

# From Mao to Modernity: China's Rise in the 21st Century

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## I. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the central question framing US foreign policy has shifted from McCarthy's infamous "Who lost China?" to "What is China?" This question encompasses crucial facets of the shifting global order: What are China's motives? What will the consequences be? How should the West respond? *Should* the West respond? Addressing these questions is a prerequisite to resolving the multitude of global challenges today, from climate change and food insecurity to terrorism and nuclear proliferation. This essay first examines China's methods to become the leading superpower. Next, it analyzes the economic, social, and geopolitical implications of Chinese hegemony. Finally, it concludes that a globally dominant China, despite presenting the threat of digital authoritarianism, could foster both economic growth and geopolitical stability.

## II. How would China become the leading superpower?

Professor Ian Bremmer at Columbia's School of International Affairs defines a superpower as a nation with sufficient economic, political, and military power to influence global politics (Bremmer, 2015). By these standards, China is not yet the leading superpower. Its gross domestic product lags \$4 trillion behind that of the US, its military is geographically limited to Asia and the Indo-Pacific, and political stability within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is faltering in the wake of the pandemic (Allison, 2023). Thus, in order for China to reach the status of a "leading superpower," it must gain significant economic and military influence in addition to political legitimacy both domestically and abroad.

The rise of China will be different than that of the US. China already faces a number of rivals, including India, Japan, Taiwan, and the US, who challenge its aspirations of regional primacy. Furthermore, solely relying on regional primacy concentrates the competition for global primacy on what the US usually outperforms on—high-end military competitions—and risks pushing China's neighbors "further into Washington's arms". Thus, rather than forcefully pushing the US military out of the Indo-Pacific and Asian regions, China could establish global leadership by shaping economic, technological, and political institutions (Sullivan and Brands, 2020). Such an approach can be classified as expansion of Chinese soft power, defined as a form of co-option through global appeal (Nye, 1990).

## III. Economic implications

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a core example of Chinese expansion of soft power through economic investments. Launched in 2013, it links over 150 countries through a network of ports, roads, railways, and communication infrastructure (Albert, 2018). The BRI has the potential to

place China at the center of global trade, boosting its global economic and political influence (Sullivan and Brands, 2020).

When expanded, the BRI could massively benefit participants by making trade more efficient and accessible, boosting global trade by 6.2%, with corridor economies having 10% higher exports. Exporters globally reap the benefits of reduced trade costs and integrated trade networks, resulting in a net increase in Foreign Direct Investment by 7.6%. As a result of improved trade, BRI-related investments have the potential to create over 400,000 jobs and lift 32 million out of poverty (Ruta et al., 2019; Abrar, 2023). Beyond promoting trade, the BRI also serves as a platform for cooperation on global challenges, such as climate change. The BRI International Green Development Coalition brings together 134 organizations and 26 environmental ministries to spearhead sustainable development (UNEP, 2023). In 2022, the coalition held an international roundtable discussion to showcase significant BRI achievements in sustainable development, such as reduced renewable energy costs in Africa. The discussion also facilitated green development planning through partnerships, including one between the Vulnerable Group of Twenty (V20) countries and BRI members, to fund global investment in green energy (WRI, 2022).

Such developments are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of Chinese leadership. Because expansion of the BRI is central to China's status as the leading superpower, the benefits of economic growth and sustainability would be seen across the rest of Eurasia and Africa. By fostering broader technological, financial, and diplomatic cooperation, China can utilize its position to fill the vacuum of climate leadership and help achieve global climate goals (Tsafos, 2022).

There would also be many domestic implications of an expanded BRI. First, foreign investment maximizes innovation output of Chinese enterprises by providing capital, increasing overall investment in domestic research and development (Ito et al., 2012). Investment also intensifies market competition through the entry of foreign capital, which incentivizes companies to innovate for competitive advantages (Amiti and Konings, 2007; Goldberg, et al., 2010). This cycle of innovation provides sustained economic growth and a pathway towards societal development. Secondly, China's overseas lendings to fund BRI projects sterilize dollar inflows produced by trade, depreciating the Yuan and sustaining China's export-driven economy "faster and longer than it otherwise would have" (Chang, 2022). Such economic stimulation is the catalyst for domestic growth, providing the necessary resources for job creation, urbanization, social security, and green development (Whyte, 2021).

#### **IV. Technological and social implications**

Beyond substantial expansions in the economic sphere, China must also sustain a technological edge as the leading superpower. Fortunately for China, it is poised to displace the US as the global technological superpower given its leadership in 37 out of 44 crucial technologies, including robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), and biotechnology (Gaida et. al 2023). Chinese technological advancements could bring global benefits in a variety of sectors. In agriculture, research led by Huazhong University found that perturbing the OsKRN gene in rice increases yield by up to 10%, a discovery that helps meet global food demands through genetically

modified crops (Zhu, 2023). In medicine, extensive investment in biotechnological research fueled rapid development of drugs, such as I-Mab Biopharma's anti-CD47 monoclonal antibody, which has the potential to cure leukemia (Han, 2021). In transportation, China debuted a magnetic levitation train that runs at a record 600 km/hr, setting the standard for future, pollution-free travel (Marcus, 2021). China will likely expand its technological investments in pursuit of overall hegemony, forwarding revolutionary breakthroughs and improving quality of life for millions.

Unfortunately, Chinese technological advancements are a double-edged sword. Developments in data collection and intelligence tracking provide the CCP improved capabilities to surveil its citizens (Khalil, 2020). For example, the CCP uses AI, digital currency, and other technology to collect personal information on Xinjiang inhabitants (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This data is used to report "suspicious" activities and imprison Uyghur Muslims to reeducation camps, where they are subject to sterilization, forced labor, and human rights abuses (Maizland, 2022). Digital authoritarianism also plagues millions of Chinese citizens through China's social credit system, which ranks people to promote social integrity (Yang, 2022). Punishments for low credit include slow internet connection, exclusion from education and work, and even public blacklisting (Mistreanu, 2018). Because China lacks a central algorithm to determine social credit, information regarding citizens is gathered through mass surveillance and data collection. Such widespread data collection results in the formation of what Law Professor Anne Cheung at the University of Hong Kong calls a "data state": an authoritarian governance model enabling the state to monitor, evaluate, and control its subjects, leaving no room for autonomy (Cheung and Chen, 2021).

As the world's leading superpower, there is no doubt China will export its digital authoritarianism globally. Corporations like Huawei, Baidu, and Alibaba are already developing global infrastructure for AI, communications, and 5G networks (Hussain et al. 2023). The main concern is standard-setting; modern global competition within the ongoing fourth industrial revolution will let countries set technological standards for generations to come, which Beijing will not hesitate to take charge of. Huawei is one example of a corporation that establishes Chinese technological dominance through standard-setting. Huawei is far more advanced in facial recognition, analytic capabilities, and video surveillance than Samsung or Nokia (Feldstein, 2020). In fact, research found that 75 out of 176 countries deployed AI surveillance, and Huawei-led firms were the leading global suppliers of such technology. China provides the equipment for governments in Uganda, Venezuela, and Cuba to surveil their citizens and quell political challenges (Feldstein, 2019). Furthermore, because the CCP can freely exercise its ability to pressure, censor, and surveil its companies, authoritarianism inevitably permeates the ever-expanding realm of technology. Lack of a free press and rule of law significantly hinders the ability to hold political parties accountable for abuses, reinforcing China's win-win diplomacy; recipient countries acquire systems to control their populations, and in return, China entrenches its global influence (Wang, 2021).

## **V. Geopolitical implications**

China is highly unlikely to rely on military force to become the leading superpower. Some tensions will inevitably arise, but are unlikely to escalate to war. In 2020, for example,

Sino-Indian tensions spiked after a deadly clash along the Galway Valley border. Despite both countries strengthening their military presences, peace has persisted, because China knows an unstable South Asia would threaten BRI investments and undermine its international image (Dalton et al. 2020). The same is true for Taiwan: despite heightened tensions after US Representative Nancy Pelosi visited the island in 2022, the economic and political threat of Western sanctions ensures the CCP is unlikely to initiate conflict (Stavridis, 2022). Therefore, despite common narratives of the Thucydides Trap—that war becomes likely when one rising power displaces the current ruling power—restraints in the international order prevent escalation (Allison, 2017). Firstly, China and the US are connected through a global network of institutions, such as the United Nations Security Council, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, and the G20, that have an incentive to promote diplomacy and prevent conflict. Additionally, as demonstrated through Taiwan, the integrated nature of the global economy incentivizes China to avoid high-risk behavior that could potentially lead to war (Thorton, 2022; Yan, 2018). Finally, the threat of nuclear retaliation reinforces the notion of mutually assured destruction, disincentivizing escalation (Thorton, 2022).

History proves that, if anything, Chinese geopolitical leadership will promote global cooperation. Many failures of the western-centric international system have revealed themselves: “endless Middle Eastern wars, the rise of ISIS, and a revanchist Russia,” to name a few (Ashford et al., 2019). China has the potential to rebalance the international order by exporting the foundational aspects of Chinese socialism—cooperation and mutual learning—globally. China initiated inclusive international diplomacy through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, G20, BRIC, and other forums to facilitate common development (Shen, 2018). As the leading superpower, China can break the Western monopoly on global development by transforming international institutions like it has done. Promoting usage of these forums legitimizes them on the international stage, allowing other countries to hold China accountable for humanitarian abuses and setting the precedent for ethical governance that addresses 21st century challenges.

## VI. Conclusion

What is China? The answer varies. The Encyclopedia Britannica posits China as “one of the great cradles of world civilization,” and yet US intelligence leaders believe China is “the most consequential threat” to national security (Young, et al., 2023; Gazis and Yilek, 2023). To understand China’s role in global relations, this essay focused on the domestic and international implications of China as the leading superpower. First, it established a framework for how China must deploy a mixture of co-option and coercion to attain such status. Next, it analyzed the social, economic, and geopolitical implications of Chinese hegemony. Economically, through expanded investments, Chinese leadership yields immense potential for growth. Socially, despite how expanded Chinese influence in the technological sphere advances societal development, lack of ethical regulations threatens to increase human rights abuses through global digital authoritarianism. Geopolitically, Chinese leadership has the potential to replace centuries of an exclusive, western-centric international system with a model of inclusive global governance and international forums.



Countries cannot be perfect. The US may spearhead global medical research, but it also has 57 times as many school shootings as G7 nations combined (Grabow and Rose, 2018). China possesses the potential to shape the future of global governance for good, yet carries out egregious human rights violations. Regardless of the implications of Chinese hegemony, the crucial question that shapes future policy-making should instead be what global leaders can do to ensure ethical and sustainable governance.

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