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Underestimating China: Why America Needs a New Strategy of Allied Scale to Offset Beijing's Enduring Advantages

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Success in great-power competition requires rigorous and unsentimental net assessment. Yet the American estimation of China has lurched from one extreme to the other. For decades, Americans registered blistering economic growth, dominance of international trade, and growing geopolitical ambition, and anticipated the day when China might overtake a strategically distracted and politically paralyzed United States; after the 2008 financial crisis, and then especially at the height of the COVID pandemic, many observers believed that day had come. But the pendulum swung to the other extreme only a few years later as China's abandonment of "zero COVID" failed to restore growth. Beijing was beset by ominous demographics, once unthinkable youth unemployment, and deepening stagnation while the United States was strengthening alliances, boasting breakthroughs in artificial intelligence and other technologies, and enjoying a booming economy with record low unemployment and record high stock markets.

A new consensus took hold: that an aging, slowing, and increasingly less nimble China would not overtake an ascendant United States. Washington shifted from pessimism to overconfidence. Yet just as past bouts of defeatism were misguided, so is today's triumphalism, which risks dangerously underestimating both the latent and actual power of the only competitor in a century whose GDP has surpassed 70 percent of that of the United States. On critical metrics, China has already outmatched the United States. Economically, it boasts twice the manufacturing capacity. Technologically, it dominates everything from electric vehicles to fourth-generation nuclear reactors and now produces more active patents and top-cited scientific publications annually. Militarily, it features the world's largest navy, bolstered by shipbuilding capacity 200 times as large as that of the United States; vastly greater missile stocks; and the world's most advanced hypersonic capabilities—all results of the fastest military modernization in history. Even if China's growth slows and its system falters, it will remain formidable strategically.

During the Cold War, Soviet leaders often made the point that "quantity has a quality all its own." As productivity equalizes, nations with larger populations, broader geographic reach, and greater economic heft scale up and dominate smaller first-movers. This dynamic has held throughout most of history. The United States benefited from it during the last century. It caught the tide of European industrialization, then leveraged its continental scale and larger population to outclass the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan, and ultimately the Soviet Union. Today, it is China that benefits from that dynamic and the United States is at risk of being overtaken technologically, deindustrialized economically, and defeated militarily by a rival with far greater size and productive capacity.

This is an era in which strategic advantage will once again accrue to those who can operate at scale. China possesses scale, and the United States does not—at least not by itself. Because its only viable path lies in coalition with others, Washington would be particularly unwise to go it alone in a complex global competition. By retreating to a sphere of influence in the Western hemisphere, the United States would cede the rest of the world to a globally engaged China.

Yet acknowledging the need for allies and partners should be the starting point, not an endpoint—because the United States' legacy approach to alliances will no longer suffice. That approach, rooted in Cold War–era assumptions and extended by inertia over eight decades, tended to view partners as dependents: recipients of protection rather than co-creators of power. They were often seen as helpful, but also as burdensome and even obstructive. That model is obsolete. To achieve scale, Washington must transform its alliance architecture from a collection of managed relationships to a platform for integrated and pooled capacity building across the military, economic, and technological domains. In practical terms, that might mean Japan and Korea help build American ships and Taiwan builds American semiconductor plants while the United States shares its best military technology with allies, and all come together to pool their markets behind a shared tariff or regulatory wall erected against China. This kind of coherent and interoperable bloc, with the United States at its core, would generate aggregate advantages that China cannot match alone.

But such an approach demands a fundamental reorientation, from command-and-control diplomacy to a new capacity-centric statecraft. This radical shift in how the United States builds and wields power is essential in a world where it no longer has the singular advantage of scale. As China plays for time and mass, the United States and its partners must play for cohesion and collective leverage. To repurpose the warning often attributed to Benjamin Franklin: we must hang together, or we will all hang separately.

FROM SIZE TO SCALE

Not every large country becomes a great power. Size refers to dimensions; scale is the ability to use size to generate efficiency and productivity and thereby outcompete rivals. Small states can become world-class by maximizing efficiency on a small foundation, but when large states run that playbook on a much larger foundation, they can remake the world. Broader internal markets can drive down costs, enabling companies to outcompete others around the world. Bigger populations create deeper pools of talent and research. Large states are less reliant on trade, which gives them greater resilience. And they can field larger militaries.

Small states have risen to power on first-mover advantages, often with the acquiescence or benign neglect of larger states. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the United Kingdom was able to dominate the world with a first-mover advantage in industrialization. But that dominance was short-lived. Germany and the United States—thanks in part to the diffusion of British industrial methods—were able to achieve greater scale than a small island in the northwest corner of Europe. From 1870 to 1910, the British share of global manufacturing fell by half as the United States and Germany caught up and surpassed it. While the United Kingdom's steel production doubled, to 6.5 million tons, Germany's quintupled, to 12 million, and the United States' grew sixfold, to 23 million. Germany and the United States pushed the British out of major industries, leveraging their larger internal markets, resource bases, and talent pools to drive down marginal costs. That economic advantage translated into still greater military and technological advantage. Together, these trends led to the United Kingdom's gradual deindustrialization and eventual decline.

British leaders and strategists were aware of the problem. In the late nineteenth century, the British historian John Robert Seeley, in one of the most influential books of the era, worried about the emergence of "highly organized states on a yet larger scale," noting that as technology diffused, "Russia and the United States will surpass in power the states now called great as much as the great country-states of the sixteenth century surpassed Florence." Even before the collapse of the British Empire, he feared that the United Kingdom would be reduced "to the level of a purely European Power" such as Spain. Seeley was not alone in calling for his country to pursue the kind of scale and efficiency gains an island could not generate on its own, through "Greater Britain"—tighter integration with imperial holdings in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and southern Africa. But these efforts were delayed, inconsistently pursued, and ultimately a failure. The colonies went their own way, and the British never found scale.

When World War I broke out, London was fortunate to have a much more powerful ally in Washington—one with the scale to help win World War II. That scale was clear to rivals. Before the war, Hitler had observed that "The American Union . . . has created a power factor of such dimensions that it threatens to overthrow all previous state power rankings." Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto predicted that his country's forces would "run wild for the first six months or a year, but I have utterly no confidence for the second and third years" because of the United States' manufacturing advantage. Italy's foreign minister also recognized that a protracted war favored the United States: "Who will have the most stamina? This is the way the question should be put." All the Axis powers feared U.S. industrial capacity. They understood that quantity was a quality of its own.

Today, that daunting scale and capacity belongs to China. American strategists must confront the risk that the United States could find itself in the position of the United Kingdom a century ago. The British experience offers both lessons and warnings: its effort at imperial integration was too little and too late. But the United States today can succeed where Britain failed, by harnessing allied and partner scale in new ways.

RISE AND FALL AND RISE

The starting point for that success must be accurate self-assessment. In recent years, the pages of *Foreign Affairs* have featured a slew of essays making the case that the United States has a clear and enduring advantage over China. Michael Beckley argues that "the Chinese economy is shrinking relative to that of the United States" and that "current trends are solidifying a unipolar world." Stephen Brooks and Ben Vagle claim that "the United States still has a commanding and durable advantage" that would give it significant economic leverage in a conflict. Jude Blanchette and Ryan Hass conclude that "the United States still has a vital edge over China in terms of economic dynamism, global influence, and technological innovation."

Predicting the rise or fall of great powers is always a fraught exercise, given inadequate information, the risks of bias, the long shadow of current events, and the challenge of sorting out which metrics matter most and in what time frame. American strategists previously swung from one extreme to another in their estimation of Japan and the Soviet Union. That same weakness has characterized net assessment of China and the United States.

There is no question that China faces significant problems: an aging society, towering debt, stagnating productivity, growing risks in its housing market, high youth unemployment, crackdowns on the private sector. But even grave macroeconomic challenges do not neatly translate to strategic disadvantage. Two facts can be true at the same time: that China is slowing economically and that it is becoming more formidable strategically. And Beijing might well address economic challenges with a return to sound decision-making in the years ahead. Emphasizing China's weaknesses risks understating its scale and capacity on the metrics and time frame most relevant for great-power competition.

For example, the idea that the United States' economy will remain larger than China's—contrary to most expectations just a few years ago—is frequently offered as evidence of commanding U.S. advantage. But as the economist Noah Smith argues in his analysis of these GDP comparisons, "Americans should take little comfort in the fact that their total GDP at market exchange rates is outpacing China's." As exchange rates shift, so do comparisons of relative size, so that a 15 percent depreciation of the renminbi—as has occurred since its peak three years ago—would make the Chinese economy seem 15 percent smaller even if its output stayed the same. Accounting for purchasing power and local prices using the World Bank's methodology, although imperfect, reveals instead that China's economy surpassed the U.S. economy about a decade ago and is 25 percent larger today: roughly $30 trillion to the United States' $24 trillion. This purchasing power adjustment captures the real cost of the determinants of national power, including infrastructure investment, weapons systems, manufactured goods, and government personnel—key factors in sustaining long-term strategic advantage.

Using this approach, if one looks narrowly at goods rather than services, China's productive capacity is three times as large as that of the United States—a decisive advantage in military and technological competition—and exceeds that of the next nine countries combined. In the two decades after China joined the World Trade Organization, its share of global manufacturing quintupled to 30 percent while the U.S. share halved to roughly 15 percent; the United Nations has estimated that, by 2030, the imbalance will grow to 45 percent and 11 percent. China leads in many traditional industries—producing 20 times as much cement, 13 times as much steel, three times as many cars, and twice as much power as the United States—and increasingly in advanced sectors as well.

Although still catching up in fields such as biotechnology and aviation, which have been traditional U.S. strengths, China—thanks in part to ambitious industrial policy efforts such as Made in China 2025—produced almost half the world's chemicals, half the world's ships, more than two-thirds of electric vehicles, more than three-quarters of electric batteries, 80 percent of consumer drones, and 90 percent of solar panels and critical refined rare-earth minerals. And Beijing is taking steps to ensure its dominance continues and expands: China was responsible for half of all industrial robot installations worldwide (seven times as many as the United States), and it is a decade ahead of anyone else in commercializing fourth-generation nuclear technology, with plans to build over 100 reactors in 20 years. The last great power to so thoroughly dominate global production was the United States, from the 1870s to the 1940s.

American observers tend to underestimate China's ability to innovate, mistakenly assuming it simply copies and reproduces Western innovations. Like the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and the United States before it, China's manufacturing strength creates a foundation for innovative advantage. State investment helps, too; it now rivals the United States' investment in science. And China's large population provides a deep talent pool and competitive scale. In ten industries of the future, according to a recent report from the Information Technology and Industry Foundation, China is near the leading edge of innovation (or better) in six.

This industrial and innovative strength can be activated for military purposes. China's navy, already the largest in the world, will add a staggering 65 vessels in just five years, reaching a total size 50 percent larger than the U.S. Navy—roughly 435 vessels to 300. It has rapidly increased its ships' firepower, surging from one-tenth of the United States' vertical launch system cells a decade ago to likely exceeding U.S. capacity by 2027. Although China lags the United States in aviation, it has broken a long-standing technical barrier by building jet engines at home and is now rapidly closing the production gap, with the ability to build more than 100 fourth-generation combat aircraft annually. In most missile technologies, China is probably the world's leader: it boasts the first antiship ballistic missile, impressive air-to-air missile range, and the largest stockpile of conventional cruise and ballistic missiles. And in a growing number of military fields, from quantum communications to hypersonics, China is ahead of any competitor. These advantages, built over decades, will persist even if China stagnates.

KNOW YOUR RIVAL

China's challenges are significant. But their strategic importance is often overstated. For example, its demographic challenges will be a major issue in the long term, but in the medium term—a timeline much more relevant to competition with the United States—they are manageable. A generational "echo boom," as the grandchildren of the Mao-era baby boomer generation enter the workforce, means that, despite an aging population, the percentage of the population below the age of 15 has actually increased, by over 30 million between the 2010 and 2020 censuses, and it has also grown as a percentage of the total population. China's dependency ratio (of adult workers to children and retirees) will remain below Japan's current ratio until 2050. And massive investments in education, industrial robotics, and embodied artificial intelligence will help China weather labor shortfalls.

Debt levels are also illustrative. Although China's household, corporate, and government debt is at a record 300 percent of GDP, other powers—including India, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States—have similar levels of total debt. In some cases, metrics that indicate weakness in one area reflect strategic strengths in another. China's housing bust, for example, is a drag on growth. But Beijing is plowing credit from that sector into industrial policy efforts that are boosting competitiveness. Similarly, while American firms continue to capture a higher share of profits and dominate rankings of market capitalization, Chinese firms are focused on different goals, often running losses to gain market share and put rivals out of business. Despite short-term challenges, China continues to play the long game.

Even if its weaknesses prove more severe than projected, China will remain vastly more powerful than any past U.S. competitor on the metrics most relevant for competition. Washington may have overestimated past rivals, including Germany, Japan, and the

Soviet Union. But China is the first to outmatch the United States in size alone, as well as in several strategically relevant areas. Stagnant or not, Beijing will remain more formidable than any past challenger.

Some analysts warn that American declinism is itself a risk, which could become "a self-fulfilling prophecy." There is wisdom in that admonition; the rise and fall of great powers often begins with flawed self-diagnosis. But it is also the case, as the political scientist Samuel Huntington argued in these pages before the fall of the Soviet Union, that fretting about decline can just as often drive renewal. The greatest risk is not declinism; it is complacency, leading to a lack of strategic intention and a failure to catalyze collective action to rise to the China challenge. If anything, the United States—particularly in the era of President Donald Trump—risks overestimating unilateral power and underestimating China's ability to counter it.

CAPACITY-CENTRIC STATECRAFT

For Washington, three realities must be central to any serious strategy for long-term competition. First, scale is essential. Second, China's scale is unlike anything the United States has ever faced, and Beijing's challenges will not fundamentally change that on any relevant timeline. And third, a new approach to alliances is the only viable way the United States can build sufficient scale of its own. Altogether, this means that Washington needs its allies and partners in ways that it did not in the past. They are not tripwires, distant protectorates, vassals, or markers of status, but providers of capacity needed to achieve great-power scale. For the first time since the end of World War II, the United States' alliances are not about projecting power, but about preserving it.

During the Cold War, the United States and its allies outclassed the Soviet Union. Today, a slightly expanded configuration would handily outclass China. Together, Australia, Canada, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, the United States, and the European Union have a combined economy of $60 trillion to China's $18 trillion, an amount more than three times as large as China's at market exchange rates and still more than twice as large adjusting for purchasing power. It would account for roughly half of all global manufacturing (to China's roughly one-third) and for far more active patents and top-cited journal articles than China does. It would account for $1.5 trillion in annual defense spending, roughly twice China's. And it would displace China as the top trading partner of almost all states. (China is today the top trading partner of 120 states.)

In raw terms, this alignment of democracies and market economies outscales China across nearly every dimension. Yet unless its power is coordinated, its advantages will remain largely theoretical. Accordingly, unlocking the potential of this coalition should be the central task of American statecraft in this century. And that cannot be done by simply doubling down on the traditional alliance playbook.

The starting point for the United States can be long-standing bilateral alliances (such as those with Japan and South Korea) and multilateral alliances (such as NATO), along with newer partnerships (such as the AUKUS defense technology agreement with Australia and the United Kingdom) and less institutionalized groupings (such as the Quad, which also includes Australia, India, and Japan). But rather than simply celebrating these frameworks or expanding their membership, the task ahead is to deepen their function—to make them foundations for capacity-centric statecraft across multiple domains. These relationships have too often operated on the assumption that the United States provides security while others contribute political support or, at best, niche capabilities. It has been largely security-centric, too—focused on deterrence, access, and reassurance—while leaving economic coordination, industrial integration, and technological collaboration as emerging but still secondary concerns. The traditional model was simply not designed to compete with a systemic rival on the order of China. It is dangerously inadequate to the demands of the moment.

The U.S. approach to alliances and partnerships in recent decades has been shaped by a combination of strategic habit and structural hierarchy. Now, it must become a platform for generating shared capacity across all critical domains—not just military ones. That will require a level of coordination and codependence that is unfamiliar and will at times be uncomfortable for both the United States and its partners. For military power, creating scale requires capacity to flow in both directions, including investment in the weaker parts of the U.S. defense industry and more generous provision of advanced U.S. military technologies to allies who historically have not received it. For the economy, scale means building a shared tariff and regulatory wall against China's excess capacity while constructing new mechanisms to coordinate industrial policy and pool allied market share. For technology, the challenge will similarly be to erect common investment rules, export controls, and research protections to prevent technology transfer to China while undertaking joint investment. These steps mark the difference between a coalition that is aligned in principle and one that is fused in practice. That shift—toward shared capacity as the foundation of strategy—will allow the United States and its partners to compete at scale and at speed.

SCALE BOTH WAYS

The Biden administration used existing security alliances and partnerships to construct a "latticework" meant to better distribute force posture, increase allied defense spending, and launch new security arrangements such as AUKUS while elevating bodies such as the Quad. These efforts should be reinforced, but the next step is to transform defense-industrial cooperation. The lessons from [Ukraine] are clear: the United States would lack sufficient capacity to sustain a prolonged conflict with China on its own. Although innovation from new firms in uncrewed systems is promising, true scale, particularly in legacy systems, will require co-production and deeper industrial integration with allies. The World War II Arsenal of Democracy is unlikely to return. In its place, the United States needs to construct what the historian Arthur Herman has called an Arsenal of Democracies: a networked defense industrial base built on joint production, shared innovation, and integrated supply chains.

This marks a sharp change from the past, when the United States primarily provided capability to others. Now, scale demands two-way flows, including allied investment and manufacturing in the United States. Some initial steps the Biden administration took, such as having the Japanese repair American destroyers, provide a modest glimpse of what is possible. More ambitious efforts might involve joint ventures with Japanese and South Korean shipbuilders (which are two to three times more productive than U.S. firms); partnerships between Europe's missile manufacturers and U.S. companies; or recruiting Japanese or Taiwanese firms to build legacy microelectronics in the United States. Too often, dated regulatory and political constraints, which must be addressed jointly by Congress and the executive, create barriers to benefiting from allied capability.

The United States' own capability must also flow outward to allies. Biden-era efforts such as AUKUS and the co-production of Tomahawk missiles with Japan are steps in the right direction. But real progress requires overcoming a bureaucratic alliance between a State Department concerned about proliferation and a Defense Department fearful of eroding its edge. Sharing technology quickly is the key to ensuring that Australia builds nuclear submarines, that Asian allies have sufficient antiship cruise missiles and ballistic missiles, that Taiwan can deter Chinese invasion, and that India is able to turn the Andaman Islands to its east into a fortress that Beijing cannot ignore. In practice, this could mean harmonizing export-control laws, aligning procurement standards, and coordinating investment in chokepoint components, from semiconductors to optical equipment.

Allies can also transfer capacity to each other, both within regions and between different ones. Some of this has begun to happen haltingly, but much more is possible. South Korean weapons can help Europe rearm and reindustrialize. French nuclear technology can support India's submarine program. Norwegian and Swedish missiles can help Indonesia and Thailand defend their waters. Pooling capacity requires thinking across alliances, with the United States facilitating collective action.

Tighter integration also requires more burden sharing—and burden shifting. Even as allies and partners build bridges across continents, they must also play a bigger role in deterrence closer to home, with Europeans stepping up in Europe and Asians stepping up in Asia. That can be done in part by strengthening the security dimension of increasingly important groupings (the Quad or the trilateral relationship with Japan and Korea). But Washington also needs to strengthen coordination with allies for actual warfighting—through steps such as modernized joint command-and-control systems, new investments in interoperability, and more sophisticated joint exercises. That could include creating joint units with U.S. allies and partners, starting with ground-based antiaircraft and antiship missile battalions to be used in a crisis in the Indo-Pacific and later extending to more complex air and naval air formations. The United States should also reinforce extended deterrence by offering allies a greater say in nuclear command and control and the kinds of nuclear sharing arrangements that it pursued with European allies during the Cold War.

Globally, the United States could pursue a new version of U.S. President Richard Nixon's "Guam Doctrine," which devolved responsibilities to partners after the Vietnam War. That would empower regional states—what former Australian Prime Minister John Howard called "deputy sheriffs"—to take the lead on security challenges in their neighborhood: Australia in the Pacific islands, India in South Asia, Vietnam in continental Southeast Asia, Nigeria in Africa. In practical terms, the next time a South Asian country faces challenges, the United States would defer to India's judgment on what might serve regional stability or counter China's influence rather than seek to advance its own preferences.

COMMON MARKETS

The Biden administration took important steps in the economic and technology competition with China, with initiatives such as the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology, and coordinated semiconductor export controls with Japan and the Netherlands. But withstanding China's excess capacity and retaining technological leadership will require more ambitious action, beyond what Washington has typically been willing to do.

China's nonmarket practices and sheer scale have overwhelmed the World Trade Organization and now pose an existential risk to the industrial base of the United States and its allies and partners. Attempting to act alone against this threat will mean failure: securing the U.S. market will do little good if China can still push U.S. companies out of partner markets, depriving them of the scale they need to remain competitive. Instead, the United States and its allies and partners must find scale together, through a defensive moat against Chinese exports. Building a protected common market could start with coordinated tariffs on Chinese goods. But because tariffs can be easy to circumvent, a better approach might be to use coordinated nontariff barriers, including regulatory tools. (The Biden administration used such barriers against digitally connected vehicles from China.) Such regulatory measures could be coordinated with partners relatively quickly and easily.

Another tool is "preferential plurilateralism"—selectively opening allied and partner markets while creating higher barriers for Chinese goods. This approach, broadly supported by figures across the political spectrum, from Robert Lighthizer, the U.S. trade representative during Trump's first term, to prominent Democratic legislators, echoes aspects of the early post–World War II trading system, which gave preferential treatment to members of the free world over autocratic rivals. If the era of free trade agreements is over for now, then sectoral agreements with allies could offer promising avenues for pooling markets while avoiding political sensitivities.

Coordinated industrial policy instruments would also be useful, such as a new international industrial investment bank that would make loans to firms in strategic sectors to diversify supply chains out of China, especially in key sectors such as medicine and critical minerals. And coordinated efforts to remove barriers to allied and partner investment could, for example, allow the bypass of national security review. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have invested heavily in industrial cooperation with the United States (over $300 billion during the Biden administration with continued growth under Trump). And despite a tendency to dismiss Europe as economically stagnant, it outproduces the United States in steel, cars, ships, and civil aircraft; claims a greater share of global manufacturing; and has a manufacturing workforce three times the size of that of the United States. Meanwhile, stronger connections between scientific ecosystems—with more cooperation and people-to-people ties, along with common research protections—will help ensure that U.S. allies and partners can match China's scale.

Pooled market share would also create strategic leverage. A collective framework for economic defense—what some have called an "economic Article 5," drawing on NATO's mutual defense clause—is a long-overdue response to China's economic coercion. Such an agreement would trigger coordinated sanctions, export controls, or trade action if one of the group's members encountered economic pressure from Beijing. It would also function as a platform for deterring military aggression.

EXIT OR LOYALTY?

Trump has presented the United States' partners with hard choices and outright threats. Many may understandably be loath to further tie themselves to Washington any time soon. Trust, built over generations, is easily squandered.

Great powers often overestimate their influence over others. Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev did not believe his experiments in regional autonomy would result in the exit of Soviet republics from the Soviet Union. The Trump administration may not expect its belittling and coercion of allies to lead to a "Gorbachev moment," but key U.S. allies are already considering declaring "independence" from Washington—pursuing nuclear weapons, building new regional groupings, challenging the dollar's role. Some, spurred by domestic reactions to U.S. pressure, are contemplating moving closer to China, even at enormous peril to their industries or security. The United States risks fracturing the free world and closing its best path to scale.

Yet as Washington turns away from its coalition, China is constructing its own. Driven together by anti-Western grievance and their own parochial interests, China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia are creating substantial authoritarian scale. China has built Russia's defense industrial base, helped Iran provide Russia with one-way attack uncrewed aerial vehicles, and assented as North Korea has sent troops to fight in Europe. All four governments are working to erode U.S. sanctions and are engaged in diplomatic coordination, intelligence sharing, and military exercises. This is a unified challenge that requires a unified response.

As some in the United States talk about creating divisions among China's partners by executing a "reverse Kissinger" with Russia, Beijing is determined to exploit fissures in Western alliances, notably between the United States and Europe. The risk now is that Washington will split from Europe while failing to split China and Russia. Efforts to build democratic capacity have been aided by China's own missteps in conducting confrontational "wolf warrior" diplomacy; the United States is now engaged in counterproductive diplomatic pugilism of its own, providing openings for China to play the role of reasonable partner. Washington will have better luck partnering with allies than with adversaries animated by deep anti-U.S. sentiment.

If the United States fails to pursue scale with others, or retreats to the Western hemisphere while undoing its alliances, the contest for the next century will be China's to lose. The United States, like the United Kingdom before it, will find itself diminished by a great power with unprecedented scale. It will encounter a world divided among multiple great powers, but with China the strongest among them and in some areas stronger than all of them. The result will be a United States that is weaker, poorer, and less influential—and a world in which China sets the rules.

Although a growing consensus has swung toward underestimating China's power and overstating America's resurgence, that thinking echoes past cycles of misjudgment. Rosy perspectives on America's trajectory risk fueling the kind of go-it-alone unilateralism that assumes, implicitly and increasingly explicitly, that American allies and partners are obsolete or overvalued when they are in fact the only path to scale against a formidable competitor. Success requires going much further and with greater ambition than the alliance-friendly policies of the previous Biden administration and rejecting outright the alienating, go-it-alone "America first" approach taking shape under Trump.

Such a commitment is not just a policy, but a signal of the capabilities of the United States, its allies, and partners. The Chinese Communist Party is inordinately focused on perceptions of American power, and a critical input in that equation is its estimation of

Washington's ability to pull in the allies and partners that even Beijing openly admits are the United States' greatest advantage. Accordingly, the most effective U.S. strategy—the one that has most unsettled Beijing in recent years and can deter its adventurism in the future—is to build new, enduring, and robust capacities with these states. A sustained, bipartisan commitment to an upgraded alliance network, coupled with strategic cooperation in emerging fields, offers the best path forward to finding scale against the most formidable competitor the United States has ever encountered.

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