The Geopolitics of China
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Editor’s Note: This fully updated geopolitical monograph serves as both a summation of our understanding of a place, and a frame upon which to hang analytical challenges and assessments. The monograph seeks to highlight the underlying geopolitics of key countries and explain their current positions within that context. This monograph begins with an identification and explanation of the “core” of China, which is not synonymous with current political borders. Building from that core, we will explain the “strategic imperatives” of China, imperatives revealed by the interactions of place, people and technology over time, and the constraints and compulsions these place on the Chinese core. We conclude with a discussion of where China sits in achieving its strategic imperatives, and how China’s interests fit within the current global environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Han Core, Buffers and Neighbors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Imperatives</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China in the Contemporary Era</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Han Core

China is an island. Not in the sense of being surrounded by water on all sides, but in the sense of being what we will call a Han core surrounded by difficult terrain creating a buffer between the core and surrounding populations.

The Han core stretches from Shaanxi and the Sichuan Basin in the west to Hebei and Guangdong in the east, sitting astride China’s two great east-west rivers, the Yellow and Yangtze. These fertile valleys, which fall inside China’s 15-inch isohyet — or the part of China that receives 15 inches (38 centimeters) or more of rainfall a year — sustain crops and hence people. Although this is China’s agricultural core, it has less than half the arable land per person as the rest of the world and just one-seventh the arable land per capita of North America. Most of China’s 1.3 billion people live within this area, which accounts for less than half China’s total land area.

This core is hemmed in by rugged mountains to the northeast and lush mountains to the south, the vast Gobi and Taklamakan deserts and plains to the north and west, and the Tibetan Plateau to the southwest, abutting the Himalayas. This ring of mountains, deserts, jungles and plateaus plus the sea to the east provides a shell around the Han core, simultaneously protecting and isolating China from its neighbors.
There is little contiguous dense population between China and its neighbors. The heartland of China is therefore at least partly secured by geography.

But the Chinese core is not naturally unified. What we now consider Han China is the culmination of centuries of war and conquest, of geographic expansionism, ethnic interaction and cultural assimilations. Security came from the drive to dominate and thus unify the internal competing powers, largely safe within the buffer shell, though regionalism and fragmentation were perennial. Competition among regional warlords as well as external threats led to a process of conquest, with ultimate power coming to those who could unify the Han core. Unified dynasties were most often rooted in the north; southern-based powers were more vulnerable to attack, and hence short-lived.

While China today may appear to be a unified entity from the outside, it is extremely diverse within. Even the geography within the Han Core is extremely fragmented, split by mountains and rivers, with the Qin Mountain-Huai River line and the Yangtze serving as the rough divider between the north and south. Dialects of Chinese are diverse and numerous, even within this Han core, as are foodways, culture and livelihoods. As one moves outward to the buffer lands, ethnic diversity increases.

The Buffers

A ring of ethnic regions surrounds the Han core, including Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria.
Although Han Chinese now make up the majority in many of these regions, they are not part of the core. They are the remnants of imperial expansion, of action against external threats and of the geographic realities of the Asian landmass. China’s core is a land of rain and rivers, a land of agriculture and merchant trade. But to the north and west, the vast plains and steppes were the lands of nomads. And when nomadic tribes and sedentary farmers abut, the result historically has often been conflict.

The perimeter of modern China reveals the results of centuries of conflict and threat, the assertion of central authority, and thus explains the reason China is so adamant about keeping its buffer regions in check. Threats from the northeast have included Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula, sources of invasion from native and distant populations. The Manchu invaded China in the 17th century, establishing the Qing Empire, though the Manchu were in the end largely assimilated into Chinese culture. The Korean Peninsula served as the route for the failed Japanese invasion of China at the end of the 16th century, and was a route for Japan’s return to the Asian mainland at the end of the 19th century. If Manchuria is largely assimilated, Korea is certainly not thanks to its more formidable terrain, and Beijing’s continued support of North Korea reflects the longstanding concern that the Korean Peninsula could serve as a bridgehead for invasion of the Han Core.

Moving west, there are the vast Mongolian steppes, source of numerous raids into China’s heartland, but most notably of the Mongol invasion of the 13th century, and the establishment of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in China. Like the later Manchu, the Mongol leadership also began a process of assimilation into Han Chinese culture and political structure during their rule. The various sections of China’s Great Wall were built along the loose boundary between the nomadic horsemen of the north and northeast and the plains and farming fields of the Chinese core. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Great Wall also parallels in part the 15-inch isohyet; the wall was a barrier to reinforce what geography had already created. China has assimilated Inner Mongolia into its current borders, but Mongolia itself was for years under Soviet domination and served as buffer between the Chinese and Soviets. China still seeks to assert influence into Mongolia to prevent foreign powers from gaining too strong a foothold there.

To the northwest is Xinjiang, route of the old Silk Road trade, which passed from oasis to oasis through deserts and windswept plains. The culture and religious character of Xinjiang is an extension of Turkic Central Asia and marks the northeasternmost extent of Islamic influence. Today, Xinjiang is one of China’s most restive buffer regions. Modern China has sought to take full advantage of the region’s extensive natural resources and to revitalize old trade routes to access resources and markets in Central Asia and on to the Middle East and Europe. Xinjiang provides strategic depth from foreign encroachment, but also a potential challenge to Chinese unity. The Soviets briefly exploited Xinjiang’s ethnic and religious differences with the Chinese core as a way of shaping relations with China. Today, Beijing keeps a tight grip on the region to weaken any potential rising nationalism or religious sectarianism that could challenge the political borders of modern China.

To the south of Xinjiang rises the massive Tibetan Plateau, far larger than the current Tibet
Autonomous Region. China only sought to directly dominate the highland relatively recently, and did not finish the job until well into the 20th century. Tibet was a frequent source of irritation for China’s Silk Road routes, as it was much easier for the Tibetans to ride down and raid than for China to ascend and control the Tibetans. Tibet is not only a natural fortress, it is the source of China’s major rivers (as well as those of many of China’s neighbors). In modern terms, Tibet is often a pawn in the strategic competition between China and India. The Himalayas provide a strong barrier between the Indian subcontinent and modern China, but were Tibet to gain independence, or alliance with India, then Tibet could threaten China’s heartland once again.

Beyond Tibet, to the south and east of the Han core rise the mountains of Southeast Asia, cut by north-south river valleys. The geography of Southeast Asia facilitated north-south movement of peoples, but constrained the expansion of power to the east and west. Thus Southeast Asia as a whole remained largely fragmented. The border regions between China and its southern neighbors may have clear lines on maps, but the physical and cultural reality suggests much more gradual fading between the two sides of the border rather than clear delineations. It is to the south that Chinese empires have sought their greatest expansion beyond the core, into Myanmar but particularly into Vietnam. These excursions have often ended in defeat of the big power given the tyranny of terrain and distance. China’s modern relations with continental Southeast Asia remain mixed, a combination of cooperation and competition, trade and distrust.

To the east lie the South China, East China and Yellow seas, maritime realms that facilitated coastal and some maritime trade, but largely served as a buffer rather than a route for interaction in ancient times. It is not that China could not develop a maritime culture, but rather than it simply did not need to. China was long largely self-sufficient with its resources, and trade with distant neighbors was more for luxuries than needs. China’s coasts provided ample space for localized fishing and trade, but maritime piracy from without was a source of angst, and China’s solution was more often to treat the coast as a wall (relying instead on north-south canals inland for trade, for example). The treasure fleets of Zheng He, touted as China’s Columbus and proof of China’s maritime tradition, were frivolities, and the fleets were burned when internal troubles arose anew. The rise of Western imperialism reinforced the vulnerabilities of China to maritime threats, but internal crises undermined China’s ability to fend off European advances.

Managing the Neighbors

China’s historic relations with the buffer regions was not one based on the absolute nation-state concept of the West, but rather of differing layers of control or influence, shifting over time based on national strength and threat perceptions. Each unified Chinese dynasty, from the Han to the Qing, sought territorial expansion for resources and protection. Differing empires faced differing priorities — the Han, for example, focused on threats from the west and the north, the Ming were concerned with the north to the northeast. But ancient China was faced with a perennial paradox: The buffer is most secure when a Han core needs its protection least, and most vulnerable when a weak Han core needs the buffer’s protection most.

In the buffer regions, successive Chinese dynasties sought assimilation or mere cooperation depending on prevailing conditions. Managing these buffer areas sat somewhere between domestic and foreign policy for Chinese dynasties, given they were both semi-integrated and semiautonomous. Frequently, China sought negative control rather than more costly positive control. Distance, terrain and low population densities made formal control over the buffer lands costly and complicated. Instead, China emphasized preventing these areas or populations from threatening the Han core as much as their assimilation.
China’s policies toward relations with kingdoms outside of the buffer regions therefore tended toward negative instead of positive control. This is similar to the strategy pursued by modern Russia and it tries to shape relations with its neighbors (as opposed to pursuing the more costly complete control as during the Cold War), and in some ways how the U.S. empire was built. While successive Chinese empires clearly sought to expand territory, they just as often preferred to rely instead on asserting authority over neighboring kingdoms, a tribute system and nominal recognition of China’s central authority. Managing the massive Chinese heartland was difficult enough without adding the complications of control of, or even influence over, the buffers. Pursuing far-flung expansion beyond the buffer was rarely an option, and when attempted often ended in disaster either due to overstretched resources or more often rebellion and conflict at home.

China is hard to invade given its size, geography and population. It is even harder to occupy, something Western imperial powers and the Japanese found, as did the successful Mongol and Manchu invaders, who eventually were largely assimilated. This also makes it hard for the Chinese to invade others — not impossible, but certainly difficult. With the buffers in place, relations with neighbors largely managed, and ample resources at home, China could live in splendid isolation, interacting by choice rather than out of necessity. But the changes in Europe, the global expansion of empires, and the modern path toward greater global trade and interaction have brought significant changes to China. China can no longer remain isolated within its buffered space, even if it wanted to. ☐
Strategic Imperatives

Geopolitics is the study of the interaction of organized people and place over time. As nations (and states) emerge, their evolution is shaped by their location, by resources, ease or difficulty of movement, by neighbors and by their own history. As we look at these, we can identify strategic imperatives, elements of constraints and compulsions on a nation that largely exist outside of a specific moment in time, a specific political system or ideology. These broader imperatives are the hidden hand in geopolitics. They are not deterministic, but they do shape opportunities and costs for acting upon or ignoring the imperatives and their underlying realities.

When we look at China, and at the Han core in particular, we see four successive imperatives, each with differing priorities over time. The fourth imperative is a reflection of China’s current position in the modern era and has rarely surfaced in Chinese history.

1. Achieve and maintain internal unity within the Han core.
2. Maintain influence or control over the buffer regions.
3. Protect the coastline from foreign encroachment.
4. Secure and protect international trade routes, resources and markets.
1. Achieve and maintain internal unity within the Han core.

China is more enclosed than any other great power. The size of its population, coupled with its secure frontiers and relative abundance of resources, allowed it to develop with minimal intercourse with the rest of the world if it so chose. As with the development of the United States centuries later, insularity was a privilege, not a constraint. China's ability to source most of its needs from its own territory and to isolate itself from external threats allowed it to develop with a largely inward focus. Even Chinese imperial power projection was driven more by the prevention of external challenges rather than the acquisition of key resources. Trade and international intercourse existed, and at times flourished, but was less a requirement and more a luxury.

The weakness of China was (and may remain) the internal diversity of geography, history, economic activity and regionalism. As noted above, the Han core appears largely unified, but underneath is extremely complex and fragmented. China has north-south divisions, coastal-interior divisions, core-periphery divisions, rural-urban divisions, and increasingly, have-and have-not divisions. Balancing these differences requires a deft hand at the center. And, with China's current economic slowdown, this balancing act is growing more difficult.

China's size has led to a historic pattern of expansion and contraction based on internal crises more often than external threats, though as anywhere, severe internal crises can pave the way for external actors to move in. To manage the diversity, geographic spread and isolation of the Han core requires a strong central government, but it also requires an expansive bureaucracy to ensure the center is obeyed. Time and again, the bureaucracy has become more dominant than the distant political core. Managing the diversity of local issues and interests falls to the local bureaucracy, and the gap between central authority and local challenges expands. But the sprawling bureaucracy and centralized order in turn creates immense bureaucratic interests, expands social divisions and fosters grassroots discontent. This has often required top-down reforms, bureaucratic ratification and power consolidation to reinvigorate imperial rulings. But at times it has instead ended up sparking coups, the rise of regionalism and warlords as well as rural revolts, a major factor, a major factor contributing to the fall of dynasties. These internal frictions eventually mean the center struggles to control the Han core, and internal or external challengers arise, decentralizing power and repeating the cycle.

In the modern era, for China to prosper it must also engage in international commerce. Disagreements among regions and officials during the 19th century as European powers were forcing more concessions from China led to conflicting policies, internal contradictions and vast disparities of wealth. Since the late 1970s and Dang Xiaoping's reform and opening, China has seen a massive increase in international trade and connectivity, but built atop a Maoist system of internal redundancy — nearly every province and every city produced steel, for example, as a way of ensuring no easy center of gravity for a foreign power to attack — growth was fast but far from evenly distributed and inherent inefficiencies abounded.

Beijing today faces the challenge of managing national economic policies even as local interests resist or ignore central mandates. The coastal regions have profited the most. China's middle class may measure some 400 million people, most of whom are within a thin strip of provinces along the maritime frontier. The remaining 900 million Chinese, while still gaining greatly over the past 30 years, remain far behind their coastal and major urban compatriots. The shift in the global economic structure has brought an end to China's double-digit growth rates and the promise that everyone will get rich, just some faster than others. The re-consolidation of central power today is a reflection of the concerns of regionalism and the memory of modern revolutions arising from the rural heartland of China.
2. Maintain influence or control over the buffer regions.

One challenge faced historically by the agricultural and stationary Han civilization was that it was surrounded to the north and west by nomadic tribes, with fluctuating borders and populations in the mountains and dense forests to the south. To secure the Han core, China historically fought, and occasionally was overcome by, its neighbors (particularly the powerful nomadic tribes to the north). To manage its regional position, China established a Middle Kingdom policy whereby it kept neighbors at bay with a parallel policy of integration and accommodation for the nearby buffer regions while employing a nominal tributary system to deal with its slightly more distant neighbors. When applied effectively, this required minimal expenditure of wealth or military force to retain a relatively safe central position. But it also offered only minimal real influence or control over the neighbors.

As throughout its history, China’s boundaries underwent constant fluctuations. But it is the Maoist period that largely shaped China’s contemporary boundaries and geopolitical landscape. The internal weakening of the Qing Dynasty in the 18th and 19th centuries provided ample opportunities for imperial exploitation of China by Europe and later Japan. With the Japanese defeat in 1945, China found itself embroiled in a civil war that pitted the Nationalists against the Communists. Manchuria returned to Chinese hands, but Outer Mongolia was under Soviet Control, and Soviet influence was spreading to Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. Even as Mao fought the Nationalists, he was also preparing to retake the northern buffer regions; he was as concerned about Soviet encroachment from the north and west as he was about the past encroachment of Europeans from the coast.

Mao began to consolidate Chinese communist control over Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, edging the Soviets out. Xinjiang meanwhile had been under the control of successive regional warlords, from Yang Zengxin to Sheng Shicai. Shortly after the end of the civil war, Mao moved to eliminate or coops local warlords and take over Xinjiang. Finally, in 1950 Mao moved against Tibet, which he secured in 1951. The rapid-fire consolidation of the buffer regions gave Mao what all Chinese emperors sought, namely, a China secure from invasion.

China’s response to the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 reinforced the significance of the buffer regions to Beijing’s security, and served as a reminder of the historic position of Korea as a potential staging point for foreign incursions into China. China’s periphery was tested in the 1950s as the United States covertly backed uprisings in Tibet, in the late 1960s in border skirmishes with the Soviets along the Ussuri River, and in the late 1970s with Vietnam’s westward expansion and China’s counter.

Modern China has formally integrated the buffer regions, stretching from Manchuria in the northeast through Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet, and into Yunnan and along the mountains in the south. These territories provide strategic depth but bring their own challenges in the form of internal ethnic relations and cohesion — something perhaps less significant in the past when these lands existed in the fuzzy space between domestic and foreign policy. Ethnic, nationalist and sectarian conflicts and insurgencies continue in Xinjiang and to a lesser extent in Tibet, and localized smaller conflicts occasionally arise in other ethnic buffer regions.

One of Beijing’s greatest fears about the buffer regions stems from the manner in which China assimilated them into the country. Unlike the Soviets, who moved non-Russian ethnic groups around to avoid contiguous ethnicities across borders, China moved Han Chinese into the buffer regions, slowly diluting the local populations. China still fears Pan-Turkic movements spreading through Central Asia into Xinjiang; large, organized ethnic Tibetan populations in India; Inner Mongolian herdsmen potentially seeking reunification with Mongolia; ethnic Koreans on
the Chinese side of the Yalu River forging ties with a future unified Korea; and numerous ethnic minority and even militant groups moving along the borders of Southeast Asia.

3. Protect the coastline from foreign encroachment.

For much of China’s history, the country was largely self-sufficient in natural resources. What additional resources or luxuries it needed could be supplied along the Silk Road routes to the west, or in small-scale trade with neighbors. Beginning in the 12th century, the coast was often plagued by piracy and suffered occasional international raids, but given its massive interior and its ethnic diversity, China rarely focused on naval power. It was not that China was incapable of developing sea power, but rather that as a continental power it had little motivation to do so: Since threats traditionally came from the nomads to the north and northwest, and China’s sedentary agricultural system simply did not need to seek resources or new lands abroad, and its population could consume its surpluses, eliminating the need for distant markets. The sea was seen as a buffer, not as a bridge.

Until European intervention, the physical threat to China rarely came from the coast. But the 19th century brought new and significant challenges to China via the sea. European powers pressed for concessions, took ports and sailed up China’s rivers. Japan invaded from across the sea, destroying much of the nascent Chinese navy in the process.

The carving up of the Chinese coastal and riverine cities among imperial powers proved a more acute
threat to China than the overall risk of China being conquered from the sea. Even Japan, with the full weight of its emerging imperial resources, was unable to conquer China. But as World War II ended and the Chinese civil war came to its conclusion, concession cities remained in foreign hands in Hong Kong and Macao, and the increased connection to seaborne trade, even if in its early stages, created potential vulnerabilities for China. The most obvious is the potential disruption of Chinese trade or restrictions on resources by foreign powers.

The second vulnerability is no less significant. Given the regionalism and divisions already apparent in China, cities and regions along the coast can see their local interests diverge from the interior, and even from those of the broader state when they begin to share the interests of foreign cosmopolitan centers. And ideas, information and challenges to the established patterns can have disruptive effects; consider the first strategic imperative of China. Modern China’s constant effort to contain powerful regions such as Shanghai and Guangdong, perennial cycle of bureaucratic and industrial consolidation and suspicions of economic penetration and political intervention by foreign powers — seen in its current hard-line policies toward Hong Kong — reflect this.

4. Secure and protect international trade routes, resources and markets.

The first three imperatives long remained the core of China’s national and international strategy. But imperatives are not entirely static, and at times changes in the global situation, in economic activity, technology, conflict, or external and internal pressures can add or alter an imperative. China’s rapid economic growth at the end of the 20th century and early 21st century created a new imperative, one that moved China out of what had been a near self-reliant capability and into one that left China vulnerable to international involvement.

China’s economic success has broken its self-sufficiency. Now, it imports at least as much of its key industrial commodities as it produces. Foreign trade is a vital piece of China’s economic activity, even as the country attempts to drive its economy toward a domestic consumption model. Outbound investments provide access not only to markets and resources but also to technology and skills. This has compelled China to seek ways to secure its vulnerable supply lines, expand its maritime presence and extend its international financial and political presence.

China must now no longer view the sea as a buffer, but as a bridge — one that must stay open and accessible. Until the full implications of this new overseas dependence were completely understood, China’s response was to begin creating a maritime capability that would deter foreign intervention. Building a full-fledged oceangoing global naval presence is costly, takes time, and most of all, takes decades of training. Focusing on anti-ship missile development is less costly in resources and time. But the issue for Beijing was more than preventing a foreign power from blocking its ports; it was the protection of supply lines.

Given the existing U.S. dominance of the world’s oceans, China faced three choices:

1. Accept U.S. presence and goodwill.
2. Seek alternative or redundant trade routes to reduce single-point vulnerabilities.
3. Invest in the development of a global naval capability.

During times of unipolar maritime power, many countries simply accept and accommodate policy to the reality. It would not be unheard of for a country, even one dependent on foreign trade routes, to assess the cost of alternative paths as exceeding the risk to their national interests. Just because the United States could disrupt Chinese trade at sea does not mean the United States has any intention
or will to do so. But as Chinese power grows, the country is increasingly seen as a direct strategic competitor to the United States. Assuming that the United States would not use its power has become too great a risk for China.

Instead, Beijing has pursued a combination of strategies: the expansion of alternative and redundant trade routes to limit single points of failure and buy time while building up a more robust maritime military capacity. From China’s perspective, at minimum, it needs to secure its own space within the enclosed East and South China seas, and prevent or deter foreign powers (namely the United States) from maintaining a strong ring of allies around the periphery of these seas. At the center of China’s insecurity lies Taiwan. This island is the proverbial unsinkable aircraft carrier that if in foreign hands can challenge China’s regional security and cut its north-south maritime access, but if back in Chinese hands provides a strong promontory into the heart of the contained seas. As China continues to assert its position in its surrounding seas, attention on Taiwan will increase, as will efforts to encourage reunification, whether peaceful or not.

China’s naval development, its advances in anti-ship missiles, its assertive reclamation of islands and reefs in what it considers its territory in the South China Sea, and its involvement in Gulf of Aden anti-piracy operations and many others are all part of building out a more robust naval capacity. Today China is testing its first aircraft carrier, and is able to conduct basic aerial operations. But taking part in drills and training in controlled conditions is far different than operating in a crisis. China has no one to teach it carrier battle group operations; it has very little in the way of naval veterans who can train the next generation of seamen. Navies are built on more than steel hulls; they are built on training and tradition. In the Sino-Japanese War, when both Japan and China were first building and training Western-style fleets, Japan’s adoption of the British naval tradition gave the country a leg up over the perhaps better armed Chinese navy, which had adopted the ultimately less successful German naval training and tradition. True naval building is a long process, and while the experience of others can accelerate the process, there is no substitute for active experience.

China’s Iron Silk Road initiative, now expanded into the broader Belt and Road initiative combining overland and maritime routes coupled with Chinese port development around the world, are all part of the strategy to diversify trade routes. Even if many of the routes individually are not profitable, the combined whole provides a strength that may exceed the cost of construction and maintenance. Belt and Road is not only about routes and market access; it is about expanding trade relations to integrate more countries into a Chinese system and thus add to the cost for the United States or another power of trying to interfere with these routes. □
China’s Modern and Ancient Trade Routes

The Belt and Road initiative is part of a strategy to diversify trade routes, and integrate more countries into a Chinese system.
Though China finds itself compelled to pursue a more global role, its geography and history have historically driven it to be a regional continental power, one most secure when it was at least partially isolated within its buffer shell. China's large population meant it did not need to seek out export markets, as the generally isolated United States did. And its buffer allowed the continual drive for internal unification, contrasting with the fragmented Europe that is much harder to unify and secure.

As China's power continues to expand and Chinese-led international institutions proliferate, it is extremely unlikely that Beijing will be content receding from the geopolitical limelight or acquiescing to the norms of the existing order. China is a late emerging power, and when any major power emerges, it challenges the existing order or risks constraints and containment. For all its constraints, for the foreseeable future China will remain one of the few states credibly challenging the political, economic and military supremacy of the United States, as well as the legitimacy of the U.S.-designed and -led international order.

China's international economic networks and dependencies have made it harder for Beijing to retain older policies of noninterference. The larger and
more active China becomes economically and internationally, the fewer countries around the world will consider Chinese actions innocuous. China faces political and security challenges to its investments and economic interests in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, Central Asia and elsewhere. As China seeks advanced technologies to remain on par with other global economic powers, it is stymied by political opposition, national security concerns and fears of competition.

Even in lower end technologies, such as steel or shipbuilding, China’s sheer size has massive repercussions that trigger often unintentional, but no less important, consequences and responses. Chinese steel production, driven both by a massive surge in internal infrastructure development and by the desire of local and regional governments to maintain employment programs, spurred a huge spike in the price of iron ore internationally. While Beijing might not have intended to crush global steel markets, the combination of high input costs and the massive surplus of steel products produced in China led to a collapse in prices and has put heavy strains on other steel producers. Given China’s scale, its surge in shipbuilding, its foray into solar panel manufacturing and its imports of raw materials all have a disproportionate effect on other nations, whether consumers or producers.

China’s resource needs also shape the international situation in other ways. As China falls behind in certain technologies or process refinements, its competitive advantage in bidding for mineral or resource projects — or even for infrastructure development projects — lies along two paths: price and political blindness. On the first, China often either outbids or underprices...
its competitors, relying on extensive — if at times unofficial — government backing to ensure success. But China will also turn a blind eye toward political concerns, working with countries with which the West is largely unable to contract or acting in areas riven by internal conflict. Combined, these increase China’s overall reach and influence and at times undermine U.S. attempts to shape international behavior through nonmilitary means.

But China is moving well beyond such policies toward a greater role in international finance. One of the strengths of the United States is the ubiquity of the U.S. dollar and the larger role the United States plays in many aspects of international trade. This is a strategic risk to China, from Beijing’s perspective, because the United States sets the rules and shapes the global economy, leaving China in a reactive position. Beijing’s pursuit of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, its inclusion in the International Monetary Fund’s de facto currency in regional trade deals and its granting of low-interest loans all reflect an attempt to balance if not break free from U.S. influence in international finance. Perhaps ironically, were China to bring about a real break and create competing international financial and trade systems,
it would lose some of the protection of the single integrated global system that currently prevents the United States from seeking a true containment policy against China, as it did against the Soviet Union.

There are numerous additional examples of military, economic and political areas in which China and the United States contend, but each can be seen as a collision of their strategic imperatives. When fundamentals, more than simply ideology or political expediency, take shape, the stakes are higher and the cost of inaction outweighs the cost of action. Although both may couch their public statements in terms of ideology, global norms, or proper economic or political systems, those are only the veneer overlaying the hardened oak of geopolitics.

But it is important to remember each of China’s strategic imperatives. It is not clear that the Han core is fully unified as China goes through the wrenching transition of economic models. The buffer zones of the Chinese periphery are providing their own problems amid a global movement toward subnationalism and in ties through Xinjiang to Islamist militant networks stretching from the Mediterranean through Central Asia to the islands of Southeast Asia. These domestic issues remain a strong counter to China’s ability to focus on its outward imperatives, yet China cannot ignore the risks from the sea.

From the viewpoint of strategic imperatives, which drive nations to follow certain courses to protect their interests as they develop, it is no wonder that the United States and China have such a complicated relationship, colored as much by economic interdependence as by strategic competition. A strategic imperative is more than just an interest, more than a policy desire. It is a force impelling a nation, though it does not force decisions. It shapes constraints and compulsions. Failing to pursue the imperative has costs. Pursuing the imperative has costs. Not all imperatives are achievable or even desirable. But beneath the surface, they press on nations, press on leaders, and create conditions both for international friction and for cooperation. □
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