The China Challenge and the Aspen Strategy Group

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The Aspen Strategy Group convened in Aspen, Colorado, in 2019 and then virtually in 2020 amid the coronavirus pandemic. At these two gatherings, participants focused intently on an issue that will be central both to U.S. strategy and to the group's future gatherings: the question of how the United States will compete and, where possible, cooperate with a China that is not merely rising, but, in critical respects, has already risen.

While the group had explored dimensions of this challenge in previous gatherings, it has increasingly taken center stage in the formulation and execution of American grand strategy. Accordingly, the Aspen Strategy Group has an opportunity to be one of the key convening institutions as U.S. foreign policy enters a new paradigm, one that will call for extensive and deep policy discussion and debate at a time of key transition.

China as the New Foreign Policy Paradigm

Over the last three years, the United States has entered the most consequential rethink of its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Although Washington remains bitterly divided on many issues, a rare area of apparent consensus across the political aisle has emerged around the need to pursue a more robust approach when it comes to China. There is an uneasy sense, shared by Democrats and Republicans alike, that "engagement" is now behind us, but it is unclear what lies ahead.

In this time of great division, it is often surprising just how rapidly the body politic has united on a more competitive approach to China. Public opinion now regularly demonstrates that most Americans see China as a top security threat and have an increasingly unfavorable view of Beijing's human rights record and economic challenge. These public sentiments are, if anything, lagging indicators that follow a hardening elite consensus on China that has proceeded with surprisingly little debate over the last three years. The watchword in elite discourses is "strategic competition," and references to a second "Cold War" are increasingly common and influential. There is now a relatively clear consensus that competition will be at the center of U.S.-China policy in the period ahead, and U.S.-China policy will, in turn, be at the center of U.S. foreign policy. Even so, fundamental questions remain with respect to the objectives of the competition and the nature of the desired end state that Washington should pursue. While there is growing consensus on various elements of U.S. strategy, critical questions also remain on how best to implement them, and the discussion as a whole has been slow to proceed from the level of generalities to that of concrete prescription.

The China challenge is also an unusual one for most policy makers because it touches virtually every aspect of policy, foreign and domestic. It combines virtually every element of traditional and nontraditional foreign policy, ranging from some forgotten aspects of nineteenth and twentieth century great power competition to the twenty-first century challenges posed by climate change, the coronavirus pandemic, emerging technologies, and the management of the global economy.

The Limited Applicability of Old Paradigms

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has had two dominant strategic paradigms, and neither of these provide adequate preparation for competition with China. The first of these paradigms was the Cold War and the second was the Global War on Terrorism and the attendant military conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia. This strategic history shaped the careers of most current American policy practitioners, and yet it provides less guidance for the period ahead than one might hope.

The first of these paradigms, the Cold War, is also the one most frequently invoked today. It is understandable that strategic elites would reach back to the only great-power competition they remember to make sense of the present one, and the analogy certainly retains intuitive appeal. China is a large, continent-sized great power with a repressive political system, and it poses a global long-term strategic challenge that will require significant U.S. mobilization.

But the similarities are limited. The U.S.-China relationship is not a bipolar contest of total victory and defeat. While the risk of conflict in Asia's hotspots is serious, it is by no means as high nor is the threat of nuclear escalation as great as it was in Cold War Europe, where American military doctrine envisioned the tactical use of nuclear weapons to offset Soviet conventional superiority. The present competition has not unleashed proxy wars or produced rival blocs of ideologically aligned states preparing for armed struggle. Importantly, while the U.S.-China relationship is not nearly as dangerous as the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, China represents a significantly more challenging competitive proposition given that its economy is far larger, more technologically advanced, and more dynamic than the Soviet economy. Beijing is also better able to wield its economic power for strategic influence given its willingness to embrace the forces of globalization and interdependence, though largely on its own terms. China is now the top trading partner for more than two-thirds of the world's countries. Unlike the U.S.-Soviet relationship, Washington and Beijing are still connected by economic, people-to-people, and technological linkages. These ties also exist between China and much of the world, which complicates a determination of whether particular states are aligned with the United States or with China.

For these reasons, the twenty-first century competition with China fundamentally occurs on a different scale and stage than that with the Soviet Union. China is a more creative and comprehensive competitor, and its weight is greatest in the economic, technological, and soft-power realms, in contrast to the arms races that defined the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. And given the wide-ranging influence of both the United States and China, the competition for influence runs not along the borders but through capitals, with middle powers playing critical roles in various "swing states" and often the subject of contestation.

Second, U.S. experience in the Middle East and South Asia also has limited utility in guiding us through the unique features of U.S.-China competition. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were largely waged apart from questions of great power competition, and they were fundamentally focused on narrower questions of radicalization, counterinsurgency, and nation-building.

The challenges of the Middle East also led the United States to overlook the domestic foundations of its own power. Those conflicts came at a time of American preeminence when Washington took the sources of its influence for granted. Now, as those sources suffer from neglect and are increasingly matched by China, the need to reinvest in them is greater. Unlike the Global War on Terrorism, the competition with China is as much about American rejuvenation as it is about foreign policy, and that requires a far more comprehensive approach.

The U.S. focus on counterterrorism and nation-building produced a cadre of experts familiar with the various villages and valleys of the region and the complexities of the political struggles within it. But by contrast, the U.S.-China competition proceeds at an entirely different scale and scope and requires completely separate sets of expertise. Some of that expertise is regional, and the central theater of U.S.-China rivalry—the Indo-Pacific—features prosperous economies, enormous trade flows, and greater diversity than the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia. Some of the expertise will be functional, requiring fluency in the nuances of technology policy, domestic competitiveness, and international economics. In both cases, that expertise is not readily abundant within the foreign policy community.

Capacity-Building for Competition

Because the last fifty years have been poor preparation for the competition with China, American strategy is still in its early stages. The United States will need to cultivate a cadre of strategic elites familiar in the politics of the Indo-Pacific, the arcana of the Chinese Communist Party and its grand strategy, and the economic and technological foundations of American competitiveness and power. It will need to develop and include in discussions at the very highest levels not only foreign policy practitioners but individuals from a wide swath of society—academia, business, and technology—who can inform all facets of U.S. strategy, foreign and domestic. And it will need to cultivate the capacity for nimble and rapid strategic adjustments against a potentially dynamic and formidable competitor. If we are truly at the early stages of the China debate, then American strategy will likely need to evolve over time, and a series of refinements and course corrections will be all but inevitable as Washington learns what is effective and adjusts in response to China's own countermoves.

The Aspen Strategy Group can play a critical role in building these capacities. Indeed, it has done so before. During the early periods of the Cold War, the Aspen Institute brought together European-trained strategists with what were then arcane physicists to master the details of the nuclear competition that could come to dominate elements of the U.S.-Soviet relationship. And of course, it was the Aspen Institute that responded to the tragedy of September 11th with convenings that familiarized the strategic community with the challenges of terrorism and counterinsurgency. Now, the Aspen Institute will once again have an opportunity to convene expert strategists and meld them with experts from other arenas in ways that will illuminate the various facets of the U.S.-China competition.

How might such an approach proceed in concrete terms? Convenings on U.S.-China competition will need to cover a range of different domains. The objective is to organize strategists to focus on the key questions in this competition; to combine their expertise with that of various regional and functional experts; to reconsider areas of agreement and probe areas of disagreement; and to take the debate beyond its present level of generalities down to the level of detailed prescription and practice. The effort could span four broad categories.

First, the Aspen Strategy Group's work on China will need to engage the military dimension. It is clear to most by now that the military challenge China poses is qualitatively different from that to which the United States has grown accustomed since the end of the Cold War. The United States enjoyed uncontested dominance against its opponents in the Global War on Terrorism, but that era is fast receding. Now, Washington often operates from a position of relative weakness in the Indo-Pacific. That state of affairs can be rectified, but the discussions on how best to do so will require familiarity with operational concepts, technologies, and distributed postures unfamiliar to most foreign policy elites. Familiarizing these individuals with the kinds of low-cost, high-impact investments that can boost the capacity for deterrence is essential. Debating whether they are appropriate is also worthwhile, as is detailed discussion on how these efforts may be translated into practice.

Second, geo-economics and technology will be at the center of U.S.-China competition. The Aspen Strategy Group can help convene robust debates on the best U.S. approach in this domain. That effort will require greater study of supply chains. It will also require deep thinking about the kinds of Cold War–era public investments in science, infrastructure, industrial policies, and education widely understood then to have salutary economic and strategic benefits. It will call for expertise in the technologies of tomorrow, whether in clean energy, biotechnology, or artificial intelligence and quantum computing. It will demand careful consideration of how to selectively decouple with China, disengaging in sensitive technologies essential to national security while permitting regular interaction in trade and investment in technologies that are less sensitive—all to safeguard American technological advantages and strategic independence while avoiding isolating the United States from global commerce. Finally, it will necessitate a reimagining of global economic institutions and the devising of new ways to organize allies and partners across Asia and Europe with the ultimate purpose of setting rules for trade and standards for technology that can undergird free world approaches to geo-economics. These are broad principles, and they increasingly find bipartisan support, though areas of debate remain in key places. The central question ahead is *how* to implement this agenda, and once again, the Aspen Strategy Group can play a critical role in convening experts to tackle this question.

Third, while U.S.-China competition is not overtly ideological, there should be little doubt that liberal values now face a renewed challenge—even if it is one less evangelical and existential than that faced during the Cold War. China's sheer size and its signature fusion of authoritarian capitalism and digital surveillance (seen in its darkest form in Xinjiang) will likely exert a pull toward autocracy. But once again, while the contours of the problem are broadly understood, context remains absent as does a robust debate on the way forward. The Aspen Strategy Group can educate its participants on the particulars of China's own thinking on Western liberalism and how it seeks to make the world safer for autocracy, the ways technology poses challenges to liberal governance, and the specific ways Beijing might be exporting some of its digital authoritarian approaches. It will also be positioned to find solutions to these challenges in order to shore up democratic resilience.

Fourth, the United States and China will need to find ways to both cooperate and compete. This principle is so frequently invoked that it borders on cliché, but the question of how and where to balance these competing impulses will need to be carefully discussed and debated. The Aspen Strategy Group can play a central role in organizing consideration of this question. It can also play a role, as it already has in so many areas of transnational cooperation, in bringing policy makers into dialogue with experts on climate change and energy, nuclear technology, epidemiology, and other specialties central to global governance.

These four domains could presumably be supplemented with additional domains or alternatively be subdivided, but they approximate the scope of the China challenge. As China emerges at the center of American foreign policy in the period ahead, there will be a need to build capacity and stimulate discussions on the way forward. The Aspen Strategy Group has been at the center of these moments of great adjustment in U.S. foreign policy, and it now has an opportunity to do so again.

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