the top U.S. and Chinese diplomats in March 2021, Blinken lauded the efforts of the present U.S. administration at gaining control of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁷ His Chinese counterparts were no doubt unimpressed. In May 2021, the United States has seen over six hundred thousand deaths from COVID-19, a mortality

⁶² ↪ John Bellamy Foster and Robert McChesney, *The Endless Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 155–83; Intan Suwandi, *Value Chains* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019), 42–67.

⁶³ ↪ Peter A. Petri, "Technological Rivalry," in *China 2049*, ed. David Dollar, Yiping Huang, and Yang Yao (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2020), 278–301; Amin, "China 2013," 24, 27.

⁶⁴ ↪ Klaus Schwab, *Shaping the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (New York: Currency, 2018); "Comparing United States and China by Economy," *Statistical Times*, May 15, 2021; "How It Happened"; Xi, *The Governance of China*, 523.

⁶⁵ ↪ Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Anchor, 2000), 101–11. For China, its historic territory includes not only Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, but also islands in the South China Sea that were long recognised as belonging to China. See "[Historical Support for China's South China Sea Territorial Stance](#)," *Maritime Executive*, August 10, 2019.

⁶⁶ ↪ David Sacks, "Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 24, 2021; Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, 315–24; Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 2, 544–49.

⁶⁷ ↪ "How It Happened."

rate of over 1,800 deaths per million. In contrast, China had experienced less than five thousand deaths, a rate of 3 deaths per million.⁶⁸ The Chinese government years before, at the highest level, had stressed the dangers of new pandemics emerging, and was consequently far better prepared. In 2017, Xi declared before the UN General Assembly: “Pandemic diseases such as bird flu, Ebola and Zika have sounded the alarm for international health security. The WHO [World Health Organization] should play a leadership role in strengthening epidemic monitoring and in sharing information, best practices and technologies. The international community should step up support and assistance for public health in African countries and other developing countries.”⁶⁹ Confronted with the emergence of a novel coronavirus (SARS-COV-2), the Chinese government made various false steps (at the local level) in the initial days, followed by the Chinese state attacking the epidemic full force, in cooperation with the population, which self-mobilised on the model of “people’s revolutionary war,” involving self-organisation in localities. This revolutionary mobilisation in response to the epidemic was a resounding success, pointing to the internal solidity of the polity and the vast potential revolutionary protagonism of the Chinese people.⁷⁰

China has declared that its COVID-19 vaccines constitute a “public good.” Already by April 2021 China had donated and exported 48 percent of its domestically manufactured vaccines—donating the vaccines to eighty countries and exporting to forty. The United States and United Kingdom had meanwhile shared their vaccines with zero countries, while insisting on maintaining international patent restrictions on the vaccines. By June 1, China had shared (exports and donations) 323.3 million doses of their COVID-19 vaccines with other countries, the European Union had shared 143.8 million doses, mostly with other developed countries, and the United States had shared a mere 7.5 million doses.⁷¹ Washington has accused China of “vaccine diplomacy” and has suggested that it is breaking the rules-based order to “outcompete the United States and its allies” in the international market for COVID-19 vaccines.⁷² China has geared up its production of COVID-19 vaccines to around five billion doses a year, most of which it plans to share as an international public good with the developing world.⁷³

China’s Third Revolution and the U.S.-Led Global Counterrevolution

In his October 18, 2017, report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CPC, Xi stated that “the Chinese nation, which since modern times began had endured so much for so long [an allusion to the Opium Wars and the Century of Humiliation], has achieved a tremendous transformation: it has stood up, become better off, and grown in strength; it has come to embrace the brilliant prospects of rejuvenation.”⁷⁴ For those aware of the history of the People’s Republic of China, it was clear that Xi was speaking of the entire revolutionary process of national rejuvenation. Mao famously declared that, with the Chinese Revolution, China had stood up. The Deng Xiaoping era, often referred to as the second era in the process of national rejuvenation, was just as clearly about China becoming better off, through rapid economic development and integration within the capitalist world economy. The New Era, in the period of Xi’s leadership, has been directed toward constructing a strong, self-sufficient, and sustainable Chinese system, aimed at “building a

⁶⁸ ↪ “Reported Cases and Deaths by Country or Territory,” COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic, Worldometer, accessed June 1, 2021.

⁶⁹ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 2, 594.

⁷⁰ ↪ Wang Hui, “Revolutionary Personality and the Philosophy of Victory: Commemorating Lenin’s 150th Birthday,” *Reading the China Dream* (blog), April 21, 2020.

⁷¹ ↪ “Why China’s Vaccine Internationalism Matters,” Qiao Collective, April 8, 2021 [updated June 2021]; “EU Vaccine Exports Outstrip Number of Shots Given to Its Own People,” *Bloomberg*, April 14, 2021; “EU Vaccines: Millions Exported to Rich Countries, Less to Poor Countries,” *Brussels Times*, May 8, 2021.

⁷² ↪ “US Secretary of State Antony Blinken Talks to FT Editor Roula Khalaf,” *Financial Times*, May 4, 2021; “State of the Order: Assessing February 2021,” *Atlantic Council*, March 16, 2021.

⁷³ ↪ “China Close to Producing 5 Billion COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Per Year,” *CGTN*, April 21, 2021.

⁷⁴ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 12.

moderately prosperous society in all respects” by 2021, and “of moving on to all-out efforts to build a great modern socialist country” by 2049.⁷⁵

Each stage in the Chinese Revolution has meant a major shift in the revolutionary process, so that the Mao, Deng, and Xi periods are sometimes referred to as China’s First, Second, and Third Revolutions.⁷⁶ The “principal contradiction” in the New Era (or Third Revolution), the surmounting of which is necessary if China is to achieve its objectives, according to Xi, is the “unbalanced” or uneven and thus “inadequate” nature of Chinese development, characteristic of the capitalist growth model. This is manifested in deepening class inequality, divisions between rural and urban areas, promotion of economic development at the expense of cultural development, and an unsustainable human relation to the environment.⁷⁷ Hence, a socialist-motivated shift toward greater economic equality, national self-sufficiency, ecological civilisation, rural revitalisation, cultural development, and the forging of a “dual circulation” model (designed to reduce China’s dependence on foreign markets and technology) are all seen as crucial to China’s emergence as a “great modern socialist society.”⁷⁸

The CPC leadership has continued to define China as “the world’s largest developing country,” albeit one in “the primary stage of socialism,” thus emphasising its direct connections to the Global South of which it sees itself a part. Its official international stance is dictated by the “five principles of peaceful coexistence,” defined as: (1) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, (2) mutual nonaggression, (3) mutual noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, (4) equality and mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence.⁷⁹ Although China as an emerging global power has been increasingly accused of setting a new agenda and seeking to overturn the existing rules-based international order imposed by the core capitalist states, this, rather than presaging anarchy or “might makes right,” as indicated by Blinken at the March 18 bilateral meetings, has largely taken the form of a strong defence of the concept of sovereign equality, which necessarily goes against the structure of the existing imperial system.⁸⁰

The path forward in China’s Third Revolution will not of course be easy, and what Xi has referred to as the “principal contradiction” in the form of uneven development is evident in vast struggles taking place at all levels in the society—and in China’s external relations.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that China’s Third Revolution has been greeted by the United States and the other core capitalist powers with a combination of disbelief, shock, and anger. Unaccustomed to thinking historically and dialectically, relying on mere formalistic frames of analysis, and believing in the inevitable triumph of capitalism, the dominant ideology in the West has been one quite literally of “the end of history.”⁸¹ The idea that China’s sovereign project would eventually lead to a critical challenge to, rather than absorption within, the existing capitalist and

⁷⁵ ↩ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 12.

⁷⁶ ↩ *Economy*, *The Third Revolution*, 10–12.

⁷⁷ ↩ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 20. The translation in the text here follows an earlier official translation of Xi’s speech, which used the term principal contradiction rather than principal challenge. See Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” *Xinhua*, October 18, 2017, 16.

⁷⁸ ↩ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 20; “What We Know About China’s ‘Dual Circulation’ Economic Strategy,” *Reuters*, September 15, 2020.

⁷⁹ ↩ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 13, 79. In recent years, it has been frequently charged by Western power elites and media that China has instituted predatory loans in Africa and other developing countries, designed to acquire assets from these countries. However, a study at Johns Hopkins University showed the opposite to be true, demonstrating that China is more lenient with respect to lending and conditionalities in interactions with developing countries than Western financial institutions and governments. See Kevin Acker, Deborah Brautigam, and Yufan Huang, “Debt Relief with Chinese Characteristics” (working paper no. 39, China Africa Research Initiative, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, June 2020).

⁸⁰ ↩ “How It Happened.”

⁸¹ ↩ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

imperialist order was thus scarcely entertained in Washington. As Kurt M. Campbell, former assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific Affairs in the Barack Obama administration, and Ely Ratner, Biden's nominee for assistant secretary of defence for Indo-Pacific security affairs, wrote in "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations" in *Foreign Affairs* in February 2018, the notion that "U.S. power and hegemony" would fail to "mould China to the United States' liking" was until recently completely foreign to the U.S. establishment. Even more shocking was the discovery that China's New Era, associated with Xi, would begin to look in many ways more like the revolutionary China of Mao than the reform era of Deng.⁸²

The enraged response of the U.S. power elite to China's undeterred pursuit of its own sovereign project has been to launch the New Cold War centred on China (also encompassing its allies like Russia and Iran). This is now seen in U.S. ruling class circles as a new war for hegemony—though minus any genuine historical analysis, which would require an honest assessment of imperialism past and present. Rather, Allison's *Destined for War*, which directly influenced Biden, drew its supposed historical frame, not from a conception of the capitalist world system, or from an understanding of the imperial imposition of unequal treaties on China. Instead, it turned to a transhistorical law of conflict associated with the "realist" perspective on international relations, derived from Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian of the Peloponnesian War, who wrote in 411 BCE: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable."⁸³

In contrast, from a Marxian perspective, any meaningful assessment of hegemonic transition in the context of the modern world must be seen as a product of the internal dynamics of the capitalist world economy, which has been characterised throughout its history by the imperialism of the core directed at the periphery and by periodic wars over imperial hegemony: the only "answer" that the capitalist system is capable of providing to the question of world power.⁸⁴

Reflecting this logic, the New Cold War on China initiated by the United States seeks to draw together the leading imperial capitalist states in a global alliance aimed at binding Beijing, together with its allies and the entire periphery of the capitalist system, to the rules-based international order controlled by the triad, while at the same time keeping the Chinese economy, the motor of world economic growth, going. China, it is recognised, is too big simply to be conquered, and too big economically to be allowed to fail. What is required, therefore, according to the ruling Washington Consensus, is a counterrevolution unleashed by the reigning powers directed at reimposing a new global set of unequal treaties on China, along with the bulk of the developing world. The object is less to contain than to constrain China. Ultimately, such a strategy is to be backed up by military force. This was what Bill Clinton's secretary of state Madeleine Albright was to call "assertive multilateralism." For Hillary Clinton, speaking at Chatham House on May 6, 2021, it is essential in this context for the United States to "take back the means of production" from China to ensure that the latter is kept in a perpetual subaltern state.⁸⁵

To say that these conditions puts the world's population in an era of almost unprecedented danger would be an understatement. No New Cold War can take place without a nuclear arms race and increased danger of thermonuclear

⁸² ↪ Campbell and Ratner, "The China Reckoning"; Orville Schell, "Crackdown in China: Worse and Worse," *New York Times Magazine*, April 21, 2016.

⁸³ ↪ Allison, *Destined for War*, vii.

⁸⁴ ↪ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World-Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 37–46.

⁸⁵ ↪ Rick Rozoff, "NATO Headquarters: Foreign Ministers of One Billion People Throw Down Gauntlet to China, Russia," *Anti-Bellum*, March 24, 2021; Rozoff, "International Law vs. Rules-Based International Order"; Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff*, 54, 93; Clinton quoted in Danny Haiphong, "Off the Rails: New Report by Corporate-Funded Think-Tank Reveals How Profit-Driven Moteives Drive New Cold War Against China," *Covert Action Magazine*, June 5, 2021.

war. China, whose nuclear warheads are in the low 200s, compared to the 1,400 deployed nuclear warheads of the United States, is seeking to double its number of warheads by 2030. The United States, for its part, is currently committed to spending \$500 billion on its nuclear forces alone over the next decade, \$50 billion a year. This includes \$100 billion on its so-called Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent, a land-based nuclear missile system designed to replace the aging Minuteman III Intercontinental Ballistic Missile system. The Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent missiles will be capable of traveling six thousand miles with greater throw weight and accuracy, each one carrying a warhead twenty times as powerful as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.⁸⁶

The world survived the Cold War. We do not know if it will survive the New Cold War. Twenty-first-century humanity is now faced, in every sphere of its existence, with an inescapable choice: "ruin or revolution."⁸⁷

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⁸⁶ ↪ Jeremy Kuzmarov, "What's Behind the Biden Administration's New \$100 Billion Nuclear Missile System?," Covert Action, March 9, 2021; "Defense Primer: Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) Capabilities," Congressional Research Service, November 10, 2020.

⁸⁷ ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Ireland and the Irish Question (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 142; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Collected Works, vol. 25, 153.

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