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The Real Origins of the U.S.-China Cold War



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The only way to win the next superpower showdown is to understand what exactly caused it.

By Charles Edel and Hal Brands | June 2, 2019

How should Washington deal with an authoritarian regime that is expanding its influence abroad and repressing its citizens at home? That is the question the United States faces today in dealing with Xi Jinping's China. But it is not a new challenge. After World War II, the United States faced another authoritarian state intent on expanding its borders, intimidating its neighbors, undermining democratic institutions, exporting its authoritarian model, and stealing U.S. technology and know-how. The result, after a period of initial debate and uncertainty in U.S. policy, was the Cold War: a 40-year competition over power, influence, and the contours of global order.

As tensions between Beijing and Washington harden, there is a growing fear that China and the United States are entering a new cold war—another multi-decade struggle to shape the international system. There is also a growing debate about who or what is responsible for the deterioration in the relationship. Is it the vaulting ambition and personalistic rule of Xi Jinping? The nature of Communist rule in China? The tragic qualities of international relations? America's own behavior and global ambitions?

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Differing diagnoses lead to different prescriptions. If U.S. actions have caused the downturn, Washington should henceforth avoid actions likely to antagonize Beijing. If Xi is to blame for putting the United States and China on a collision course, perhaps America should focus on either waiting him out or enabling those around him.

Alternatively, if confrontation is an inescapable byproduct of the authoritarian rule of China's Communist Party or of the tensions that inevitably emerge between great powers in a competitive international system, then the United States should accept that rivalry is unavoidable and adopt a more concentrated and coordinated strategy of counter-pressure.

In parsing these different possibilities, it can be helpful to go back to debates about the origins of the first Cold War. Historical scholarship on the breakdown of U.S.-Soviet relations after World War II addresses such questions as which side was most

responsible, whether confrontation between Moscow and Washington was inevitable, the role of ideology and perception, and the significance of individual leaders in bringing on what U.S. President John F. Kennedy would call the “long twilight struggle.” These debates also provide a useful framework for thinking about how the United States and China got to the present impasse, and where Washington should go from here.



Cheering Communist youths lead the way for a huge portrait of Josef Stalin on Aug. 14, 1951.

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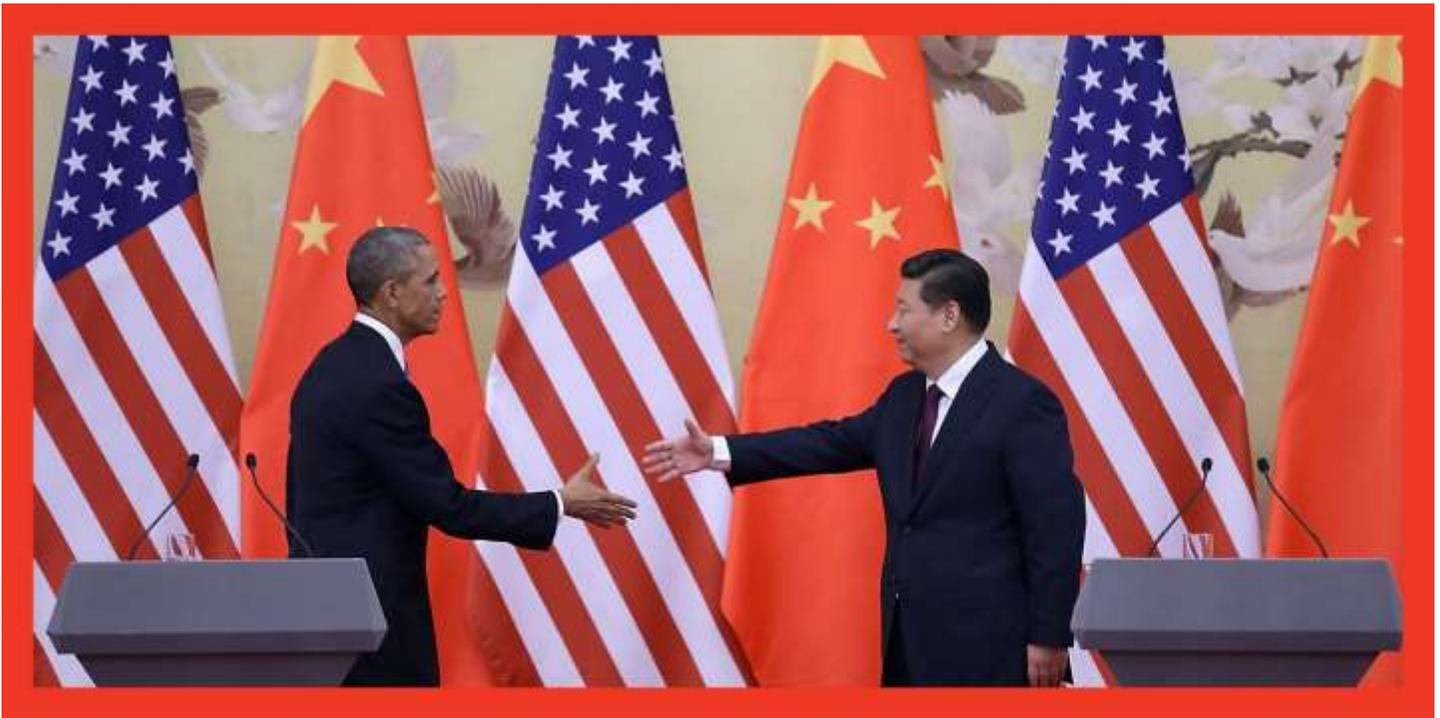
Between 1945 and 1947, the U.S.-Soviet relationship went from a tense but productive wartime partnership to a deep geopolitical and ideological confrontation that would persist for decades. Subsequent historical interpretations of the Cold War’s origins fall into four distinct schools of thought.

The first interpretation, which emerged in the late 1940s and 1950s, placed responsibility for the Cold War on the Soviet Union. According to this view, Moscow’s attempt to dominate large swaths of Europe and Asia after World War II were driven by traditional Russian expansionism, Marxist-Leninist ideology, and Joseph Stalin’s extraordinary paranoia. U.S. policymakers were primarily interested in continuing wartime cooperation with the Soviet Union and had trouble comprehending Moscow’s truculence. The turn toward a more confrontational U.S. policy in 1946 to 1947, then, was simply a reaction to a series of increasingly aggressive Soviet actions. There was little that Washington could have done to appease Stalin’s concerns; if anything, U.S. policymakers should have responded sooner and more sharply to the Soviet challenge.

Beginning in the late 1950s, and with increasing influence after the national disillusion caused by the Vietnam War, so-called revisionist scholars challenged this interpretation. They insisted that Washington, not Moscow, was the guilty party. The United States, the revisionists believed, had long been an inherently expansionist power, bent on extending its economic reach, promoting its system of market capitalism, and spreading its values throughout the world. This ethos jeopardized Stalin's reasonable desire for a zone of privileged interest in Eastern Europe; it forced Moscow to choose between insecurity and confrontation. As William Appleman Williams, the dean of the revisionists, wrote, "It was the decision of the United States to employ its new and awesome power in keeping with the traditional Open Door Policy which crystallized the Cold War." According to this reading of events, U.S. policy made no allowances for Soviet concerns or Moscow's interests, and it was hardly surprising that the Kremlin chose confrontation..

A third explanation combined elements of the first two interpretations. Writing after the passions stirred by Vietnam had faded, post-revisionist historians acknowledged that the United States had made errors. But they saw the Cold War mostly as a tragic inevitability. After World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union found themselves the two mightiest countries in the world, with vast power vacuums between them. This situation alone would have produced competition; divergent political systems, historical experiences, and concepts of how best to produce security brought on the Cold War.

With the brief opening of the Soviet archives after the Cold War, a fourth interpretation emerged. Eminent historians such as John Lewis Gaddis revised their earlier interpretations, placing greater culpability on the Soviets in general and Stalin in particular. Drawing on previously unavailable sources, Gaddis wrote that "Stalin's post-war goals were security for himself, his regime, his country and his ideology, in precisely that order." There was no possibility of lasting cooperation with a leader so ruthless, aggressive, and distrustful. Stalin's unappeasable suspicions, his belief in Western weakness, and his willingness to probe the outer boundaries of U.S. influence caused the wartime alliance to crumble. This interpretation has been called "neo-orthodoxy" because new sources led to an old conclusion: that the West was right, both morally and prudentially, to resist.



U.S. President Barack Obama shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on Nov. 12, 2014. *Feng Li/Getty Images*

These differing interpretations of the Cold War’s origins mirror key questions and controversies in contemporary U.S.-China relations. Is the downturn in relations the fault of Washington or Beijing? Is there something in the nature of the Chinese Communist Party or Xi Jinping that drives it toward confrontation? Or is the anarchic and competitive nature of the international system to blame?

One school of thought, the contemporary parallel of Cold War revisionism, seems particularly lacking. Yes, the United States has long maintained a significant military presence in the Asia-Pacific and taken other actions—support for human rights within China, for instance—that have surely antagonized an insecure and ambitious Chinese regime. But the United States has simultaneously done more than any other country to enable China’s remarkable rise, by paving Beijing’s way into the World Trade Organization, opening its markets to Chinese goods, allowing the transfer of advanced civilian technologies, and encouraging Beijing to become more engaged and influential in both regional and global diplomacy. It is difficult to claim that the United States “is bent on containing China,” then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in 2010, given that “China has experienced breathtaking growth and development” since re-establishing relations with the United States.

Moreover, it is hard to square a revisionist reading of U.S.-China affairs with the timeline of a declining bilateral relationship. Most observers agree that what some call Beijing’s “new assertiveness” began to emerge in earnest in 2008 and 2009. This was in the midst of the global financial crisis, at a time when the incoming Obama

administration was stressing the need to reassure Beijing, talking about the emergence of a multipolar world, and even hinting at the possibility of creating a “G-2” for managing global affairs. As the political scientist Andrew Scobell has written, it was the resulting perception of American weakness and accommodation—not a perception of increased hostility—that constituted the background to increased Chinese pressure in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and other areas.

A second school of thought—one that locates the sources of the antagonism in Xi’s personality and policies, just as neo-orthodox historians placed the blame largely on Stalin—has more to be said for it, but it is also less than entirely convincing. There is no debating that China has become more ambitious, aggressive, and authoritarian under Xi. At home, he has cracked down on dissidents, strengthened political controls, transformed China into an increasingly high-tech police state, and replaced collective leadership with personalized rule. In Asia, Xi has stepped up China’s use of military coercion, economic leverage, diplomatic pressure, and influence operations to increase Beijing’s sway and constrict the choices of regional powers. Military and paramilitary forces have harassed, confronted, and violated the sovereignty of countries such as Japan and India; Beijing is simultaneously advancing geoeconomic projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership designed to bring the region into its orbit.

Further abroad, Xi has positioned China for a global challenge to U.S. influence. Under his rule, Beijing has expanded its global military footprint; it has used the Belt and Road Initiative to project economic power ever farther from China’s periphery. Xi’s “Made in China 2025” initiative bespeaks an ambition to wrest economic primacy from the United States by seizing the commanding heights of technological innovation; his regime has also declared that Beijing will now act as an ideological alternative to Washington and has expanded efforts to support authoritarians and undermine democracy overseas. No serious observer can dispute that China’s behavior has changed in ominous ways under Xi Jinping.

Yet the trouble with this interpretation is that it is not clear whether Xi is the cause or the effect of changes in Chinese foreign and domestic policies. After all, he took power in 2012; the turn toward sharper rivalry with the United States occurred earlier, under Hu Jintao. The promulgation of the nine-dash line in the South China Sea, the intensified pressure against Japan in the East China Sea, and other facets of Chinese assertiveness all predate Xi, even if they have intensified and accelerated under him. All this raises the question of whether he is actually so remarkable—or whether China’s growing power and other deeper changes would have produced someone like Xi even had Xi himself not come along.

A third school of thought—which corresponds to Cold War post-revisionism—is that shifting power dynamics and the nature of international affairs have driven the United States and China to rivalry. Clearly, there is a great deal of evidentiary support for this interpretation. China’s rise over the past three decades has been unlike anything in modern history. Its constant-dollar GDP rose from \$1.9 trillion to \$8.3 trillion between 1998 and 2014. Chinese military spending rose from 2.2 percent to 12.2 percent of the world total between 1994 and 2015. Beijing has acquired ever more advanced military capabilities; it has developed the economic wherewithal to influence countries from Southeast Asia to Eastern Europe and beyond.

The growth of Chinese power—particularly Chinese military power—was initially driven in part by concerns that the United States might make Beijing its primary adversary with the Cold War over. Those fears were crystallized during the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995 to 1996, when Washington responded to Chinese attempts to intimidate Taiwan by deploying two carrier strike groups to nearby waters. Growing Chinese strengths, in turn, have dramatically intensified the momentum toward rivalry. Beijing’s rising power has made the Pacific feel smaller, as Chinese influence collides with America’s long-established positions in the region. It has made arrangements that were nettlesome but tolerable in the past—the persistence of U.S. alliances ringing China’s maritime periphery, the global dominance of liberal values—seem less tolerable now that Beijing is in a position to challenge these arrangements. It has encouraged growing Chinese confidence on the global stage, making it harder for Hu and Xi to continue hiding their power and biding their time. All this, in turn, eventually compelled sharper U.S. policies in response, whether in the form of a Third Offset Strategy meant to counter Chinese anti-access and area denial capabilities or the Trump administration’s tariffs meant to undermine Beijing’s economic power.

Post-revisionists contributed to the debate on Cold War origins by pointing out that it was simply hard to see how the United States and the Soviet Union—two powerful, ambitious countries with conflicting interests and visions of security—could have indefinitely gotten along after World War II. Something similar could be said about U.S.-China relations today.

Yet one of the primary reasons that U.S. and Chinese visions of security differ is that China is not just any type of challenger—it is a challenger with an autocratic, one-party political system. That fact—which touches on a key element of the original orthodox explanation of the Cold War—also goes a long way in the current context. Americans have long believed that authoritarian regimes are inherently aggressive and hard to deal with. There is ample reason to think that this is true in China’s case. It is

simply impossible for Beijing's rulers to feel fully secure in a system dominated by liberal values and a liberal superpower, because they fear that this system will undermine their own authority at home.

Similarly, the autocratic nature of the Communist Party ensures that Chinese officials will constantly be tempted to channel internal discontent outward, to manufacture legitimacy by pursuing a nationalistic foreign policy, and to place antagonism with the democratic world as a core tenet of its beliefs—as the Chinese government has increasingly done over the past three decades, after the shift away from socialist economics and the repression at Tiananmen Square undermined other the prior ideological pillars of party rule. Finally, the nature of the Chinese system means that Chinese leaders see U.S. subversion and discontent even where there is no such intent—as their outraged response to 2012 New York Times story on corruption within China's ruling elite demonstrated. As long as the United States and its allies have institutions such as a free press interested in investigating corruption, as long as the United States supports concepts such as democracy and human rights, and as long as the United States maintains its alliances in Asia, Chinese leaders will feel threatened.

In sum, Xi Jinping may be overseeing key changes in Chinese behavior, and there is no doubt that Beijing's rulers dislike many U.S. actions in the region and beyond. But Sino-American antagonism is less a result of those factors than it is a product shifting power dynamics and the ingrained nature of the regime.



The U.S. Navy destroyer USS Stethem docks at Wusong military port in Shanghai for a five-day friendly visit on Nov. 16, 2015.
Xinhua/Chen Fei via Getty Images

There are several implications for U.S. policy toward China. First, there is little that the United States can realistically do to appease or reassure Chinese leaders. Unless Washington withdraws U.S. military forces to Hawaii and abandons its Pacific allies, and unless it ceases advocating on behalf of democratic values and human rights abroad, the Chinese leadership will remain convinced that America's chief aim is to contain its rise and undermine its stability. This conviction is not entirely wrong, but it is exaggerated—and it is driven by actions beyond those taken by the U.S. government. As long as American society promotes open, transparent, and democratic institutions, the United States will always appear as an ideological and even existential threat to Communist Party leaders. And as long as the international system remains fundamentally competitive, changes in the relative balance of power will produce the sort of frictions we see today. Confidence-building measures have their place in Sino-American relations, but Washington will not persuade Beijing's leaders that its presence is stabilizing and its intentions are benign.

Second, if the United States remains unwilling to cede Beijing a sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific, it needs to shore up its regional defenses by reinforcing the regional security architecture as well as its own sovereign capabilities. The last several years have seen the explosion of new bilateral, trilateral, and occasionally quadrilateral security arrangements between Washington and its regional partners, as well as efforts to upgrade America's bilateral alliances. These are indeed positive steps, but thus far they have not significantly altered Chinese actions in the South China Sea and farther abroad, nor have they reversed unfavorable changes in the regional balance of power. During the Cold War, it was only once Washington had demonstrated its willingness to uphold the status quo in West Berlin—and Western Europe more broadly—that the situation settled into a stalemate, albeit a dangerous and uneasy one. The differences between Europe in the late 1940s and today's Indo-Pacific region are vast, but the analogy holds a key point for today's policymakers: Strong security arrangements, backed by formidable U.S. military power, might harden feelings of antagonisms and suspicion, but they are indispensable to preserving the peace.

Third, U.S. officials must understand that the competition is both geopolitical and ideological. Xi Jinping's China is not Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union. But it has been working assiduously to undermine democracy and strengthen autocracy overseas, out of ideological sincerity as well as a hardheaded belief that Beijing will be more secure in a world where illiberalism has displaced liberalism. The United States and its allies need to recognize that the competition with an increasingly authoritarian, repressive, and technologically adept state is, by its nature, one that has ideological elements driving those trends.

That is something policymakers should not shy away from. Today, one of the most pronounced trends in international affairs is the simultaneous ascent of authoritarian states and the retreat of democracies. Faced with this challenge, Western policymakers must become more assertive in defending democracy at home and advancing democratic values more forcefully in an ideologically contested Asia. During the Cold War, U.S. efforts to strengthen non-communist elements within the Soviet bloc often ended in frustration, at least in the near term. But over the long term, they gave hope to those laboring for a freer future behind Moscow's Iron Curtain. Meanwhile, increasingly assertive efforts to promote democracy in regions around the world during the 1970s and 1980s made the global ideological climate steadily less friendly to a repressive communist regime.

A similar lesson holds today. Supporting human rights and democracy in the Asia-Pacific and globally makes good moral and strategic sense, for doing so is the best way of ensuring that the international ideological climate remains congenial to American influence and American values. Likewise, highlighting Beijing's increasingly horrific abuses of its own population—namely, the internment, torture, and forcible re-education of Muslims in Xinjiang—and standing publicly with supporters of human rights and political reform in China should be a key part of any U.S. strategy for waging a competition that is about values as much as it is about power.

Finally, mounting an appropriate response to China can only happen with sustained popular support. It is commonplace in Washington to speak of “whole of government” approaches. What is needed here is something even broader—a “whole of society” approach.

The U.S. response to Moscow during the late 1940s and early 1950s shows that this is indeed possible. Used to thinking of Soviet soldiers as their allies and exhausted from their heroic efforts during World War II, the American public was far from eager to wage a sustained twilight struggle against the Soviet Union. But Soviet aggression, calls for assistance from democratic partners, and sustained political leadership convinced the American public that this was a necessary struggle. The United States built a rough Cold War consensus based on fear of the Soviet threat—and also hope that in meeting that threat, America could build a thriving free world community.

Rallying the same type of support today will require that U.S. officials be realistic about the nature of the challenge and spell out clearly what meeting it will require. It will also require articulating how addressing the Chinese challenge will be central to preserving the relatively stable, open, and democratic world that has taken hold over the past seven decades. And this, in turn, will demand a level of sober but resolved political

leadership that has, thus far, been absent in the current administration. The size and scale of China mean that the problems it presents are not going away anytime soon. As during the Cold War, the United States will need a strategy that is as broad and enduring as the threat it is meant to counter.

