

INTELLIGENCE PROJECT

# China's 21st Century Aspirational Empire

Robert R. Odell



HARVARD Kennedy School  
**BELFER CENTER**  
for Science and International Affairs

PAPER  
MAY 2023



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## About the Author

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# Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how the Chinese party-state chooses to exercise its economic, financial, diplomatic, military and soft power in the next 25 years will make a great difference to US national security and foreign policy, and to developments in the rest of the world. The paper makes three key points:

The core argument of this paper is that Beijing will likely aspire to pursue an empire-like position globally, not just seek an Asia-Pacific sphere of influence, and that this aspiration will founder. Achieving an empire-like position is both an imperative and is infeasible. The tensions between goal and reality will likely characterize China's role in the world in coming decades and will be central to the difficulties of US-China relations. Second, there is heuristic value for US policymakers and analysts to consider a 20-year outlook on the rise of China that encompasses China's pursuit of a global empire-like position. Third, paying close attention to how Beijing organizes its own government, corporate, and non-governmental organizations to seek an empire-like position will provide important signposts emerging tension and trends.

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A worker cleans glass panels of the Bank of China headquarters building near a decoration setup for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing, Sunday, Aug. 26, 2018.





## Introduction: Beijing between opportunities and constraints

How the Chinese party-state chooses to exercise its economic, financial, diplomatic, military and soft power in the next 25 years will make a great difference to U.S. national security and foreign policy, and to developments in the rest of the world. One way to frame China's power trajectory is to explore whether and how it might become more empire-like—seeking to bolster its own national advantages by eroding or suborning the sovereignty of states in all world regions.

The goal of this paper is to outline an argument that China could pursue a strategy of building and reinforcing an empire-like position in the world in the next 20 years. The paper is intended to offer a view of China's rising power that is orthogonal to the prevailing set of views in Washington, and so stimulate thinking among U.S. policymakers and analysts on how China could succeed, or fail in this strategy. The paper does not seek to advance an alarmist view of China's rising power: The Chinese empire-like position that the paper charts would not resemble the British empire of the 19th century or first-half of the 20th century, with territorial control, resident administrations, codified authorities, and intricate commercial and economic ties.

Just as the United States built and maintained such an empire under 20th century conditions, it may pass that China seeks to undertake a similar grand strategy under 21st century conditions. The term American empire carries definite accusatorial or normative uses, but also describes a U.S. position in every region of the world with complex, overlapping forms of power and influence—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement.<sup>1</sup> This U.S. position in the world also had a strong values component of support for democracy, civil liberties, and civil rights—not just intended as a counterpoise to the ideology or the Soviet bloc. The U.S. position also included occasional exercise of hard power and coercion—sometimes erupting in war.

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<sup>1</sup> This set of forms of U.S. power is the DIMEFIL model that is often used in U.S. national security educational settings and discourse.

The paper relies on the definition of empire of Michael Doyle, one that relies on historical empires.

“A relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society, whether achieved by force, political collaboration, or by economic, social, or cultural dependence.” Michael Doyle (1986):

This definition arguably also accommodates seeing the U.S. in the second-half of the 20th century as being empire-like, with U.S. **control** of effective political sovereignty of some select third countries in the early and middle periods of the Cold War. This gave way to U.S. **dominant influence** over political sovereignty of more countries in the later Cold War and beyond.

## The Washington near-consensus on China’s global role

The leading U.S. narrative in Washington on the rise of China recognizes its global goals, and is consistent with the idea of Beijing seeking an empire-like position. Because no single narrative on the China’s use of its rising power globally completely captures the variation in views across the organizations of U.S. national security and foreign policy, it is more apt to describe the set of narratives as a near-consensus..

The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy contains the following paragraph as part of the point of departure for describing the U.S. strategic response. The view of China’s use of power is descriptive and could be seen characterizing the main lines of the Washington near-consensus.

“The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific **and to become the world’s leading power**. It is using its technological capacity and increasing influence over international institutions to

create more permissive conditions for its own authoritarian model, and to mold global technology use and norms to privilege its interests and values. Beijing frequently uses its economic power to coerce countries. It benefits from the openness of the international economy while limiting access to its domestic market, and it seeks to make the world more dependent on the PRC while reducing its own dependence on the world. The PRC is also investing in a military that is rapidly modernizing, increasingly capable in the Indo-Pacific, and growing in strength and reach globally – all while seeking to erode U.S. alliances in the region and around the world.”<sup>2</sup> [ emphasis added ]

(For comparative purposes, Annex A contains the relevant paragraph from the 2017 National Security Strategy. )

The Washington near-consensus clearly sees China pursuing a global role, “to become the world’s leading power.” How does the empire lens on China’s goals and actions add value to this narrative? The approach taken in this paper builds out Washington consensus as follows:

The main weight of the near-consensus focusses on the U.S.-China competition in the Asia-Pacific region. The Washington near-consensus on the rise of China focusses on China seeking to displace the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, using multiple forms of power and influence. In terms of downside risk or risk of severe national loss, Beijing’s view is likely consistent with the Washington near-consensus, that the focus is on the Asia-Pacific region and especially on U.S.-China competition in East Asia. However, in terms of upside risk or opportunity, Beijing likely sees many openings for economic ties and even influence over political sovereignty in multiple regions, to include Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, eastern Oceania, and the Arctic.

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<sup>2</sup> Biden-Harris Administration, U.S. National Security Strategy, October 2022

# Part 1: China's aspirational empire: both imperative and infeasible

The core argument of this paper is that Beijing will likely aspire to pursue an empire-like position globally, not just seek an Asia-Pacific sphere of influence, and that this aspiration will founder. Achieving an empire-like position is both an imperative and is infeasible. The tensions between goal and reality will likely characterize China's role in the world in coming decades and will be central to the difficulties of U.S.-China relations.

## What would empire look like for China?

Chinese leaders and national security thinkers have closely observed the U.S. playbook for power and influence and are likely developing or implementing their own playbook in ways that reflect 21st century opportunities. If China takes the trajectory toward more empire-like power and influence worldwide, it will likely not resemble the territorial, on-the-ground control or coercion of 19th century or early 20th century European empires. Under 21st century conditions and exploiting the deep and wide proliferation of information and communications technologies, China would seek to erode third-country sovereignty only as much as it needed to, in order to meet its local or region-specific goals. Elite bargains in third countries, using Chinese capital, finance, and technology, could help make eroded sovereignty opaque to the public of given countries.

It is likely that Beijing will seek to attain an empire-like position in multiples regions of the world with complex, overlapping forms of power and influence—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement. The Chinese pursuit of an empire-like position would have a strong values dimension and include occasional exercise of hard power and coercion. In sum, the core argument is that it is worthwhile for the U.S. to consider a China that pursues an empire-like position globally in the 21st century that would look much more like the so-called American empire that prevailed in the second half of the 20th century.

For Beijing to pursue a global, empire-like posture, it would have to not only continue to seek economic, commercial, and technology advantages or domination in every region and across multiple industrial, services, and science and technology

fields. It also would have to seek to convert that economic power to other forms of power—diplomatic, informational, military, intelligence, and law enforcement, as well as pursuing these other forms of power in their own right.

The first part of China's global reach—the push for economic power—is beyond dispute. It is occurring now. The second part—the conversion of economic to political power and pursuit of empire-like influence and control—is less certain, but plausible, based on four factors:

- Beijing has aspirations to gain global recognition of the value and importance of its values. These claims to a kind of universalism of Chinese core ideas will likely not be met by increasing Chinese dominance in economics, finance, trade or technology in some regions.
- In some sub-regions, Beijing will not be able to resist taking the opportunity to convert economic power to political power, to include dominant influence or control over some aspects of the political sovereignty of third countries. Beijing's goals and capabilities will likely make some opportunities to gain position, respect, displace the U.S., and emplace friendly elites irresistible.
- Beijing will seek to make innovative uses of technology to enable or advance Chinese influence or, for some measures of the government and economy, control over third countries. The scope and penetrative depth of these technologies—5G, artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, bioeconomy technologies—will likely offer Beijing not just economic or commercial advantage, but opportunities to gain dominant influence or control politically in some countries, in multiple regions.
- The challenges of social and political division in the U.S., the seeming fragility of U.S. political and social institutions, and highly visible symptoms of U.S. future ungovernability could offer Beijing opportunities to develop and propagate forms of Chinese soft power based on order, stability, and merit. To the extent that the U.S. undertakes highly assertive forms of foreign and trade policies, Beijing will likely see these U.S. actions as further opportunities for soft power.

Based on these factors, and despite the obstacles it faces, Beijing will seek to attain empire-like position globally, and especially Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and eastern Oceania. The goals, methods, and actions will merit the term empire-like because they will seek to influence and even control the political sovereignty of select third countries. This influence or control will seek encompass skewing national law and law enforcement, influencing elections, directing some aspects of finance and public finance, and limiting freedom of action in foreign policy.

## **How achieving an empire-like position is likely infeasible for China**

Achieving an empire-like position globally is likely infeasible for China, for three main reasons. First, the 21st century is unlikely to replicate the conditions that led to an empire-like position for the U.S. in the 20th century. Second, despite its growing power and heightened national goals, China does not have the attributes that would allow it to attain a global empire-like position. Third, third countries are likely to have characteristics and options that preclude Chinese conversion of economic and financial power to influence or control over political sovereignty.

In the vein of Mark Twain's quip that "history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes," the U.S.'s empire-like presence in the second half of the 20th century offers a kind of model or playbook for Beijing in the 21st century. Beijing will likely perceive opportunities to use all of the forms of national power to achieve a kind of global dominance. That said, attentive observers, including in Beijing, will see that the empire-like roles of the U.S. were historically contingent and not replicable:

- In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. emerged as the nation least damaged, most mobile and present in almost all world regions, and with a powerful economy and ability to invest.
- The weakness of the European colonial powers and the development of culturally-based independence movements created many openings for the U.S. to gain new influence and in some cases, control.
- The U.S.-Soviet Union geopolitical competition and the division of much of the world into aligned blocs created conditions for greater U.S. influence, military basing and alliances, in common cause with national leaders in third countries.

- The powerful U.S. industries involving entertainment, sports, individual consumer goods, and the car—together with the Cold War emphasis on freedom—contributed to a kind of powerful cultural influence for the U.S.. U.S. influence was fun, and liberating. U.S. culture allowed women and girls in third countries to envision new roles for themselves.
- Finally, in many cases, immigrants to the U.S.—served as purveyors of U.S. values, and indirectly, U.S. cultural influence back to their home countries.

In the 21st century, Beijing can count on none of these factors.

Even worse from Beijing’s perspective, China does not seem to offer an attractive model for values or culture. Domestic repression of ideas, tight control of the internet, and harsh subjugation of ethnic minorities are now part of China’s image abroad. China’s film and music/dance offerings are increasingly present in the world, but do not seem to offer the verve and virality of K-Pop or South Korean film. In some regions, Beijing’s efforts at converting economic influence to political influence have created resentment and fears over sovereignty. In these dimensions, Beijing might well realize the limits of its global appeal, making empire-like influence more remote.

Second, despite its growing power and heightened national goals, China likely does not have the attributes that would allow it to attain a global empire-like position. In this vein, it is worth quoting at length from David Shambaugh’s 2013 book, *China Goes Global—A Partial Power*, as an assessment of China’s strategic goals from an American skeptic.

“I further conclude from this study that China is, in essence, a very narrow-minded, self-interested, realist state, seeking only to maximize its own national interests and power. It cares little for global governance and enforcing global standards of behavior (except its much-vaunted doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries). Its economic policies are mercantilist and its diplomacy is passive. China is a lonely strategic power, with no allies and experiencing distrust and strained relations with much of the world. At the same time, China displays periodic evidence of being a dissatisfied, frustrated, aggrieved, and angry nation that seeks redress against those who have wronged it in the past or with which it has disagreements at

present. China carries a heavy burden of aggrievement and revanchist nationalism from a history that does not serve it well, currently or in the future...China's occasionally assertive and truculent external posture is rooted in its domestic insecurities, rising nationalism, and historic experiences."<sup>3</sup>

Shambaugh concludes that China is not ready for global leadership. The point of this paper is to highlight the potential that China will see global leadership, and even empire-like influence and control in some countries and sub-regions, even without possessing the tools to be a great power. If this is correct, the tension between China's aspirations and reality will characterize much of the economic and geopolitical landscape of the 21st century. Although Shambaugh makes this assessment in 2013, in some important ways, the situation today is even worse. The authoritarian turn, personalistic leadership, and foreign policy assertiveness of Chairman Xi Jinping likely supercharges Beijing's goals for global leadership or empire-like influence, while at the same time, making such leadership less feasible.

Third, countries are likely to have characteristics and options that preclude Chinese conversion of economic and financial power to influence or control over political sovereignty. Globalization has arguably had the effect of strengthening nationalism, pride and national or sub-national culture, and the importance of sovereignty in many countries, in every sub-region. At the same time, economic stresses and pressures on workers and businesses have likely sharpened sensitivities to real or perceived economic predation from foreign powers. In these context, Beijing's actions to finance and build national and local infrastructure could yield greater influence and even inroads to control, Beijing would have to proceed very deftly in converting economic or financial power to political influence or control. The dynamics will all be case-by-case, depending on the country. But for Beijing to achieve sustained success would seem to require a sea-change in Beijing's approaches and philosophical inclinations toward the external world.

Overall, the tension between China's goals and reality does not imply that the U.S. should either dismiss Beijing's global aspirations or overemphasize risks or threats of China's actions globally. Viewing China through the lens of its empire-like aspirations will have heuristic value for the U.S.—helping the U.S. to interpret complex events and trends involving China's rise.

<sup>3</sup> Pages 310-311 "China Goes Global - David Shambaugh - Oxford University Press," accessed April 25, 2023, <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/china-goes-global-9780199860142?cc=us&lang=en&>.



## Part 2: Viewing Beijing's goals and actions through the lens of empire has heuristic value for U.S. observers

There is heuristic value for U.S. policymakers and analysts to consider a 20-year outlook on the rise of China that encompasses China's pursuit of a global empire-like position. Put another way, seeing China through the lens of its potential 21st century empire, and the United States' own 20th century empire, has value in helping enable U.S. policymakers and analysts to get past their own assumptions and potentially better interpret and understand China's rise.

In addition, the aspirational empire interpretation of Beijing's goals and actions is correct, the collision between aspirations and reality will be an important feature of the economic and security landscape in multiple world regions. The tension between Beijing's goals and its ability to achieve those goals will play out against the larger U.S.-China tensions over third countries.

There are five elements to the heuristic value for U.S. observers to see Beijing's goals and actions through the lens of empire:

First, an overemphasis on Beijing's goals and actions in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in East Asia, tends to frame the U.S.-China geopolitical competition **in zero-sum terms**. If China dominates, it will be at the expense of the United States, and vice versa. Making the U.S.-China competition mainly about East Asia raises the salience of dyadic, two-party military conflict—as one power seeks to overcome the advantages of the other in the sub-region. In contrast, seeing the U.S.-China competition in global terms--encompassing their interactions with many third countries—has both zero-sum and non-zero-sum elements. For some third countries, Beijing's successful pursuit of empire-like control would almost certainly come at the expense of the U.S.. Yet for other countries, and for some regions, Chinese and U.S. efforts at influence or control could co-exist, and even complement each other.

In some important ways, the Asia-Pacific region is the **least susceptible** to Chinese pursuit of an empire-like power position. Somewhat ironically, most countries in the wide geographic area in continental Asia and maritime areas where China

historically exercised its tributary form of empire is most sensitive to the risks of Chinese party-state influence. The countries near China have been and continue to be most invested in preempting or countering Chinese attempts to attain an empire-like position in their countries, with some exceptions.

Second, seeing Beijing's goals and actions through the lens of empire would force U.S. policymakers and analysts to pay **attention to the complexity** of efforts of both great powers at influence or control in third countries, and de-center the risks of direct military escalation or conflict over Taiwan, the South China Sea, or the so-called first and second island chains. Centering the competition over third countries brings all of the overlapping forms of power and influence of the DIME-FIL model—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement—in addition to values and ideology. The potential for a serious gap between Beijing's aspirations for use of these forms of power and reality in third countries further increases the complexity.

Third, the lens of China pursuing a global empire-like position puts **the uses and effects of technology** in a different light. An emphasis on U.S.-China competition in the Asia-Pacific region includes extensive attention to semiconductors, in the context of Taiwan and the U.S.. But Asia-Pacific focus also makes military technology—and uses of weapons in East Asia—central to the competition. Military technology is indeed important in the U.S.-China rivalry, but there is much broader technology competition going on that involves the entire world. Given the likely gap between Beijing's goals and reality, greater proliferation and penetration of technology to third countries are likely to have unintended consequences. The technology will operate on the societies, economies, and politics of third countries but without Beijing actually achieving much influence or control. An example might be Beijing's promotion of smart or safe cities based on information and communications technologies.

Fourth, seeing Beijing's goals and actions through the lens of achieving a global, empire-like position increases **the salience of Chinese culture and values** as an element of its rising power. Chinese actions to promote its culture and values globally have proved susceptible to abuses. Both the Confucian revival in the propaganda narratives of the party-state, and the global establishment and promotion of Confucian Institutes raised suspicions of Chinese state goals. In this context, it is easy for U.S. and other Western observers to see the promotion

of Chinese culture and values cynically—as part of a power game. Yet, Chinese leaders and many in the wider public very likely see their culture and values as eminently worthy of greater recognition in foreign contexts, and as part of the package of Chinese economic investment, finance, and engagement. Seeing the U.S.-China competition primarily as risking dyadic military conflict in the Asia-Pacific region tends to discount the values dimension, while the lens of Beijing seeking an empire-like position tends to center the potential appeal and challenges of culture and values as part of Chinese soft power.

Overfocusing on the East Asia sub-region occludes the role of Chinese culture and values—and their potential roles in Chinese soft power. China’s East Asian neighbors have been influenced by Chinese culture for millennia. They know it from the insider, as it were, and have tended to develop powerful antibodies to exposure or ingestion of new forms of Chinese culture and values.

Finally, the **dynamics of U.S.-China interactions in third countries** becomes much more important. Being attentive to how U.S. responses to China’s aspirational empire goals and actions could help shape appropriate U.S. responses with regard to third countries. Despite the reasons for the plausibility of China pursuing a global, empire-like strategy, there are plenty of things that go wrong, even without active U.S. measures against China’s strategy. Would China be able to attain such an empire-like position? The factors affecting Beijing’s prospects will vary by the third country at issue. However, one of the key elements of Beijing’s prospects will be the kind, scope, strength and consistency of U.S. response. The goals and actions of the U.S. with respect to China’s pursuit of a global, empire-like position will matter greatly, with wide variations in potential outcomes. Reduced to a schematic, one version of these outcomes is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** U.S.-China dynamics if China seeks global, empire-like position

	U.S. pursues active containment	U.S. responses situational, jujitsu
China pursues highly manipulative, at times coercive approach	1	2
China uses the full range of kinds of power, inc. values	3	4

The combinations correspond to the following kinds of outcomes:

1. **Proxy war:** The U.S. acts sharply to protect the sovereignty of a third country or both the U.S. and China subordinate the sovereignty of a third country as a stage for war.
2. **Potential Chinese overreach:** In common cause with the leadership in a third country, the U.S. acts to buffer, insulate or defend a third country from Chinese influence or control.
3. **Potential U.S. overreach:** Against with the leadership in a third country, the U.S. acts to spoil, disrupt, punish or interdict Chinese influence or control. The responses of China could affect the security or stability of the country and sub-region.
4. **Modus vivendi—two empires:** Both the U.S. and China pursue influence, and in some cases control, but both stay within bounds.

Any of these cases could occur as unusual events in individual countries, or become wider, frequent phenomena in entire sub-regions in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, or eastern Oceania.

What the matrix does not show is how the goals and actions of all the actors—China, the U.S., the third country at issue, and regional middle powers—will all likely be affected by the ubiquity and societal penetration of technology.

These five elements comprise the heuristic value of a China as empire lens for U.S. and other Western observers. The four elements offset the arguably tendencies to miss or misunderstand much of the potential complexity of the rising power of China by:

- Emphasizing the zero-sum character of U.S.-China relations in the Asia-Pacific region
- De-emphasizing the many kinds of power that come into play in Chinese goals and actions involving influence or control over third countries, and privileging military power

- Emphasizing military technology uses and effects in East Asian scenarios, and deemphasizing the wider global technology competition involving non-military technologies
- Discounting the potential role of Chinese culture and values in future Chinese soft power in third countries.
- Being attentive to how U.S. responses to China's aspirational empire goals and actions could help shape appropriate U.S. responses with regard to third countries.

It might be too easy for American observers to unreflectively adopt a completely unrealistic oppositional stance toward the 21st century rise of China. For example, at a September 2022 think tank conference on national security, a former U.S. combatant commander declared that the United States must “ensure that China does not become a world leader”. It is unclear what this would have meant in 1980, but in 2022, it suggests that some in the U.S. national security and foreign policy arenas have not thought through what the U.S. wants from China in the 21st century. As noted, the zero-sum approach to the rise of China might apply with respect to security in the Asia-Pacific region. It will likely not apply to a rising China with goals for a global, empire-like position. The two empires might be able to co-exist in seeking influence in the wider world. Alternatively, U.S. responses to China goals and actions in Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, eastern Oceania, or the Arctic could lead to serious tensions and even military conflicts.

## Part 3: How Beijing organizes for empire-like position will provide key signposts

For U.S. and Western observers, paying close attention to how Beijing organizes its own government, corporate, and non-governmental organizations to seek an empire-like position will provide important signposts for both Beijing's imperatives, and the likely infeasibility of the project. Efforts to coordinate multiple forms of national power between Beijing and Chinese country teams in third countries will have observables that could shed light on the tension between aspirations and reality. (Country teams would include government, NGO and corporate officials affiliated with Beijing.) Types of tensions to watch would include:

- Issues for which Beijing seeks third country government compliance against country teams seeking to broaden or deepen business relationships
- Differences between Beijing and country teams on which third-country political leaders, parties or factions to support
- Differences over the hard ball degree of methods to influence or control third country entities
- Differences in proposed responses when China goals or actions become the targets of media or law enforcement attention
- Issues for which leadership jockeying in Beijing has downstream effects on country teams
- Repercussions of anti-corruption measures in China on country teams
- Issues for which Beijing seeks greater local confrontation with U.S. or other Western interests.

Efforts to closely control efforts from Beijing could skew the work of Chinese officials working in third countries and could distort Chinese perceptions of what is actually happening.

# Closing points: Expect to see more tensions outside East Asia

The tension between Beijing's goals and ability to achieve the goals for an empire-like position will likely characterize much of the China's global and regional roles and actions in the 21st century.

A leading implication of this paper for the U.S. is that the Asia-Pacific region might well not be the main stage for U.S.-China competition in the next 20 years. Instead, the main stage might be third countries throughout the world. . This is not to discount the importance of the ways in which U.S.-China competition in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific could lead to military conflict, especially over the status of Taiwan or the South China Sea. That set of dynamics deserves close and continuing attention by policymakers and analysts. But it is possible that over the over longer run, East Asia is not the main stage of the U.S.-China competition.

Steady, incremental, and innovative moves by Beijing toward empire-like influence in Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, eastern Oceania, and the Arctic might well be much more important to relative U.S. power. Detecting or measuring China's progress in gaining influence and even control in some places and cases might be elusive. It might be difficult to come up with an adequate way to benchmark or aggregate Chinese influence. Developments will likely be less salient than the China threat in East Asia. Chinese empire-like influence and selective control in the 21st century, if it occurs, will be an utterly new-seeming phenomena, with extensive uses and effects of technology and interactions with the effects of climate change. It would comprise a new way for China to interact with the world.

U.S. responses to Beijing's efforts to attain empire-like status will be a key variable for success in many sub-regions. U.S. responses will themselves be sensitive to national sovereignty, and U.S. missteps could even open doors for greater Chinese influence

All these are reasons that the possibility deserves greater study and attention.

U.S. policymakers and analysts need to be asking

- How will China's leaders choose to exercise its increasing economic, diplomatic, and military power in the next 25 years? Can China's leaders restrain themselves?
- Is China's approach likely to lead to a more empire-like posture in the world, with significant erosion of the sovereignty of third countries?
- How is the U.S. likely to respond if its geopolitical competition with China becomes more about contested control or influence in third countries, and less about direct military confrontation?
- Alternatively, what if China's leaders play their hand smartly, providing extensive leeway to third countries and becoming more powerful on the way?



# Annex A: Approximating the Washington near-consensus

## Excerpt from Trump Administration National Security Strategy, December 2017

“Although the United States seeks to continue to cooperate with China, China is using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda. China’s infrastructure investments and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations. Its efforts to build and militarize outposts in the South China Sea endanger the free flow of trade, threaten the sovereignty of other nations, and undermine regional stability. China has mounted a rapid military modernization campaign designed to limit U.S. access to the region and provide China a freer hand there. China presents its ambitions as mutually beneficial, but Chinese dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states in the Indo- Pacific. States throughout the region are calling for sustained U.S. leadership in a collective response that upholds a regional order respectful of sovereignty and independence.”

## Excerpts from National Intelligence Council Report, Global Trends 2040, March 2021—From five-year regional outlook, to 2025 for East Asia

The trajectory for East Asia to 2025 increasingly appears to be one in which China expands its leading position in the region, with the majority of its neighbors accommodating Chinese predominance. This accommodation derives largely from their need for economic ties to China and a lack of alternatives, although many countries would prefer to avoid deference to Beijing. By 2025, China’s ambitions and military capabilities are likely to extend further into the Pacific, and its institutional reach will be even broader, having already expanded via organizations such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Lancang Mekong Cooperation forum.

China will be the common denominator for most regional tension in the next five years as it navigates great power politics and its interest in establishing regional dominance over its neighbors. The manifestation of these tensions is likely to reflect the interconnected nature of East Asia, as Chinese actions in one area—such as the Mekong River—may lead to responses by other countries elsewhere—such as the South China Sea. Tensions may also spiral upward from the local to the international level, such as when Vietnamese or Filipino fishermen confront Chinese Coast Guard vessels and then appeal to their own governments for support from their national coast guards or navies. Each of the areas highlighted in this section could serve as the locus for conflict in the next five years, but it is hard to pinpoint exactly where or when conflict might break out.









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