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US-China Rivalry in Asia and Africa: Lessons from the Cold War

By Gregg Brazinsky



People in Senegal welcome Chinese leader Xi Jinping during his visit to Dakar on July 21, 2018. (Photo by Xaumem Olleros/AP)

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Summary

- During the Cold War, the United States vied for global influence not only against the Soviet Union but also against China—a rivalry that has reignited in recent years.
- The main theaters for Sino-American competition during the Cold War were Asia and Africa—two regions that are at the center of the contemporary rivalry. Although today’s rivalry is not an exact replay of the Cold War, lessons from the earlier competition offer critical insights into how the new contest between China and the United States may evolve.
- Both countries risk repeating mistakes they made in the earlier period, when overt efforts by Washington and Beijing to strengthen their political and economic influence in neutral countries often alienated the very people they sought to win over.
- The United States can do two key things to move China toward cooperation and pragmatism. First, it can help Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan continue to provide a democratic alternative to the Chinese model that is strong and vibrant.
- Second, if Beijing does choose to moderate its policies, Washington should be ready to do everything it can to reinforce that decision.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report explores the ways Sino-American Cold War competition in African and Asian countries resembles and offers lessons for the contemporary rivalry. It looks at similarities between two dimensions of Sino-American rivalry during the Cold War and today, comparing Cold War-era Chinese and US aid programs with the contemporary economic rivalry and drawing parallels between the countries' contest for political dominance during the two eras. The report was commissioned by the China program at the United States Institute of Peace.

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Xi Jinping speaks at the Johannesburg Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in South Africa on December 4, 2015. The Chinese leader announced tens of billions of dollars of financial commitments to Africa at the summit. (Photo by AP/File)

Introduction

Perhaps the only issue on which there is any semblance of bipartisan consensus in Washington is China policy! That the United States has entered an era of protracted competition with China for global supremacy has become an article of faith among elected officials and policymakers of all political inclinations. Both Democrats and Republicans have, for the past few years, called for tougher measures to check China's efforts to expand its military footprint in Asia, crack down on Chinese theft of American technology and intellectual property, and more carefully monitor Chinese influence activities in the United States and abroad.² The media, along with a diverse array of China experts and academics, now proclaim that the United States is in a “new cold war” with the People's Republic of China (PRC).³

Washington's conviction that Beijing is now a strategic competitor—if not an outright adversary—has grown out of a broader disillusionment with China's political trajectory since the 1990s. During the immediate post-Cold War period, many Americans were convinced that Western liberal democracy was becoming universal.⁴ The Bush and Clinton administrations were optimistic that the United States' former adversary could be transformed through engagement.⁵ Economic integration would lead to a rise in living standards, and the leaders of the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) would realize that only a more open political system could continue to thrive in an age of globalization. In 1997, President Clinton pronounced that “growing interdependence would have a liberalizing effect on China.”⁶ But, of course, this is not what happened. Rather than embracing liberal conceptions of human rights and individual freedom, China took an authoritarian turn, and the state strengthened its control over the economy instead of relaxing it. Beijing’s divergence from Western expectations soon elicited a wave of anxiety and hand-wringing in the United States. It has now become cliché to bemoan the way the United States and its allies “got China wrong.”⁷

This is not the first time a wave of disillusionment and frustration with China has swept over the American policy establishment and media. In 1949–50, after several decades of deep engagement with China and high hopes for the future of the relationship, US officials expressed similar feelings about changing political tides on the Chinese mainland.⁸ American businesses, missionaries, and philanthropic foundations had been very active in China during the years before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. During World War II, American media painted a highly favorable picture of China and its leadership, while President Roosevelt expected a strong, friendly China with an enlarged status in the international community to emerge from the war.⁹ American confidence in the impact of Westernization and liberal ideas on China was reflected in Marion Levy’s 1949 work, *The Family Revolution in Modern China*, which argued that industrialization and other modernizing forces would eliminate China’s traditional social structure and leave it a powerful, modern nation-state.¹⁰

The triumph of the Communist Revolution and the birth of the PRC in 1949 crushed the United States’ dreams for postwar China, however. China’s new leaders rejected American leadership and ideals, and CCP chairman Mao Zedong soon announced that he would lean toward the Soviet Union. Americans were shocked and angered by the communists’ sudden triumph. While the Truman administration temporized about recognizing the new Chinese government, Truman’s opponents in Washington bemoaned the “loss” of China—and blamed the president for it.¹¹ A little over a year after CCP forces conquered the mainland, Mao ordered them to cross the Yalu River and fight United Nations Command forces in Korea, ushering in a brutal three-year war that cemented Sino-American hostility and rivalry in Asia. Americans swiftly came to view the Chinese as fanatical and part of a communist monolith intent on world domination.¹²

In the aftermath of the military struggle over Korea, Maoist China and the United States entered into a bitter and wide-ranging competition. Its main theaters were Asia and Africa—two regions that are now again at the center of Sino-American rivalry. The key issues driving that competition were, of course, quite different from those that have shaped the current mutual antagonism. Yet echoes of the past are not difficult to find in the new cold war. Under the leadership of General Secretary Xi Jinping, the CCP resembles the party of Mao more than it has at any other time since the 1970s.¹³ The United States generally remains committed to the same goal—the establishment of a liberal international order—that has guided its foreign policy since World War II. Some of the major flash points of the 1950s—most notably the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula—remain potential flash points today. China sometimes uses very familiar rhetoric and tactics to expand its influence abroad. And both Beijing and Washington have been woefully prone to the same kinds of mistakes that they made during the original Cold War.

This report argues that Sino-American competition during the Cold War offers parallels to the contemporary rivalry and provides valuable insights and lessons for today. Focusing primarily on countries in Asia and Africa, it draws parallels between two specific dimensions of Sino-American rivalry during the 1950s and 1960s and the current era.¹⁴ First, it compares competition between Chinese and American Cold War aid programs to contemporary Sino-American economic rivalry. Current Chinese aid and investment policies deploy both strategies and rhetoric that bear distinctive similarities to their Cold War predecessors—evoking a US response that likewise recalls past approaches, including past missteps. Second, this report looks at political rivalry between the PRC and the United States in African and Asian countries. It argues that Beijing and Washington previously made highly counterproductive efforts to push countries in these regions to take sides, and that their contemporary diplomacy is falling into the same trap. In the course of the analysis, the report makes recommendations for US policy toward China.

The “New Cold War”

Most essays and articles on the new cold war with China draw comparisons between Washington’s rivalry with Moscow between 1946 and 1991 and the emerging Sino-American rivalry.¹⁵ There are obvious merits to this comparison. During the earlier period, Moscow was perceived by many in Washington as the United States’ principal adversary, much as China is perceived today. The Soviet Union posed the greatest military threat to the United States, gained dominance over a significant portion of Europe, and aimed to establish its influence in newly independent countries. Today, as China seeks to dominate the Asia Pacific, it is the country that has the greatest capacity to challenge the US military.

At the same time, the Soviet Union was certainly not the only influential actor on the communist side during the Cold War. During the past 30 years, historians have revised their understanding in two key ways. First, the Cold War was more “pericentric” than was initially thought.¹⁶ In other words, the outcomes were determined not only by Moscow and Washington but by a wide variety of different actors, including Beijing.¹⁷ Historians have demonstrated that China, Cuba, and East and West Germany were all influential in their own right and competed against both purported allies and known adversaries. The Soviet Union’s rivalry with China, for instance, was sometimes just as bitterly contested as its rivalry with the United States.¹⁸ Second, Europe was not the only venue for Cold War competition, and perhaps not even the most important.¹⁹ Historians have made the case that the Cold War was truly a global conflict whose ramifications were felt in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa as well as in Europe.

If the world is entering into a new cold war, it may well be a multipolar conflict that spans several different theaters, much like the previous one. During the Cold War era, the United States vied for influence not only against the Soviet Union but also against China, Cuba, and, for a time, Nasserist Egypt. Today, the United States views China as its most formidable adversary, but its areas of conflict with Russia are significant and dangerous. Similarly, China has recently clashed with India and has a long list of territorial disputes with increasingly wary neighbors such as Japan and Vietnam. Each of these sub-rivalries poses its own danger to global stability and

In the 21st century, many of the most active battlefields of the new cold war are in the same regions where Beijing and Washington vied for influence during the 1950s and 1960s.

has the potential to be multifaceted, with cultural, political, and economic dimensions as well as military and strategic ones. Given the multipolar nature of international rivalries during the new cold war, it makes sense to look more closely at the key sub-rivalries of the original Cold War era.

Sino-American competition during the 1950s and 1960s offers an apt parallel for the new cold war. Anxieties about

Maoism in Washington drove significant policy decisions as much as if not more than concerns about the Soviet Union. Historians have demonstrated, for instance, that the expansion of Chinese influence in Asia weighed heavily on the Johnson administration when it chose to Americanize the war in Vietnam.²⁰ Moreover, despite the PRC's dramatic economic transformation during the past 40 years, the CCP has retained power and continues to be driven by some of the same strategic assumptions and ideological preoccupations. In short, analogies with Sino-American Cold War rivalry are likely a better indicator of how China will formulate its grand strategy in the coming years than analogies with Soviet-American Cold War rivalry.²¹

During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States and China competed most directly in Asia and Africa, especially in neutral Asian and African countries. In the two decades after World War II, many countries in these regions gained their independence from colonial powers. Both the free world (the Cold War term used throughout this report) and the Communist bloc strove to gain the allegiance of the dozens of newly independent states emerging from European rule and seeking more political autonomy and better standards of living. China sometimes enjoyed surprising success in this endeavor. The CCP had waged its own revolutionary struggle against colonialism and succeeded in building a cohesive state despite the hostility of the United States and the West. It offered an appealing model to some African and Asian leaders who harbored similar aspirations.

At the same time, both the United States and the Soviet Union often stumbled in their efforts to appeal to newly independent countries whose economies and societies they did not have a deep understanding of. US officials were aware of China's inherent appeal in the Global South, and US policy toward many countries in the region placed the greatest emphasis on countering Chinese rather than Soviet initiatives. In the 21st century, many of the most active battlefields of the new cold war are in the same regions where Beijing and Washington vied for influence during the 1950s and 1960s.



A train travels along the Standard Gauge Railway, funded and built by China, inside Kenya's Nairobi National Park on December 24, 2021. The railway is one of several major infrastructure development projects China has financed in Africa in recent decades. (Photo by Brian Otieno/New York Times)

Chinese Economic Aid and Investment

Beijing's aid to and investment in developing countries are among the most striking features of its foreign policy in the 21st century. Through the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative alone, China has committed more than \$1 trillion in loans to African, Asian, and Latin American countries over the past decade.²² This is in addition to the billions of dollars that China spends annually in grant aid supporting other kinds of programs, including technical cooperation projects, the dispatch of medical teams and other volunteer groups, and turnkey infrastructure projects that typically set up much-needed factories for immediate use.²³ CCP officials consider these commitments as critical for expanding China's global influence and standing.

Economic aid has long been a central feature of the PRC's foreign policy. It is easy to assume that China was not an important aid donor during the Cold War, when its economy was still struggling and its living standards were low. But Mao Zedong and the CCP leadership gave different forms of aid a very high priority—much as Chinese leaders do today. China's leadership was even willing to sacrifice its own citizens for the sake of providing foreign aid.

During the Cold War, Beijing most often devised aid projects to have an immediate impact and help newly independent countries reduce their dependence on their former colonizers—an important objective for many nationalist leaders in African and Asian countries.

For instance, when millions were dying as a result of food shortages during the Great Leap Forward, Beijing still exported tens of thousands of tons of rice to newly independent Guinea, whose friendship China aimed to win.²⁴ Moreover, many of the themes and purposes of Chinese aid during the 1950s and 1960s had a lasting effect on how the CCP conceptualizes and uses aid today. Understanding the key

features of Beijing’s Cold War–era aid to Asia and Africa and how they have been reconstituted in its current aid programs can help the United States anticipate China’s future objectives and formulate potential responses.

The influence of China’s Cold War–era aid policies on its current thinking about economic development comes across most clearly in a 2021 white paper published by the PRC’s State Council Information Office, “China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era.”²⁵ The paper, a comprehensive statement of the principles and purposes of the PRC’s foreign aid, echoes many themes that Premier Zhou Enlai first laid out in 1964 when he announced the Eight Principles of Economic Aid during a visit to Africa.²⁶ Much as the Eight Principles were targeted primarily at Africa and based on “the principle of equality and mutual benefits,” the white paper explains that “South-South cooperation is the focus” of China’s current aid programs and that Chinese development aid “is a form of mutual assistance between developing countries.”²⁷ Other parts of the white paper specifically reference Cold War–era policies and principles that are being updated for the “new era.” The paper notes, for instance, that “China always supports development cooperation on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” invoking a platform for cooperation with India and Burma that Zhou and Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru first announced in 1953.²⁸ The paper also takes up many concerns that were far less prominent 60 years ago, such as digital technologies and environmentally sustainable development, but the current generation of CCP leaders clearly finds much that is attractive in the aid programs devised by their predecessors. It is not surprising that along with these broad principles and general trends, many more specific features of Maoist China’s approach to economic aid have also been reintroduced, albeit in slightly different forms.

This is not to ignore the differences between the “mutually beneficial” aid that China offered during the Cold War era and Xi Jinping’s “win-win” approach to loans and investment today. During the Cold War, countries that received any kind of aid from the PRC needed to meet the ideological criteria of the CCP. They did not have to be socialist, but they did need to be governed by postcolonial nationalist leaders who supported China in international forums such as the United Nations. Today, there are few if any ideological litmus tests for receiving aid. During the Cold War, moreover, China often geared its aid toward helping recipients become more self-sufficient and even autarkic. Currently, aid is more often used to enhance trade with recipient countries or open markets to Chinese enterprises.

Despite these differences, however, the parallels between China's current and past uses of aid and investment are notable. In the past, China focused especially on projects that could benefit its image in the region at the expense of the United States and the Soviet Union. China's largest aid commitment to Africa during the 1960s was the construction of the Tazara (also called Tanzam) Railway. The railway aided Tanzania and Zambia, neutral but left-leaning African countries in dire economic need, by linking Zambia's copper-producing region to the port city of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, thereby reducing Zambia's dependence on the white supremacist government in neighboring Rhodesia. During the early and mid-1960s, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia had approached the United States, the World Bank, and the Soviet Union to assist with the railway, but none agreed to fund what would clearly be an expensive and difficult undertaking.²⁹ Chinese leaders first entered into discussions of the project with Dar es Salaam in 1965 and remained committed to the railway through the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.³⁰ Between 1967 and 1975, when the railway was completed, the PRC provided Tanzania and Zambia with an estimated \$415 million in interest-free financing while dispatching between 30,000 and 50,000 workers to construct the railway.³¹ The cost was significant, but the project offered Beijing a high-profile opportunity to cultivate its image as a friend and supporter of African countries, one that was willing to meet their needs when wealthier countries would not. Both Tanzania and Zambia remained highly supportive of China on international issues, and the Tanzanian government sought to emulate aspects of Maoism in its domestic policies.³²

This kind of opportunism in Africa and Asia has remained a characteristic of China's aid policy in the 21st century. As Beijing has become a much more active international aid donor during the past few decades, it has tried to earn goodwill by supporting countries and projects that most other donors and institutions shy away from. During the Great Recession, US aid to many regions declined, and many global investors looking to reduce their risk avoided undertaking projects in regions such as Africa and Central Asia.³³ Although China's foreign aid had been increasing steadily since 2003, China took advantage of the temporary decline in US aid expenditures to strengthen its own presence in international development. Between 2007 and 2015, China's foreign aid commitments grew from \$1.47 billion to \$3.14 billion.³⁴ Beijing's aid totals were still far smaller than Washington's (US foreign aid still totaled around \$48 billion in 2009), but they reflect its wish to demonstrate strength and eagerness to help when the United States and its allies seemed to be demonstrating the opposite.³⁵

China's willingness to provide aid to pariah states, which are shunned by the wealthiest aid donors and international institutions, is another manifestation of this opportunism. Unlike Western donors, which often insist that recipients adhere to liberal standards of governance, China generally does not seek to impose political reform. During the years immediately after the Korean War, North Korea was the largest recipient of Chinese aid, and although this relationship has changed, it remains important to China.³⁶ Chinese aid statistics for North Korea are difficult to access, but there can be little doubt that Beijing is by far Pyongyang's largest aid donor. The noted North Korea expert Andrei Lankov has reported that even during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, China seemed poised to increase food and fuel aid shipments to North



People at the Seoul Railway Station watch news coverage of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's state visit to North Korea on June 18, 2019. Beijing is believed to be Pyongyang's largest source of foreign aid by far. (Photo by Lee Jin-man/AP)

Korea—a move that limited the impact of Western sanctions.³⁷ And whereas much of the international community has supported strong sanctions against Iran, Beijing signed an agreement in 2021 offering the regime \$400 billion in infrastructure investment.³⁸ Aid to Iran and North Korea affords Beijing an opportunity not only to expand its influence but also to undermine Western sanctions regimes.

Another important characteristic of Chinese economic aid programs during the Cold War was their pragmatism. Beijing most often devised aid projects to have an immediate impact and help newly independent countries reduce their dependence on their former colonizers—an important objective for many nationalist leaders in African and Asian countries. Often these aid projects used relatively simple technologies that were well suited for the countries they were deployed in. Chinese aid workers who traveled to African countries during the 1960s adapted to local living standards, often eating the same diets and residing in the same types of dwellings as local inhabitants. Typically, the Chinese built turnkey projects such as textile mills and matchstick factories that could easily be managed by recipient countries. While some Chinese aid went to Pakistan and Southeast Asia, Beijing invested heavily in aid projects for some of the poorest neutral African countries, including Guinea, Mali, and Congo-Brazzaville (Republic of the Congo). Such projects stood in contrast to those initiated by the United States and its European allies, which often aimed to demonstrate the free world's technological prowess while focusing

on building institutions and human capital. African leaders were grateful to receive such aid from the West, but the Western projects often took much longer to deliver results. Ultimately, the relatively low-tech Chinese Cold War–era aid projects were calculated to quickly address the needs of recipient countries. At the time, even US officials acknowledged that the PRC was having some measure of political success with these projects, despite modest economic impact.³⁹

China’s approach to economic aid during the Cold War was in large part born of the era’s economic and strategic realities. Chinese leaders were often the first to admit that the PRC was a poor and technologically backward country in comparison with its Western rivals. They recognized that they could not spend as much on aid programs as the United States or other former colonial powers, nor transfer the most impressive technologies. But China could help African and Asian countries take modest steps forward in manufacturing or developing infrastructure that suited their needs at the time. It could also use the rhetoric of anti-imperialist solidarity and cooperation between African and Asian states to heighten the ideological appeal of its assistance.

Despite China’s meteoric economic rise during the past 40 years and the CCP’s recent efforts to rapidly develop high-tech industries through its “Made in China 2025” plan, China still cannot match the technological prowess of the United States and its allies in most key sectors. Yet China can provide technologies to developing countries that improve living standards and cost significantly less than those the West could supply. Chinese companies such as Huawei seem to be benefiting significantly from this approach. Huawei has invested heavily in Africa’s digital infrastructure during the past decade, and many African countries have chosen to work with the company to develop their 4G and 5G networks, despite warnings from the United States that Huawei’s equipment could be used to spy on their leaders. The main reason that so many African countries are choosing Huawei is that Beijing’s industrial policies have made it cheaper and more efficient than its competitors.⁴⁰ The sophisticated measures that support Huawei and its high-tech ventures are a far cry from the construction of textile factories, but China’s current approach still bears clear traces of Cold War policies: China earns praise and sometimes loyalty from African leaders because it provides needed technologies at lower costs than the United States or its allies.

US Response to Chinese Aid and Investment

Cold War parallels not only help explain China’s current approach to economic aid but also offer some insights into ways the United States might respond to Beijing’s ambitious and wide-ranging aid initiatives. One clear lesson is that the United States should not—and indeed it cannot—try to counter every Chinese aid project. During the Cold War, the United States and its allies often ended up wasting resources and sometimes looked foolish when they tried to undermine or reduce the appeal of specific Chinese projects. The United States’ most significant response to Chinese support for the Tazara Railway was to build the Great North Road, a massive road

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improvement and construction project that partly covered the same route as the railway. The problem was that the Zambian government could not afford to buy the trucks needed to transport copper via the roadway.⁴¹ Although the Zambian government was appreciative of the project, it was not well suited for the country's needs at the time.

Today, too, as Jessica Chen Weiss has noted, “Washington frequently falls into the trap of trying to counter Chinese efforts around the world without appreciating what

local governments and populations want.”⁴² The Biden administration and its allies in the G7 certainly seem to have followed this pattern in their response to China's Belt and Road Initiative. In a plan that simultaneously mimicked and tried to counter the Chinese initiative, President Biden and the G7 leaders sought to invest billions in the Build Back Better World plan, which would have built and financed new infrastructure around the globe. But the Biden administration was forced to scrap its initial plan and rebrand the initiative when Congress did not pass the larger Build Back Better bill. G7 leaders officially announced the latest iteration, the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), in June 2022. The plan relies primarily on the private sector and development finance institutions for funding, and it is far from guaranteed that its ambitious goals can be met. Although some official agencies and private companies have agreed to fund specific projects, the totals still fall far short of the hundreds of billions of dollars that the Biden administration hoped for.⁴³ If the plan fails to attract sufficient investment, the whole endeavor might seem like an empty promise whose sole purpose was to derail China rather than offer developing countries anything concrete. Even if the PGII does succeed in raising hundreds of billions of dollars in investment, the projects that it supports will likely coexist with rather than replace China's—much as the Great North Road coexisted with the Tazara Railway.

The point is not that the United States and its allies should shy away from offering financial and technical aid to help countries in Africa or Asia develop their infrastructure or achieve other priorities. They should, however, offer this aid with a clear and affirmative purpose rather than making thinly veiled attempts to counter or compete with what Beijing is doing. Washington and its allies should think carefully about where and how their relative wealth and expertise can best benefit developing countries. If American aid ends up complementing Chinese aid in some areas, this will still improve relations with Asia and Africa far more than constant vying with Beijing for goodwill and influence.

The United States should also recognize that while current Chinese aid programs are ambitious, they are not infallible. Many criticisms of the Belt and Road Initiative have emerged—not only from Western countries, which argue that the programs use unfair practices to benefit Chinese firms, but also from recipient countries. Several prominent African leaders, both rulers and dissidents, have become disillusioned with Chinese aid because it has not brought the prosperity and stability they anticipated. In 2019, for instance, President John Magufuli of Tanzania pulled out of a port construction deal that he called “exploitative” because it required Tanzania to give China a 99-year lease on the port in addition to a number of other special rights



Monks await the arrival of President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport in Mattala, Sri Lanka, on March 18, 2013. The airport, financed by loans from China, is so rarely used that elephants have been spotted on the runways. (Photo by Sanka Gayashan/AP)

and privileges.⁴⁴ Moreover, Beijing’s headlong rush to extend loans and support development projects in different parts of the globe has sometimes led to poor judgment about which projects are feasible and prudent. Roughly a decade ago, Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa unveiled an ambitious plan to turn Mattala, a quiet town in a strategic location, into a thriving port city with Chinese aid. But almost every project initiated under these auspices ended in embarrassing failure. Chinese loans financed the construction of the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, intended by the Sri Lankan government to handle a million passengers a year; instead, it has been dubbed the “world’s emptiest airport” because virtually no major airlines service it.⁴⁵ If Chinese aid projects in Asia and Africa have often been flashy and high-profile, then their failures and weaknesses have also sometimes been spectacular. For the United States, such missteps might provide an opportunity to show how a more cautious and less dramatic approach could benefit developing countries in the long term.

China's Approach to World Politics and Diplomacy

Not all Chinese and American efforts to gain influence in African and Asian countries during the Cold War involved offering economic aid. Sino-American rivalry was also political and diplomatic, much as it is today. When it came to capturing the loyalties of newly independent states, however, China and the United States faced a common problem: postcolonial leaders often wanted friendly relations with major powers but did not want to be forced or pressured to choose sides. Overt efforts by Washington, Moscow, or Beijing to strengthen their influence in neutral countries at the expense of their rivals often alienated the very people they sought to win over. China and the United States sometimes ended up losing potential friends because they were too eager to gain the upper hand in their competition with one another.

China was perhaps the more successful in its efforts to earn goodwill among African and Asian countries during the mid-1950s. After the Korean War, the CCP temporarily toned down its campaign to promote revolution internationally and focused on achieving cooperative relations with neighboring states—especially those in South and Southeast Asia. Zhou announced at a 1953 policy conference that the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence would serve as the guidelines for China's relationships with its neighbors.⁴⁶ The new principles emphasized nonintervention in the affairs of other countries, nonaggression, sovereign equality, and mutual benefit. After Zhou traveled to Delhi in 1954 to meet Nehru, the Indian prime minister became an enthusiastic supporter of these principles and worked with Chinese leaders to promote them in other neutral states. US officials were convinced that Zhou had managed to pull the wool over Nehru's eyes and hide the PRC's dangerous ambitions. But the Five Principles ultimately proved successful. Soon after Zhou's summit with Nehru, Zhou traveled to Burma and held a series of cordial meetings with Burmese prime minister U Nu.⁴⁷

The high point of Beijing's peaceful coexistence campaign came with Zhou's dramatic and well-received speech at the Bandung Conference in 1955. Zhou extolled Afro-Asian solidarity, anti-colonialism, and mutual support among newly independent states. By the end of the conference, even leaders from relatively conservative African and Asian states acknowledged Zhou's skilled oratory and statesmanship.⁴⁸ Despite US efforts to discourage neutral states in Asia and the Middle East from interacting with the PRC, Beijing continued to win over neutral countries. It was able to establish formal relations with Cambodia, Egypt, Indonesia, and several other African and Asian states while hosting leaders from key unaffiliated countries. By the late 1950s, China's diplomacy was building momentum—and was frustrating the United States.

But China's successes during the early Cold War did not prove durable. The reasons had more to do with the CCP's own inept diplomacy and shift toward more radical posturing than with US maneuvering. Frictions between the PRC and its most important international partner, the Soviet Union, had been growing since the mid-1950s. Khrushchev's 1956 "secret speech" and the accompanying program of de-Stalinization led to an ideological schism between Beijing and Moscow that widened until the early 1960s, when the community parties of both countries

became openly hostile toward each other.⁴⁹ In the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split, Beijing strove to differentiate itself from Moscow and called for a militant, anti-imperialist front that refused compromise with the United States and its allies. China stepped up its support for revolutionaries abroad and criticized the Soviets for their relatively lukewarm positions on Algeria, Cuba, and Vietnam.⁵⁰ This zealotry and intolerance soon damaged China's relations with its neighbors; for example, its border clash with India in 1962 hurt China's image among moderate neutral states.

Perhaps the most disastrous episode in Beijing's Cold War-era diplomacy was its unrelenting support for a second Asian-African conference—a follow-up to the 1955 Bandung Conference—to be held in Algiers in 1965. The PRC wanted to use the conference to promote its own more militant view of solidarity between African and Asian states at the expense of the views of moderates such as Nehru. Beijing did have some allies in this endeavor, including President Sukarno in Indonesia and Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia.⁵¹ Unfortunately for Beijing, Algeria's leader, Ahmed Ben Bella, was overthrown just 10 days before the conference was scheduled to begin. When the new Algerian government tried to delay the start of the conference, China insisted that it be held as scheduled and pressured delegations to attend. But after a bomb exploded in the venue where the foreign ministers were to meet, more moderate states such as Egypt maneuvered behind the scenes to postpone the conference. Beijing suffered a major embarrassment, as events demonstrated that the PRC and other more radical African and Asian states could not set the agenda for the entire group.⁵² After this, Chinese influence suddenly seemed to be on the wane, and not as a result of American efforts to contain it. China's own shift from moderation to militarism and intransigence had marred its image in many African and Asian states, and recovery from the political damage would take years.

More recently, Beijing seems to be repeating this Cold War-era failure rather than learning a lesson from it. China is shifting away from the rhetoric and diplomacy of the “peaceful rise”—a policy described in a widely read *Foreign Affairs* article by CCP official Zheng Bijian—and moving toward more hyper-nationalistic, “wolf warrior” diplomacy.⁵³ In the process, it is destroying the goodwill it built up in many parts of the world. Just as in the 1960s, China's increasingly combative and uncompromising posture is alienating countries that once viewed it favorably.

Throughout the late 1990s and early part of the 21st century, Beijing's diplomats promised that China's rise to great power status would present an opportunity and not a threat to its neighbors. Zheng asserted that China did not “seek hegemony or predominance in world affairs” but a “peaceful rise” that would open up China's markets and create prosperity for the entire region. The PRC, Zheng said, would avoid the Cold War mentality that had produced bitter rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union and aim for “cooperation with all countries of the world.”⁵⁴ At the same time, Zheng fastidiously avoided discussing the issues that were already sparking concerns about China among some observers—its human rights abuses, unsettled territorial claims, and infringements on copyrights and intellectual property. Zheng's promises of cooperation and tolerance for all echoed claims made by the CCP during the 1950s that China would seek peaceful coexistence with other postcolonial states regardless of their ideologies.

For a time, Beijing did have a significant degree of success with its peaceful rise strategy. In his 2007 book on Chinese soft power in Southeast Asia, Joshua Kurlantzick maintained that

“elites and populaces in most nations” across the region viewed China “as a constructive actor—and, potentially, as the preeminent regional power.” Moreover, polls showed that populations in Africa and Latin America often held more favorable views of China than of the United States.⁵⁵ Even among American allies such as Australia and South Korea, China’s image seemed to be improving—sometimes at America’s expense. In the early 2000s, for instance, the Bush administration and the South Korean government clashed over policy toward North Korea and an incident involving US troops. In April 2004, 63 percent of South Korea’s ruling party members considered the PRC South Korea’s most important diplomatic partner.⁵⁶ Favorable views of China emerged among some African leaders as well. For example, Moeletsi Mbeki, a South African businessman and analyst, told the *New York Times* in 2006 that China was not the “first big foreign power to come to Africa, but they [the Chinese] may be the first not to act as though they are some kind of patron or teacher or conqueror.”⁵⁷

The Impact of China’s Approach

Although the peaceful rise approach brought some success, China’s lapse into what David Shambaugh has called an “aggrieved defensive nationalism” has hurt its relations with many neighbors in recent years and is destroying much of the goodwill that it built up during the 1990s and early 2000s.⁵⁸ China’s overall global outlook underwent a significant change during the 2008 financial crisis. China weathered the crisis relatively well, whereas the United States and many of its allies suffered economic meltdowns that slowed their growth for nearly a decade. As China’s position in the global economy improved, so did its ability to project military power and economic influence.⁵⁹ The Obama administration announced its “pivot to Asia” in 2011, mostly in reaction to China’s increasing assertiveness in the region.⁶⁰ China’s initial response was generally moderate and restrained, but the announcement of the new policy provoked fears among some CCP leaders that Washington was seeking to prevent China’s rise and maintain its own dominance in Asia.⁶¹

To some degree, these fears were already manifest in 2006, when Beijing excluded disputes over its maritime boundaries from the compulsory dispute settlement procedures of the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas.⁶² When Xi Jinping assumed the CCP leadership in 2012, he turned legal assertions into concrete actions. Most alarming to many was the PRC’s rapid and expansive buildup of new military outposts in the Spratly Islands, which analysts considered potential game changers in the event of a Sino-American conflict. These new bases enabled Chinese coast guard ships to intimidate neighbors in Southeast Asia; the military vessels deployed at the new bases frequently made it more difficult for countries in the region to conduct civilian and law enforcement activities in the South China Sea.⁶³ Starting in 2020, China took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen its claims over disputed territories. It stepped up illegal fishing activities in Indonesian waters, precipitating a series of clashes between Chinese fishing vessels and the Indonesian navy. The Chinese coast guard has even sought to disrupt neighboring countries’ oil and gas projects by dispatching naval vessels into their exclusive economic zones.⁶⁴ Although China’s growing adventurism in the South China Sea is likely a product of



Philippine Coast Guard sailors watch as a Chinese vessel monitors their effort to resupply the Sierra Madre outpost on the Second Thomas Shoal—which is claimed by both the Philippines and China—in the South China Sea on November 10, 2023. (Photo by Jes Aznar/New York Times)

several factors, including US efforts to limit Chinese influence in the region, it is also a product of Xi Jinping’s militant nationalism and determination to assert China’s interests unilaterally and with little regard for the views of the international community.

But China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea and the combative mentality that underlies it are alienating the PRC from its neighbors, just as its turn to more radical anti-imperialism and the launch of the Cultural Revolution damaged its reputation during the late 1960s. Recent surveys of world opinion show how China’s actions in the South China Sea have affected Southeast Asian views of its intentions. Many leaders in the region who viewed Beijing as a constructive actor 15 years ago are now highly ambivalent about its influence. Some continue to see China as the most important economic player in the region, but few trust Beijing to do the right thing. One survey found that 58 percent of Southeast Asian elites had little or no confidence in China’s intentions; mistrust ran particularly high in Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam.⁶⁵ Perceptions of China in Southeast Asia are admittedly complex, and the PRC itself has continued to emphasize the need for mutual trust and has taken some actions to address neighboring countries’ misgivings.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, an uneasy mix of economic cooperation and geopolitical friction is likely to characterize China’s relations with Southeast Asia as long as Beijing continues to assert territorial claims that have no basis in international law.

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China's growing assertiveness has also badly damaged its relationship with India. Despite long-standing frictions between Beijing and Delhi over the Sino-Indian border and despite China's friendship with Pakistan, the relationship had generally been stable since the 1990s, even if some element of mutual mistrust persisted. But Chinese actions in June 2020 undermined the relative calm. A clash between Chinese

and Indian forces in the Galwan Valley stunned Indian leaders and ended years of relative peace and stability in the border region. Despite multiple rounds of talks, the two sides have struggled to come to terms. Indian leaders blame the clash on China's aggressiveness and have modified Delhi's foreign policy in response to what they now consider an urgent security priority. According to Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow in the Center for Asia Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, "Any restoration of the prior status quo in the bilateral relationship is unlikely."⁶⁷ These developments bear some resemblance to relations between the countries during the period after the 1962 Sino-Indian War. That conflict also arose after Beijing adopted a more militant nationalism that alienated moderate countries. Though its views on China might not completely align with those of Washington or its allies, India has already started to increase its cooperation with the United States while looking for ways to decrease its reliance on the PRC.⁶⁸

As it did during the Cold War, China is prioritizing status and prestige in Asia and around the world.⁶⁹ It aims to be acknowledged as a global economic leader and military power by the international community. The dilemma for China remains how to enhance its status: It could assure its neighbors that it seeks cooperation and peaceful coexistence, and that it is willing to negotiate political differences and territorial issues. Or it could pursue regional dominance without regard for its neighbors' concerns, though this approach risks a rush into avoidable conflicts. Although China's current relations with countries in Asia and Africa are far more intricate and elaborate than the relatively limited interactions of the Cold War era, Beijing's overall approach seems to have followed a similar trajectory: a period of compromise and engagement followed by a turn to a more strident nationalism that stirs anxieties among its neighbors and undermines its ambitions for leadership. Most countries in these regions no longer have the option of completely dissociating themselves from China or eliminating Chinese influence, but they may nevertheless choose to limit cooperation and seek more independence from Beijing.

Yet Washington should not be too hasty to celebrate Beijing's recent stumbles. During the Cold War, the United States could never benefit from China's mistakes because its own diplomacy with countries in Asia and Africa was also prone to missteps. Even as China alienated potential supporters by shifting away from its initial emphasis on peaceful coexistence with neighbors, the United States' tendency to view every issue through the lens of the Cold War similarly undermined its influence. Washington's Manichaeian view of Sino-American rivalry often led it to decry neutralism and demand that countries take sides. Yet rather than winning leaders of newly independent countries over to the free world, this approach often alienated or disappointed nationalists who had once viewed the United States favorably.

For instance, during the 1950s and 1960s, Washington constantly pressured Sihanouk, the neutral and fiercely nationalist Cambodian prince, not to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC. Yet China's influence loomed large in Cambodia's neighboring states, and the small country found it impossible to make an enemy of Beijing. The more pressure the United States put on Sihanouk, the more resentful he became and the more he flouted American advice. He visited China in 1956 and normalized relations with the PRC two years later. "China's a great country nearby and a reality," he told US officials.⁷⁰ Sihanouk was further enraged by America's approach to Cambodia during the Vietnam War, which displayed little regard for his country's sovereignty or neutrality and prioritized defeating Hanoi. By 1964, Sihanouk had unilaterally terminated all American aid programs and closed the Cambodian embassy in Washington.

As renewed Sino-American rivalry has emerged as a dominant factor in global politics, Washington has sought to promote its vision of a world divided between democratic countries that play by the rules and authoritarian ones that threaten international peace and stability. The United States does not bluntly demand that nations cut ties with China as it did during the Cold War, but it has pressured both allies and unaligned countries to support it on specific issues. Many countries in South and Southeast Asia have voiced concerns about the negative impact that Sino-American rivalry has had on the region and asserted their right to maintain good relations with both Beijing and Washington. Lee Hsien Loong, the prime minister of Singapore, has warned both China and the United States not to try to divide Southeast Asia or pressure its leaders. In a widely cited 2019 speech, he explained that Southeast Asian states would benefit more from multilateralism than from bilateral arrangements with one of the two great powers. He insisted on "regional cooperation initiatives" that could "strengthen existing cooperation arrangements centred on ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations]" but would not "create rival blocs, deepen fault lines or force countries to take sides."⁷¹

Even some long-standing American allies have emphasized that they do not want to be forced to choose between Beijing and Washington. South Korea, for instance, is deeply entrenched in America's Indo-Pacific security architecture. The United States has kept forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula since the Korean War, and Seoul remains dependent to some degree on American security guarantees. At the same time, China is South Korea's largest trading partner and has not been shy about using its economic leverage to punish and intimidate its neighbors. South Korean diplomats and officials have insisted that they should not have to choose between their security and economic interests. Kim Ha-jung, the former South Korean ambassador to China, explained in a recent interview: "Many people say South Korea must choose between America and China, but I do not agree. . . . We should strengthen the alliance with the US, with which we share the values of liberal democracy, while maintaining a close friendship with China, a close neighbor."⁷²

Nonetheless, South Korea has recently found itself caught between the competing demands of Washington and Beijing. South Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol had vowed during his campaign to consider expanding the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, which the United States installed in South Korea in 2017. Beijing had protested the initial deployment and retaliated with economic coercion against Seoul. Since Yoon took office, in May 2022,

Seoul has proceeded cautiously on the THAAD issue—probably to avoid the risk of completely alienating China. While it has moved to secure permanent operational deployment status for the THAAD battery that the United States had already installed, Seoul has backed away from installing additional batteries.⁷³ Overall, Yoon has tilted slightly more toward Washington than his more progressive predecessor, but he has continued to seek an equilibrium in which South Korea can maintain its military alliance with the United States without alienating the PRC. That even a conservative leader in a country allied with the United States proceeds with such caution demonstrates the challenges that Washington will face if it pressures Asian countries to take sides. Most South and Southeast Asian countries lack the same deep ties to the United States that Seoul has, and they will likely be more averse to straining their ties with Beijing.

If the United States pressures Asian nations to side with it against China, as it did during the Cold War, many leaders in the region—who above all want to maintain independence and strategic flexibility—will resist. The United States risks once again alienating some countries—or even driving them into China’s embrace. Insisting on greater alignment with the United States could also lead to a loss of American credibility. Ultimately, Washington can do little to reduce China’s already deeply entrenched economic and political presence in the region. Indeed, its efforts could be destabilizing or even dangerous given the region’s high level of interdependence with China. Insisting that Asian leaders follow guidance that they are likely to reject will only highlight the limitations of American power and influence.

But if US efforts to counter Chinese economic initiatives or to pressure Asian and African leaders to align with the United States against the PRC are unlikely to prove successful, then what options does the United States have left? The United States never defeated or humbled China during the Cold War in quite the same way that it did the Soviet Union, and it is unlikely to achieve an unambiguous victory now. Here, too, the Cold War offers some valuable lessons.

The Cold War Denouement and the Contemporary Challenge

The low point in Sino-American relations during the Cold War was probably the mid-1960s. The guiding doctrines of China’s foreign policy at the time were uncompromising radicalism and support for all forces willing to fight against American imperialism. As the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution began to wane, however, China moderated its policies at home and abroad. Domestically, some party members who had been purged or internally exiled were rehabilitated, and after 1969, Beijing started to send subtle signals to the Nixon administration that it was willing to improve relations. Moreover, the PRC scaled back its support for some (but not all) revolutionaries in neighboring countries.⁷⁴

What made Beijing decide to change its course so dramatically? Some of the explanation undoubtedly lies in China’s deteriorating geopolitical situation. It had broken with the Soviet Union over ideological differences during the 1960s, but in 1969, the ideological dispute suddenly turned into a series of military clashes between Chinese and Soviet forces.⁷⁵ Increasingly



People walk past a photo studio displaying portraits of Chinese leaders Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong, and Liu Shaoqi at the beginning of the May Day holiday in Beijing on April 29, 2023. (Photo by Mark Schiefelbein/AP)

isolated from the free world, the Communist bloc, and many neutral countries in Asia and Africa that it had once enjoyed good relations with, Beijing recognized that its situation was precarious and that it needed to change. But geostrategic factors were not the sole determinant of Chinese decision-making. Dramatic changes had swept through Asia over the course of the 1960s, and the PRC could not ignore them. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan were succeeding with export-led capitalist development strategies, while the socialist countries in the region were slowing down or stagnating. China's leaders realized that they could either change or fall further behind. After Mao's death, China's new leader, Hua Guofeng, began tentatively changing some of the disastrous policies of the Great Leap Forward and promoting economic growth, though he did so within a Maoist framework.⁷⁶ Chinese economic planners also studied the "Asian tiger" economies and sought to emulate some of the policies that had fueled these countries' economic takeoffs. Deng Xiaoping, who opened China to the global economy in the years after Mao's death, even once stated that he hoped to see "several more Hong Kongs" arise in mainland China.⁷⁷ Ultimately, the CCP leadership was pragmatic enough about economic policy to realize that Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan offered alternatives to the course that Mao had chosen.

The efforts of the Nixon administration to improve relations with the PRC during the 1970s bore fruit not only because Washington was careful diplomatically but also because Chinese leaders recognized that past policies had not served the country well. If 21st-century Beijing continues to repeat the mistakes that it made during the Cold War, it may end up hurting its prestige and prosperity—much as it did during the 1960s. Beijing’s more nationalistic emphasis on wolf warrior diplomacy and its assertiveness vis-à-vis its neighbors in South and Southeast Asia have caused leaders in the region to view China’s rise with more uneasiness and less optimism than they did just a decade ago. Much of Africa continues to view China favorably, but some African leaders have voiced concerns about the continent’s growing indebtedness to China and the environmental impact of some Chinese development projects.⁷⁸ Moreover, with China’s economic growth slowing, its leaders will face even more difficulty if the United States and its allies continue seeking to decouple their economies from China and take other measures that could inhibit the growth of China’s productivity. In short, China may soon face a choice akin to the one it faced during the early 1970s: be more pragmatic and conciliatory in its foreign and domestic policies or hold to a hard ideological line and risk stagnation and even decline.

The United States can do two key things to move China toward cooperation and pragmatism. First, it should make sure that Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan continue to offer Asia a democratic alternative to the Chinese model that is strong and vibrant. Over the long term, the best strategy for contesting China’s influence will involve political and economic attraction more than military preparedness. Africa, the rest of Asia, and China itself need to be persuaded that open political and economic systems are the most effective way of obtaining wealth and prestige in the modern world. Second, if Beijing does eventually decide to moderate its policies, the United States should do everything it can to reinforce this decision. Much as the Nixon and Carter administrations helped accelerate China’s turn toward the West during the 1970s, any US administration should be ready to shift its China policy quickly if the CCP leadership makes another course correction. Recalling that past Chinese policies have veered back and forth between greater militancy and greater cooperation should help the United States maintain historical perspective on the current chill in Sino-America relations. Although the contemporary rivalry does not completely look like a replay of the Cold War, lessons from the earlier contest offer critical insights into how the new contest may evolve.

Notes

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