The Essence of the Strategic Competition with China

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U.S. national security strategy and defense policy have come to focus on China as the primary emphasis in the "strategic competition" outlined by recent U.S. strategy documents.[1] Outside government, an avalanche of recent reports and essays lays out the China challenge in sometimes fervent terms, depicting an ideologically threatening revisionist state with malign intentions. As the *Financial Times* columnist Martin Wolf put it recently, "Across-the-board rivalry with China is becoming an organizing principle of U.S. economic, foreign and security policies."[2]

There is little question that China's growing power, its military buildup, its bold regional and eventually global ambitions, and its outsized self-conception pose very real challenges to the United States and the post-war, rule-based order. China is neither infinitely powerful nor wholly malicious. But its belligerent coercion of its neighbors, threat to use force to absorb Taiwan,[3] violations of human rights, predatory economic behavior, and many other activities mark its rise as a potential threat to U.S. security and any sort of rule-based international system.

Yet there remains a question of precisely what *sort* of challenge China poses—and, by extension, the true essence of the emerging competition. This article argues for one answer to that question: At its core, the United States and China are competing to shape the foundational global system—the essential ideas, habits, and expectations that govern international politics. It is ultimately a competition of norms, narratives, and legitimacy; a contest to have predominant influence over the reigning global paradigm. That paradigm, I will argue, is comprised of four components; economic and political values, cultural influences, leading rules and norms embodied in international law, agreements, and practice, and leadership of and standards reflected in international institutions. The article also contends that, despite its massive investments in propaganda tools and economic statecraft, China remains starkly ill-equipped to win such a competition—but the United States could, through self-imposed mistakes, lose it.

The article makes this case in four parts. First it offers reasons why other components of the competition often said to be central—military, economic, and clashing geopolitical interests—are in fact

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secondary aspects of the emerging rivalry. Second, the essay reviews various theories of power to make the case that direct, coercive power is both less effective and less sustainable in the long-term than more indirect, systemic forms of the kind at stake in the competition for the wider paradigm. Third, this analysis examines theories of legitimacy and legitimate authority to further define the ways in which states gain systemic influence. Fourth and finally, drawing on those theoretical foundations, the essay defines the characteristics of the current competition for the paradigm and outlines implications for U.S. policy.

Secondary Components

Many assessments of the U.S.-China competition focus on three leading issues; the military and economic parts of the overall competition and specific geopolitical disputes involving Chinese territorial ambitions. These three elements are crucial and require U.S. attention and effort but are best viewed as secondary or supporting elements of the main contest.

The argument here is not that these more material or "harder" forms of power are unimportant to the competition. Indeed, as I will argue below, material power, and especially aspects of economic power and influence, establish part of the basis for success in normative terms. Claims to ideological supremacy must rest on strong material foundations. Investments in the long-term foundations of economic competitiveness, such as key emerging industries, research and development, and economic justice and equality, remain critical. The argument here is rather that such investments are means to a more important end and will not on their own win the competition—either for the United States or China. What is ultimately at stake is not a higher GDP or advantage in selected military systems; it is the power to exercise predominant influence over the defining ideas, rules, and institutions of world politics.

The Military Competition

The U.S.-China contest, for example, has an important military component. China poses an obvious danger to Taiwan. It has coerced other claimants to contested areas of the South China Sea, waged a limited war against Vietnam, and tangled with India over disputed land. It is engaged in a potent military buildup. Even short of war, credible military power is a critical supporting instrument to reassure friends and allies and avert a creeping belief that there is no alternative but to knuckle under to China.

Yet the military threat posed by China is muted in comparison to classic militaristic predators, at least for now. Beijing is not set to launch vast armies and fleets to invade and conquer its neighbors.[4] Prospective targets of adventurism are mostly too large and populous to be absorbed in this way; many are too far away; the benefits of owning territory are minimal; the difficulty of power projection is now extreme;[5] the risk of war with the United States and others would be too great. While China's long history is hardly free of adventurism, invade-and-occupy strategies have mostly been alien to China's modus operandi beyond its own territory: It prefers to overawe Asia rather than occupy it. In its "gray zone" tactics and elaborate economic investment programs, China gives every indication of intending to pursue its goals short of the use of force. China's dominant strategies, in short, are not built around conquest; the competition is not likely to be resolved by military power.

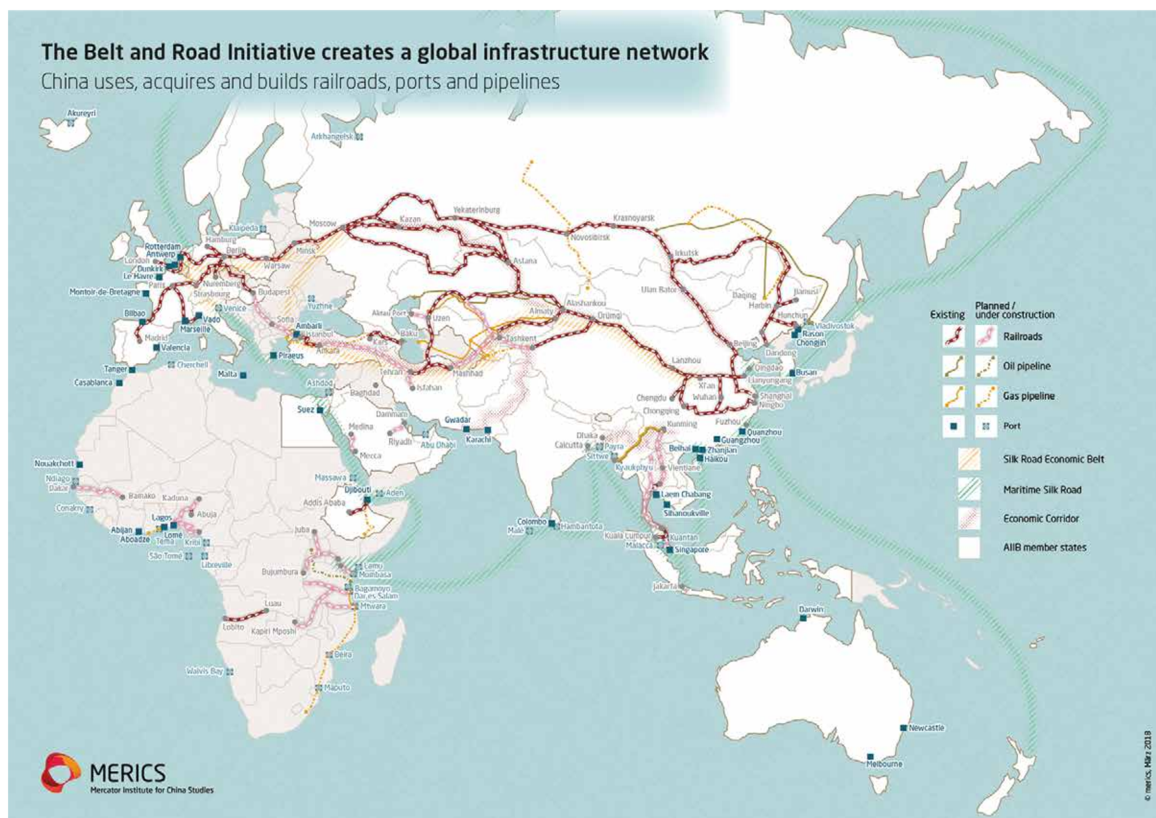
This part of the competition is also constrained because China's military ambitions, even at their most extensive, have no prospect of threatening vital U.S. interests. Chinese military seizure of Taiwan would be a tragedy and a crime, and the United States should not endorse Beijing's coercive control over the country—but it would not threaten the existence of the United States. Even Chinese military hegemony over Southeast Asia, as much as it would impair U.S. and allied freedom of action and as much as the United States should strongly support

others in the region to oppose it, does not represent anything close to an existential threat. The French-German rivalry of the 1930s—to take only one example—was centrally and primarily a military competition for the obvious reason that each state posed a direct military threat to the other, threats that had been repeatedly exercised in previous centuries. Nothing like that core military aspect exists in the U.S.-China relationship. Neither of the two countries poses a direct, existential military threat to the other's homeland.

The Economic Competition

The competition also has critical economic elements. Most broadly, economic performance, and the ability to compete in leading industries, provide the foundation for competitive strength. China is aiming for dominance in a range of key industries. It is using foreign investment—notably through the Belt and Road Initiative—to reorient Eurasia around a Chinese hub. Some of its strategies for doing so are aggressively incompatible with a rule-based economic order.

Yet while economic instruments are leading tools, the competition is not at its core an economic dispute. In its state-led developmentalism China is merely practicing an approach many rising powers have used, from supporting key industries to investing in frontier industries to buying—or stealing—foreign technology.[6] Such state-led strategies are not wholly incompatible with a shared, nondiscriminatory global economic order; indeed, the coming years are likely to see more energetic versions of industrial policy in many countries, including the United States.



China has invested more than 70 billion USD into BRI-related infrastructure projects according to the MERICS BRI database. (Merics Institute for China Studies)

China's engagement with the shared international economic order has been imperfect but hardly a sham, reflecting many real reforms.[7] It aims to make itself rich and powerful, not to destroy the economies of others. Economics, at the end of the day, is a positive-sum affair. If China is willing to constrain its economically predatory activities—and that remains an open question—the United States and China ought to be able to compete vigorously across many industries even as they remain at peace and collaborate on issues of mutual concern.

These limits suggest that the competition is not primarily, at its essence, an economic one. Economics alone will not provide China with the leverage to dominate key regions or issues. A good example is the economic dependence China has managed to achieve in regard to countries in Asia—dependence that has not prevented these countries from pushing back vigorously against Chinese coercion.[8] The level of countries' overall trade dependence with China has remained mostly stable in recent years, and Chinese foreign direct investment represents a modest component of most countries' total. The recent push in many countries to diversify sources of supply, sparked both by the tariff war between the United States and China and then the pandemic crisis, will also mitigate China's ability to use economics to achieve unique competitive advantage.

Geopolitical and Territorial Disputes

Third and finally, the United States and China also have conflicting interests in specific regional disputes—chief among them, the struggle for the alignment of other states and China's sovereign claims to Taiwan and contested areas of the South China Sea. How these are resolved will set important precedents that shape world politics. But in none of these cases do the United States or China have interests that are at once vital and irreconcilable. China's objectives are not necessarily specific enough to demand an absolute clash of interests; what it means, for example, by regional predominance is largely to be determined. Even the claim to Taiwan does not necessarily come with a specific timeline or form in which it must be resolved.

In terms of maritime control, there is no specific level of Chinese influence in the South China Sea that would pose a threat to vital U.S. interests. The potential remains for a tough, sometimes bitter, but nonetheless peaceful reconciliation of China's growing ambitions in Asia with U.S. national interests. Nor is either likely to prevail in absolute terms. Too many targets of their influence, from India and Vietnam to Indonesia and South Korea and even the Micronesian Island states, are vigorously determined to retain their sovereign independence. Simply put, neither the United States nor China has ambitions that *necessitate* efforts to challenge the vital interests of the other.

The Faces of Power

The emerging U.S.-China competition, then, has important military, economic, and geopolitical components. Each of those issues demands significant U.S. attention and investment, from a credible military posture in Asia to government-funded research and development in key technologies to intensive diplomacy with pivotal states. But it is in another area that we find the true fulcrum of the contest, the hub around which these supporting elements will revolve, the contest whose outcome will be most decisive. That is in the competition for influence over the guiding narratives, ideas, and norms of the international system. The next two sections of this article examine two literatures that help make the case why this is so: Each represents a school of research on the nature of world politics, and each offers important insights about the ways great powers can prevail in strategic competitions. They have to do with the character of effective and sustainable power and the nature of legitimate authority wielded by great powers.

Many definitions of power long focused on its most straightforward variety; direct coercive or persuasive power—the ability to make some person or entity do something they would otherwise not do.[9] This is the form of power many observers are concerned that China has begun to wield, through economic and military force, in Asia and beyond. But over the course of the last half-century, scholars increasingly came to appreciate other, more indirect, subconscious and ideational forms of power—other faces or lenses which focus on shaping the agendas, habits, and worldviews that guide behavior.[10] These other interpretations of power speak to the ways in which actors achieve influence over people and groups by "shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences,"[11] and they point to the ways in which the United States has enjoyed such a predominant international position in the post-war era.

Direct power is forcing a state to liberalize its economy. Indirect power is creating a global marketplace (and, more than that, a dominant conventional wisdom) that makes its elites and leaders believe that such liberalization is in their interests. It involves influencing how people think—how they conceive their interests and very identities—rather than trying to coerce or bribe them into making a specific choice. It shapes what others believe they want, and why.

Indirect power can be more decisive than direct power.[12] Strong-arming other great powers is often impossible: As Iran and North Korea are reminding the United States, even weaker states can refuse the demands of stronger ones. Conflicting interests, national pride, the political interests of the target government, and a dozen other factors dull the impact of direct forms of power. But when the overall context shapes how those states view their own interests in ways aligned with U.S. objectives, U.S. influence is forcefully magnified. Even the realist Hans Morgenthau recognized this difference when he argued that,

> *Cultural imperialism is the most subtle and, if it were ever to succeed by itself alone, the most successful of imperialistic policies. It aims not at the conquest of territory or at the control of economic life, but at the conquest and control of the minds of men as an instrument for changing the power relations between two nations. If one could imagine the culture and, more particularly, the political ideology … of State A conquering the minds of all the citizens determining the policies of State B, State A would have won a more complete victory and would have founded its supremacy on more stable grounds than any military conqueror or economic master.*[13]

Some Marxist and postmodern thinkers describe such a process in more dystopian terms—as a form of thought control, more about submission than persuasion.[14]

Dystopian or not, such cultural power provides an important part of the story of how the United States won the Cold War and then attained a predominant global position afterward. Military deterrence of communist aggression was one part of the Cold War story, though arguably, past a certain point, not the dominant one. Nuclear weapons made big wars infeasibly costly, and the United States learned in Vietnam (as the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan) that even limited military force was at best a defensive measure. Rather, the United States prevailed in the Cold War contest primarily because its ideas, norms, structures, and institutions "conquered the minds" of elites and leaders the world over, including many within the Soviet bloc itself. Ideas associated with the United States and its friends and allies established hegemony over a predominant component of the international community—today, a bloc that represents well over three-quarters of world GDP and world military spending.[15]

Ideas need to have a persuasive basis to enjoy such success, and material factors were essential to the victory of the ideas associated with American power.[16] America's leading economic standing in 1945 and again in 1989, and its predominant military power after the Cold War, underwrote the credibility and appeal of its ideas. It was the Soviet system's inability to compete in material terms, and not a sudden affection for liberal values, that provided the main fuel for reform. The attraction of western-style reforms among Soviet leaders only emerged as a product of direct economic need: The Soviet Union was going bankrupt and needed to change. Ideas seldom conquer world politics absent material support systems—military and economic power that legitimizes and backs up those ideas.[17]

The most fundamental process, though—one unquestionably underwritten by material success—was the fact that the United States came to represent the metropole of the dominant ideas of world politics, ideas that were dominant in part because they were also associated with specific material outcomes, but also because they embodied inherently legitimate and appealing concepts—the appeal of liberal governance, human rights, and the cultural muscle of American films, music, and literature. The critical competitive advantage was this interlocking package; credible military power and impressive economic achievements tied to a larger, coherent set of social and cultural ideas with inherent legitimacy. Over time, this package had tremendous appeal, attracting states hoping to boost their security or economic fortunes. Few made this choice because the United States forced them to do it; most did so because the context and its dominant narratives made them believe it was in their own interests.[18]

This normative and systemic power manifested itself in very real sinews. They ranged from international economic institutions, to global human rights conventions and the advocacy organizations that rose up around them, to the spread of American entertainment and media, to vast flows of students and tourists and military officers, to the gradual thickening of webs of international law and legal precedent.[19] These sinews then produced hundreds of practical outcomes which advanced U.S. interests: Developing nations agreed to rule-of-law reforms which produced a more stable global economy; trading partners assented to concessions and deals when required by the World Trade Organization; states were more apt to sign on to nonproliferation-oriented policies and sanctions in service of shared norms. The emergence of ideational hegemony thus left the United States much more likely to get what it wanted across numerous issue areas. One result was astonishingly positive trends in areas the United States sought to influence—democracy, human rights, economic growth and development, economic freedom, and the rule of law.

Despite its broadly shared values and norms, China sees this dominant paradigm as a by-product of American hegemony and Chinese second-class citizenship, a status it is furiously determined to shed. China—like Russia—also views the ideas associated with the reigning order as justifying regime change narratives which ultimately threaten the rule of the Communist Party. As I will argue below, however, China is poorly equipped to succeed in these more indirect avenues to power, or to offer a compelling alternative to the ideas associated with the post-war U.S.-led order.

The Contest for Legitimate Authority

A second literature provides another useful way of understanding the competition for the international system and offers other reasons why that competition is so important to great power rivalry; the concept of legitimacy or "legitimate authority." Max Weber and other classic scholars developed the notion to help explain sustainable and effective forms of governance within states, and over time

others applied them to the international arena. These scholars emphasize a similar point to the analyses of the nature of power: Direct, material, coercive or directive power is not always the most effective or sustainable. Authority that comes from a perception of legitimacy is more lasting and ultimately influential—and the post-war U.S.-led order reflects elements of this more than a China-led order could do in the 21st century.

Understanding Legitimacy

One scholar defines legitimacy as, "The normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed. It is a subjective quality, relational between actor and institution, and defined by the actor's *perception* of the institution."[20] A perception of legitimacy is distinct from coercion and rationalist perception of self-interest: Individuals or states may comply with a rule because they are forced to do so, because they perceive clear material interest in doing so—or because they view it as legitimate. The scholar Ian Hurd, one of the most thoughtful recent scholars of international legitimacy issues, explains that,

> *Compliance with a rule may be motivated by a belief in the normative legitimacy of the rule (or in the legitimacy of the body that generated the rule). Legitimacy contributes to compliance by providing an internal reason for an actor to follow a rule. When an actor believes a rule is legitimate, compliance is no longer motivated by the simple fear of retribution, or by a calculation of self-interest, but instead by an internal sense of moral obligation: Control is legitimate to the extent that it is approved or regarded as "right."*

The ability of great powers to set such norms then becomes a form of power to the degree that they are internalized by recipient nations and taken as a rule, or that is "authoritative over the actor."[21] The political scientist John Gerard Ruggie has similarly argued that, "Political authority represents a fusion of power with legitimate social purpose."[22]

Legitimacy can arise from many sources.[23] First, like indirect or systemic power, it can be grounded in a perception of material benefits—things that provide "favorable outcomes" to participating states, groups, or individuals. People and states find legitimate that which meets their own material needs and interests. But material outcomes are not the only, or even always the most important, sources of legitimacy. It can also arise from a belief that the governing institutions reflect a basic sense of fairness, or be grounded in a perception of adherence to "correct procedure." The validity of a norm and the soundness of a legitimate authority are also partly a function of a faith in enforcement:[24] When members of a community have no faith that norms will be enforced, the validity of the overall system of authority wanes. Finally, legitimacy emerges in part from "the intrinsic qualities of the norms and ideas being articulated by the hegemon."[25] Norms which uphold human dignity, for example, have an inherent legitimacy that a resort to brute force would not.

The emergence of a perception of legitimacy in these and other ways is not entirely distinct from the process of determining national interests, objectives, or even strategies for achieving them. Perceptions of legitimacy help to determine, as one author says, "what gets included in the calculus of interest."[26] That is, a perception of legitimate authority becomes a critical part "of the state learning what it *wants*."[27] A good example is in the post-war territorial integrity norm: States have accepted the legitimacy of institutions and processes that generated it and to some extent the leaders of the international system who enforce it. States no longer "want" territorial acquisition as they once did—surely in part because of material reasons (territory is no longer as valuable as it once was), but also because of a conception of what is "legitimate" behavior.

These restrictions derive in part from the close connection between legitimacy and community. Legitimate authority is grounded in an agreed community with shared rules: "For there to be legitimacy there needs to be a community/society, and the fact that legitimacy makes sense within it is clear evidence that such a community/society actually exists." An implication is that, once states have recognized a given authority and its norms as legitimate (and perceive an essential validity in the larger system), those who refuse to abide by those norms lose their "rightful membership in the family of nations."[28] This is partly because a system of legitimate authority will define the "normal pattern of behavior" expected of community members, and in turn shape "the structure of opportunities faced by states" in ways that alter their choice of ends and strategies for achieving them.[29]

This clash between opposing systems of ideas reflects a clear historical pattern—recurring contests over legitimating narratives in great power rivalries.[30] Burgeoning material power is essential but not enough: Great powers, especially rising powers, must demonstrate that their bid for influence is legitimate. If they cannot, their power will always be limited by natural push-back from the larger system. Even the most dominant powers cannot bully their way to everything they want: Dominating the space of ideas, ideologies, and narratives is the basis of more complete and lasting competitive success.[31]

The Normative Foundation of Hegemony

This close connection between legitimate authority and communal identity helps to explain why legitimacy—while partly dependent on the compelling image of material power—also has non-material roots. Richard Ned Lebow has described ancient Greek conceptions of multiple forms of power: They "understood," Lebow suggests, "the transformative power of emotion: how it could combine with reason to create shared identities, and with it, a general propensity to cooperate with or be persuaded by certain actors."[32] Legitimate authority appeals to such emotions, to the willingness to see one's identity as part of a community which has the accepted right to enunciate certain rules for the collective group.[33] This is even true of the most powerful states: Even the hegemon in such a system must be subject to its rules.[34]

Lebow has discussed how the Greeks distinguished various forms of power and influence; that achieved through deceit (*dolos*) as opposed to that achieved through more legitimate persuasion, "by holding out the prospect of building or strengthening friendships, common identities and mutually valued norms and practices" (*peithō*). This latter form of power, according to many classic Greek historians and philosophers, is ultimately more lasting and effective "because it has the potential to foster cooperation that transcends discrete issues, builds and strengthens community and reshapes interests in ways that facilitate future cooperation." Lebow continues;

> *Capability-based theories of influence like realism assume that influence is proportional to power, measured in terms of material capabilities. … The Greek understanding of the psyche suggests that capability-based influence always has the potential to provoke internal conflict and external resistance because of how it degrades the spirit—and all the more so when no effort is made to give it any aura of legitimacy through consultation, institutionalization, soft words and self-restraint. Peithō is least likely to generate resistance, especially when initiated by an actor whose right to lead … is widely accepted.*[35]

Ancient Greek thinkers made a second distinction to understand the character of systemic leadership; between what they called *hēgemonia* or legitimate authority grounded in accepted

institutional position, contributions to the common good, and shared norms, and *archē* or coercive, hierarchical rule over others grounded in superior material capabilities.[36] There are many exceptions, both in terms of countries with a more negative appraisal of the United States and U.S. behavior on specific issues, but broadly speaking what has made U.S. post-war power unique is the degree to which it has reflected *hēgemonia* rather than *archē*.

As with legitimacy and power more generally, the achievement of an acknowledged and sustainable variety of hegemony thus has normative foundations.[37] It is not just a measure of material power, but a "thick phenomenon encompassing elite and mass beliefs" which points to the "substantive ideational content" as being important. Ideological or normative agreement among elites and populaces is as important as coercive power in a sustained and legitimate hegemony. If a normative order appeals only to elites, its power will be less complete and sustainable than an order whose norms reach into the "common sense" of the people.[38]

Three scholars define a hegemonic order as one "in which a leading state or coalition can establish and impose rules on other great and secondary powers." As a result of the normative foundations of hegemony, they conclude that,

> *A hegemon cannot impose rules without securing a broad measure of consent through the production and reproduction of a legitimating ideology. The legitimating ideology serves to promote and protect the taken-for-granted rules and ideas that structure international order.*[39]

The 1945 San Francisco Conference at which 46 nations signed the United Nations Declaration establishing one of the key institutions of the post-war U.S.-led international system.(UN Photo/Historical Photo)

This degree of consent distinguishes legitimate hegemony from empire or "pure domination" (or in ancient Greek terms, *hēgemonia* versus *archē*) and means that the hegemon can "rule without using coercion at every turn. Instead, other great-power states accept the hegemon's leadership because they can see a place for themselves in the order."[40]

This appeal to inclusive and communal interests is a critical part of the story of U.S. power in the post-World War II era. As Lebow explains, post-war U.S. leaders "created economic, political, military and juridical institutions that, at least in part, tended to restrain powerful actors and reward weaker ones." As a result, "American hegemony during the Cold War was based on the sophisticated recognition that the most stable orders are those 'in which the returns to power are relatively low and the returns to institutions are relatively high.'"[41] To be sure, the United States advanced its own selfish interests after 1945 on many occasions, and sometimes took actions that were excessive or needlessly unilateral. And all throughout the Cold War, American material power—economic as well as military—provided critical underpinnings for the systemic victory. Yet in pursuing a version of legitimate authority, the United States exercised its power less crudely and coercively than many hegemons and created a normative order with legitimacy and appeal.[42] It has variously been described as a "benign" or inclusive hegemon,[43] one whose leadership gained greater legitimacy because it is perceived in broad ways to be exercised in the name of an international community as much as for the United States itself.[44] The resulting shared order has had significant value for the United States,[45] but it has also worked to the advantage of many others.

The resulting paradigm created a platform for the United States to exercise influence through socialization. As John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan have argued, states can exercise power directly through material incentives. But they can also work through the more indirect forms of power noted above, seeking to alter,

> *…the substantive beliefs of leaders in other nations. Hegemonic control emerges when foreign elites buy into the hegemon's vision of international order and accept it as their own—that is, when they internalize the norms and value orientations espoused by the hegemon and accept its normative claims about the nature of the international system. … Power is thus exercised through a process of socialization in which the norms and value orientations of leaders in secondary states change and more closely reflect those of the dominant state. Under these circumstances, acquiescence is achieved by the transmission of norms and reshaping of value orientations and not simply by the manipulation of material incentives.*[46]

The result has been an architecture of legitimate authority that made the U.S. post-war role nearly unique in the annals of historical great powers, especially those with hegemonic degrees of authority. It was the normative, paradigmatic, systemic, and rule-based power that made the U.S. role so different, so lasting, and so much less likely to prompt strong balancing by others.[47] Robert Cox argues that hegemonic power is propped up by "universal norms, institutions, and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behavior for states and for those forces of civil society that act across national boundaries."[48] Ikenberry and Kupchan explain that effective socialization is grounded in legitimate authority, or "the common acceptance of a consensual normative order that binds ruler and ruled and legitimates power."[49] Based on a number of historical case studies, they conclude that, "The ability to generate shared beliefs in the acceptability or legitimacy of a particular

international order—that is, the ability to forge a consensus among national elites on the normative underpinnings of order—is an important if elusive dimension of hegemonic power."[50]

The concept of identity is an important part of the foundation for legitimate orders. A nation's conception of its own identity establishes the basis for its view of whether it fits into a given normative order. If the influence of orders runs through elites to populations, governments will face greater difficulties joining orders that run directly counter to deeply established national identities.[51] A nation with a powerfully Islamic self-conception would be hard-pressed to easily integrate into an explicitly Christian order; a democracy would naturally resist an order based on autocratic norms. The predominance of established democracies among the world's leading economies and major powers, the power of national identity, and the need to build a global order in accord with the identities of the major powers, will be substantial barriers to China's legitimate hegemony of any order.

A Fight for the Paradigm

These forms of structural or paradigmatic power are precisely what is at stake in the current U.S.-China rivalry. The emerging strategic competition reflects, at its core, a struggle over the context, the field in which world politics unfolds—the prevailing ideas, narratives, norms, rules, and institutions that shape states' interests. This makes it an ideological competition, but of a specific sort. The revolutionary ideological adventurism central to Soviet and Chinese strategy in the Cold War is not characteristic of current Chinese policies. It is instead a competition between two would-be leaders of a governing ideational order, each offering a basic political model, essential economic principles, and other aspects of a set of norms and values.[52]

The international paradigm as conceived here has four main pillars. First are the prevailing global political and economic values—whether elites and populaces tend toward values such as democracy, liberal economic policies, free trade, and human rights. These could be measured by such yardsticks as total numbers of regimes reflecting certain values, indices of political and economic freedom, and public opinion polling on favored values.

A second pillar of the international paradigm is cultural influences: Which countries, systems, peoples or groups set the global standards in cultural habits and in such areas as film, television, music, and literature? Influence in this pillar can be measured by prevalence of global cultural influence, opinion polls, and emergent habits and practices.

The third pillar of the current paradigm is global rules and norms as established in international law, conventions, and practice. These range from the territorial non-aggression norm enshrined in the UN Charter and many other compacts, to the core elements of international maritime law and the law of war, and can be measured in terms of formal agreement as well as the degree to which they are respected.

The fourth and final pillar is international institutions, both intergovernmental and nongovernmental. Influence here can be measured by leadership positions and the policy stances the institutions take.

The primary U.S. task in the emerging competition is to preserve the astonishing advantages that accrue from being the hub of a shared and widely appreciated order of dominant ideas, norms, habits, and perspectives in each of these four pillars of the paradigm. Competing in military, economic, and geopolitical areas remains important, but these contests do not reflect the *essence* of the competition, which is ultimately a struggle for control of the global paradigm. Win that fight, and the rest is likely to fall into place. Lose it, or allow the ideational context to fragment (as is already occurring, partly because of U.S. actions), and U.S. power and interests will confront a vastly more hostile world.

Limits to China's Normative Legitimacy

China's task is clear; to establish a competing ideational pole in world politics. It has been vocal about its desire to promote an alternative socioeconomic model—the so-called "Beijing Consensus," the China Model, the China Dream. Its increasingly aggressive attacks on U.S. and western values and ideas hope to discredit them in the eyes of much of the rest of the world.[53] Yet the scholarship on power, legitimacy, and paradigmatic influence through institutions and norms strongly suggests that China confronts formidable, indeed perhaps insurmountable, barriers to success in these terms. As three scholars have argued, during a period of partial or broad-based power transition, "when the identity of the rising state is consistent with the ideologies and identities underlying the order, hegemony is likely to be stable." When the rising state's values contradict those of the establish paradigm, on the other hand, it will be hard-pressed to create a new hegemony.[54] This is exactly the problem China faces today—and it stems not from simple policy or strategy differences, but from a fundamental, systemic clash between the identity of the Chinese Communist Party and the norms underlying the prevailing order.

To begin with, Beijing has no universal set of values and norms to offer as the foundation of a new, Sino-centric world paradigm. The cheerful phrases that populate its public diplomacy do not describe any coherent system, and anyway are daily contradicted by its own autocratic behavior at home and abroad. (Beijing cannot proclaim itself an advocate of democracy while working assiduously to silence critics abroad through Orwellian forms of harassment.)[55] Well-funded state propaganda tools can do little in this regard: Ideational power emerges from societies in an organic process, largely through example and the work of private actors. It cannot be forced into place in a five-year plan.[56]

Economically, despite its impressive record, China has no easily-exportable model of growth beyond classic state-led development—which has failed as often as it has succeeded.[57] The shining example of its economic model is anyway likely to dim, due to slowing growth, an aging society, and blowback against its predatory and corrupt practices abroad. The more intriguing concepts Beijing has put on offer, such as a more fully democratic and pluralistic international order, run counter to China's historically hierarchical instincts. They are also easily co-opted, if the United States is willing to embrace a more shared and humbler version of leadership. Moreover, world politics is different than it was in 1945—with more diverse and dispersed sources of power, richer flows of information, less respect for authority—in ways that will make it tougher for Beijing to achieve the deference it reportedly craves.[58]

China, of course, represents a very different sort of economic rival than the Soviet Union. Its economic engine is vastly larger and more effective; its mastery of numerous advanced technologies outside the military sphere well beyond anything the Soviet system could muster. In this sense we cannot expect or hope for a rapid change in the Chinese system itself, as it encounters insurmountable barriers to competitive vibrancy. It will have an economic gravitational force unlike anything the Soviet Union ever achieved and continue to serve as a viable model for handfuls of nations which choose its system as a model. Beijing will surely have a significant degree of economic influence.

It will also be able to translate these forms of economic power into some degree of systemic influence. It is using economic power in part to place senior officials in key posts in international organizations, including the United Nations.[59] It is using economic muscle to establish parallel institutions on a host of issues, from development to regional political forums. It is using dominance of key industries, such as 5G telecommunications, to gain a leading role in global standard-setting. It is bribing and

Police seemingly indiscriminately arrested protestors in Hong Kong on riot related charges. (Bill Gallo, VOA News, 18 November 2019)

coercing other countries into compliance with some aspects of its systemic goals. As noted above it is investing billions in a "global megaphone" of social media, broadcast entities, classic propaganda, and other forms of influence.[60]

But these strategies are likely to take Beijing only so far in the quest for systemic leadership and a veto power on the policies and actions of others. Its actions are prompting increasing levels of concern and blowback in countries from Europe to Australia to South Korea, and even selected African countries. China has managed to generate highly negative public opinion in a range of countries it has sought to bully, from the United States to Canada, Sweden, Vietnam, and Japan.[61] A recent survey of opinion in Southeast Asia found a range of attitudes, including significant respect for Chinese achievements, but growing concern about the implications of rising Chinese power and an almost universal belief that Chinese military strength was a threat to the region.[62] If anything, China's multiple hard line actions of recent years—its crackdown on Hong Kong (now intensified in recent months), repression in Xinjiang Province, threats against journalists and politicians abroad, direct coercive behavior in the South China Sea, and many other actions are promoting more resistance rather than accommodation.

One recent study conducted in-depth analyses of public opinion and public discourse data to characterize elements of national identity in states identified as current great powers, including Brazil, France, Germany, India, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Their research found significant support for both democratic and (less universally) neoliberal values—and very little support for countervailing Chinese norms. "While some aspects of western neoliberal hegemony are contested," the study concluded, "the distribution of identity among the great powers provides strong support for western hegemony." The study highlighted the intense dilemma facing China's quest for a legitimate hegemony, noting that, "it is unlikely that China can build an ideology that would simultaneously satisfy its domestic needs and appeal to others."[63]

These shortcomings are on vivid display in China's most recent attempt to promote its own leadership of the international system—its efforts to build a narrative of Chinese success and altruism during the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis. These efforts have had at best partial success and there has been significant blowback in many places to China's behavior and its narrative.[64] During the crisis, the actions of its so-called "Wolf Warrior" diplomats—nationalist and aggressive officials seemingly determined to flaunt Chinese power and reject any challenge—have become even more bellicose. The reaction, in many quarters, has been one of growing concern and outrage.[65] Those reactions betray again a consistent theme: Many other countries view Beijing's exercise of its power and influence as essentially self-serving. The nature of China's view of the world—Sino-centric, hierarchical, culturally exclusive, domineering—undermines its efforts to exercise legitimate authority, and its lack of an inherent set of appealing values ruins its potential to benefit from indirect forms of power.

The limits to potential Chinese hegemony also emerge in more classic geopolitical terms. Any rising, would-be hegemon wanting to establish the normative basis for a new order must recruit partners in its cause. A hegemonic transition, "is likely only when the rising state is able to form a counter-hegemonic coalition of revisionist great powers."[66] Given the normative and identity constraints noted above, it is difficult to see how China could draw major powers into its hegemonic system in anything like a consent-based model. It will not be able to gather any of the world's leading developed democracies into its fold—a constraint that rules out Europe, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and many other countries, states which comprise (along with the United States) some three-quarters of world GDP.

Nor will Beijing be able to recruit those neighbors who see China primarily as a threat, such as India and Vietnam. Rising democracies (again India along with Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Indonesia, and others) hope for Chinese investment but, as noted above, their normative identity suggests that they would resist an order built on autocratic principles. Even China's partnership with Russia appears to have significant limits, as would be expected for two countries that have traditionally viewed each other with great suspicion and even hostility. In sum, there is no counter-hegemonic coalition with any real geopolitical heft available for China to assemble.

The Contest for the System: America's Inherent Competitive Advantages

China's effort to win legitimate authority does meet the first condition noted above for such influence—offering material benefits. But that is all. It is not willing to commit to institutions and processes that reflect true procedural fairness in critical circumstances such as South China Sea maritime disputes or human rights. It actively undermines the procedural soundness of many international institutions in pursuit of its own unique interests. It refuses to participate in the enforcement of critical norms in areas such as nonproliferation, human rights, rule of law, and trade fairness. In sum China's approach to power does not meet many of the conditions of legitimate authority. Historically, China gained such authority through narrower avenues—material power and a claim of cultural superiority—which will not be enough for the 21st century equivalent of a "tribute system."

The greatest risk in this systemic competition, in fact, may not originate with China at all. It originates in the decades-long rise of challenges to the legitimacy of the prevailing neoliberal model within the international order itself. The United States faces two epochal trends, not one; the rise of China, but also the emergence of an ecological, socioeconomic, and ontological crisis of the prevailing paradigm. If this latter crisis can be resolved and the U.S.-led ideational

order placed on a renewed footing, then there is really no way that China can advertise its increasingly repressive, economically slackening, internationally belligerent model as a sensible alternative.

This means that, for the United States, the current strategic competition is likely to be won in the same way that the Cold War was won, from the inside out—built on a 21st century foundation of social, environmental, and economic reforms, investments, and initiatives which revalidate the prevailing liberal-democratic approach to politics and economics, likely including steps to enhance the sharing of wealth and levels of economic justice inherent to the system. As in the Cold War, military capabilities, geoeconomic statecraft, and geopolitical maneuvering remain important as complementary tools. But together they will constitute a large holding action, with wins and losses along the way, which need never be viewed as a zero-sum contest. The United States will prevail, if it does, in more ideational and systemic terms.

The United States need have little fear that China will somehow convince leaders, elites, and populaces around the world that repressive, state-led development under Beijing's tutelage is desirable. This is not to suggest that the United States will prevail in the systemic competition without effort. Several new or expanded initiatives are clearly called for, including;

- a better-resourced, more innovative and professional set of tools for the information competition—to bring greater light to Beijing's violations of shared norms and promote the legitimacy of the American-led order;
- expanded economic aid, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief (HA/DR) efforts in the developing world to sustain positive views of the U.S. global role;
- enhanced tools to counteract Chinese economic coercive diplomacy, including a revised BUILD Act and multilateral coordination to offer alternatives to the investment financing in the Belt and Road Initiative;
- reforms to international institutions to provide greater voice for rising powers and exceptions to the conditionality that can push some countries in the direction of accepting Beijing's often less-conditioned aid and investment;
- renewed investments in—rather than withdrawal from—key international institutions, agreements, and processes.

These initiatives demand significant new investments as well as effective strategic coordination across the U.S. government. Maintaining decisive advantage in systemic competitions will demand real effort. Beyond such specific policy responses, however, the most significant threats to U.S. goals lie in the potential for two self-imposed mistakes. One is a failure to respond to the challenges to the prevailing socioeconomic model—climate change, inequality and stagnating wages, health and human security, and issues of cultural identity in an integrating world. This would provide China more ammunition in the ideational war and exacerbate the polarization and policy incoherence that undermines American leadership.

The United States could also lose ground through a second mistake—a fresh bout of unilateralism and self-righteous pugnaciousness. The new competition is getting underway in very different circumstances than the last: World politics is far more multipolar than in 1945, and any new global order will have to be more diverse, embracing distinct and mutually-respectful American, European, Japanese, Brazilian, Indonesian, Korean, Indian, and other varieties of social and economic models as well as approaches to specific security challenges (including China). It will be all too easy for the United States to take a panicked and rigid approach to the competition, demanding that all see it in the same irreconcilable terms, insisting

that they choose sides in ways few want to do, and in the process alienating many potential partners.[67]

Such a response, Richard Ned Lebow concludes, would violate historical lessons about the dangers of coercive forms of hegemony and undermine the image of legitimate American authority that "previously allowed it to translate its power into influence in efficient ways." An America headed down this road would increasingly be forced to "use threats and bribes to get its way." Such an outcome, if it did emerge, would, Lebow concludes, constitute "another tragic proof of arguably the most fundamental truth of politics; that friendship and persuasion create and sustain community, and community in turn enables and sustains the identities that allow rational formulation of interests. In the last resort, justice and power are mutually constitutive."[68]

U.S. strategy since 1945, while guilty of many excesses, tragic errors, and occasional coercive belligerence, has reflected these insights remarkably well for a dominant great power. To ignore them now would be to surrender the greatest U.S. competitive advantage in the emerging competition with China. The United States is primed for success in the long-term competition with China for relative authority over an increasingly shared, diverse, fragmented, and multipolar international system. It merely needs to remember the practices and values that have brought it to this point and can underwrite continued influence in the future. **PRISM**

Endnotes

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[25] Ikenberry and Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," 293.

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[27] Hurd, *After Anarchy*, 42, emphasis in original; and 45. See also Hurd, "Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics," 387-388. See also David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, 2nd. Ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xi, who agrees that "To the extent that people acknowledge power as rightful … they will feel a corresponding obligation to obey and support it without having to be bribed or coerced into doing so."

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[32] Richard Ned Lebow, "Power, Persuasion and Justice," *Millennium*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2005), 553.

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