Opinion – Rethinking the China Challenge

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In the U.S. when one party enacts foreign policy, the other party imagines how it will one day exercise power. During the Clinton administration of the 1990s, for example, neo-conservatives formed The Project for a New American Century (PNAC) to revive ideas they had first articulated during the final months of the George H. W. Bush administration: that the U.S. should adopt a more militarized foreign policy to shape the 21st century in line with American values and interests. More recently, the Carnegie Foundation convened a group of foreign policy experts, including Jake Sullivan, Biden's National Security Advisor, to explore how U.S. foreign policy could advance the economic interests of the middle class in the United States through promoting high-value manufacturing initiatives in defense, semiconductors, and renewable energy technologies. The scale of the new initiatives remained small relative not only to other fiscal policy commitments but also to similar policies by both U.S. allies and adversaries, as Adam Tooze has noted. Biden's policies were not enough to sustain the presidency and so Democratic-leaning policy intellectuals are once again marginalized, but from the sidelines they are ringing the alarm bells.

This is the spirit in which we should approach Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi's recent essay in *Foreign Affairs*, "Underestimating China: Why America Needs a New Strategy of Allied Scale." The authors offer a compelling diagnosis of the shifting balance of power in international politics – one that would have surely alarmed the neoconservatives aligned with PNAC. At the heart of their argument is the concept of scale — the idea that larger states, through population, economic coordination, and productive capacity, can marshal decisive advantages across military, technological, and economic domains. For Campbell and Doshi, the rise of China represents the latest iteration of a familiar historical pattern: just as the United States once surpassed Great Britain and the Soviet Union overwhelmed Nazi Germany, China now appears poised to eclipse the United States.

Their argument rests on a thorough inventory of China's scale-based advantages. China boasts twice the U.S. manufacturing capacity and dominates key sectors such as electric vehicles, advanced nuclear reactors, and artificial intelligence. It now leads the world in patents and top-cited scientific publications, and possesses the largest navy on the planet, with unmatched shipbuilding and missile capacities. According to Campbell and Doshi, these are not future potentials but current realities. Even amid slower growth, high debt, and demographic headwinds, China remains a formidable peer competitor.

Their solution? The United States must embrace a strategy of allied scale — leveraging its network of democratic allies to match and exceed China's capabilities. This requires not only military integration but economic co-production, shared technological development, and reciprocal investment. Alliances, in this view, are not burdens but force multipliers. The U.S. should pursue joint ventures with Japanese and Korean shipbuilders, collaborate with European missile manufacturers, and relocate critical electronics production through partnerships with Taiwanese firms. In short, the U.S. must reimagine itself as the nucleus of a distributed alliance system that competes collectively with China.

There is much to admire in Campbell and Doshi's analysis. It offers a strategic framework that integrates economics, security, and industrial policy. It also marks a return to the kind of grand strategy that characterized the early Cold War: forward-looking, alliance-centered, and rooted in material realities. And yet, the vision suffers from two major blind spots: its inattentiveness to both issues of political legitimacy and climate change.

The first problem is political. While Campbell and Doshi advocate a globally integrated strategy, they understate the domestic obstacles to its realization. These problems are deeply rooted in the ongoing crisis of the liberal West, as Perry Anderson has recently discussed. Neoliberal capitalism emerged in the West because of the exhaustion of Keynesian liberalism and its conceit that the state should regulate capitalism in the public interest. The new neoliberal dispensation mobilized the powers of the state to secure the operation of a more globalized and self-regulating economy. The Great Recession of 2008-9 shattered the neoliberal supposition of self-regulation, but governments nonetheless doubled down on the existing economic model by recapitalizing banks and flooding the markets with liquidity. The results of these policies across the West were tepid growth, rising inequality, further consolidation of oligarchic control over both the economic and political institutions – all accompanied by rapidly rising levels of government debt. These conditions unleashed the populist storms that have raged across the West for the past decade.

Notable here is the obliviousness of Campbell and Doshi to the political context in which they formulate their proposal. Their supposition is that U.S. and Western control over the international political system is imperiled by the rise of China. One might cite instead the old line from a 1970s-era comic strip *Pogo*: "We have met the enemy and he is us." Why save the U.S.-based international liberal order? Maybe this decaying order is, in fact, the problem. Many countries, as Ngaire Woods points out, are looking for the exits to the liberal garden in the form of regionally based, post-American, multilateral orders. Domestically, American populism, energized by economic dislocation and elite distrust, threatens the very alliances that Campbell and Doshi seek to revitalize. Donald Trump, elected twice on a platform of geopolitical retrenchment, has portrayed U.S. alliances as exploitative dependencies. This worldview now shapes large segments of U.S. foreign policy thinking. Allies, in turn, may justifiably question America's reliability. How can prospective members of a U.S. anti-Chinese alliance plan for long-term integration with a partner whose strategic posture swings with electoral tides?

The second issue is existential. Nowhere in their essay do Campbell and Doshi address the planetary crisis of climate change. Their framing of geopolitical competition remains locked in a twentieth-century logic of industrial supremacy, without accounting for the ecological limits of such growth. In privileging the nexus between economic and military power, they ignore how environmental stability forms the basis for any sort of state power. Indeed, climate change is already destabilizing state capacity: rising sea levels, resource shocks, and extreme weather threaten infrastructure, migration patterns, and political legitimacy. Authors such as Michael Klare and Timothy Heath offer a version of climate realism that stands in stark contrast to Campbell and Doshi's strategic realism. Is there even a question as to which reality we should take more seriously?

U.S. and China strategic rivalry without climate coordination is both dangerous and self-defeating. A more sustainable grand strategy would incorporate Campbell and Doshi's insights on scale while reframing alliances as instruments of both competition and cooperation. The United States and its allies should certainly strengthen their industrial and technological capacities. But they must also lead a global transition toward ecological resilience. Indeed, in this latter pursuit, the U.S. and its allies must collaborate with China. A Green New Deal for global alliances — rooted in renewable infrastructure, shared innovation, and climate adaptation — offers a compelling alternative to the logic of zero-sum rivalry. Such a strategy would appeal not only to policymakers but to citizens whose support is essential for any enduring foreign policy. Such a policy orientation would entail a green new deal uncoupled from the imperatives of geopolitical competition.

Of course, this pushes against the dominant ideology of the contemporary world – nationalism. Contemporary world politics needs to be framed not as a struggle for geopolitical or geoeconomic dominance, but rather as what the novelist Kim Stanley Robinson refers to as a battle for the earth. Robinson's novel, *The Ministry of the Future,* rightfully portrays climate change not just as a policy challenge, but as a civilizational pivot. The central task of the 2020s is not merely to outcompete China, but to reimagine power in a world of environmental limits and democratic erosion. If the United States is to lead, it must offer more than dominance. It must offer a vision of shared survival. As democratic- leaning policymakers gaze powerlessly at the spectacle of Trump 2 statecraft, this is a point that should reframe their strategic imagination.

About the author:

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