

Managing the U.S.-China contest: can Brazil and ASEAN countries cooperate?

Kishore Mahbubani

Abstract: The U.S.-China contest will be the biggest geopolitical issue in the coming decades. The U.S. erred in not adopting a thoughtful, long-term strategy to manage China's challenge. While Brazil and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have fundamentally different geopolitical circumstances, they share strong ties with both countries and should send a united message against their rivalry. They should work together to forge a multilateral approach, based on existing norms and processes, to develop a new balance of power which will enable both China and the U.S. to thrive together with Brazil, ASEAN and the rest of the world.

Keywords: U.S.-China geopolitical contest; Brazil; ASEAN.

Administrando a rivalidade EUA-China: podem o Brasil e os países da ASEAN cooperar?

Resumo: A disputa EUA-China será a maior questão geopolítica das próximas décadas. Os EUA erraram ao não adotar uma estratégia ponderada e de longo prazo para administrar o desafio da China. Embora o Brasil e a Associação das Nações do Sudeste Asiático (ASEAN) tenham circunstâncias geopolíticas fundamentalmente diferentes, eles compartilham fortes laços com ambos os países e devem enviar mensagem unida contra essa rivalidade. Eles devem trabalhar juntos para forjar uma abordagem multilateral, baseada em normas e processos existentes, para desenvolver um novo equilíbrio de poder que permita que a China e os EUA prosperem junto com o Brasil, a ASEAN e o resto do mundo.

Palavras-chave: disputa geopolítica EUA-China; Brasil; ASEAN.

Brazil and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could not be further apart geographically. ASEAN and Brazil are located exactly on opposite sides of the globe. Logically speaking, since geopolitics is a combination of two words – geography and politics – the different geographies of Brazil and ASEAN should mean that we will have different geopolitical challenges. As one moves firmly ahead into the third decade of the 21st century, it is becoming clearer and clearer that both Brazil and ASEAN will face a common challenge: managing the U.S.-China geopolitical contest. This essay argues that while the U.S. has made a huge strategic error by launching a geopolitical contest without first working out a thoughtful, long-term strategy, Brazil and ASEAN can send a common message to persuade the U.S. and China to press the pause button on their geopolitical contest.

Making predictions about the future is always hazardous. However, one does not have to be a geopolitical genius to figure out that the dominant geopolitical contest of the 21st century will be the one between the U.S. and China. This contest will be complex and multidimensional, as I document in my book *Has China Won?* (2020), which has been published in Brazil as *A China Venceu?* (Mahbubani 2021a). This geopolitical contest will gain momentum in the coming decades because of a fundamental two thousand year old iron law of history: the number one power in the world today, the U.S., will always push down the number two power, China, and prevent it from becoming number one.

Of course, the U.S. denies that it is only protecting its primacy in launching this contest. To gain support for its position, the U.S. has to portray this geopolitical issue as a contest between good and evil, or between democracies and autocracies. A well-known U.S. writer, Anne Applebaum (2021), described it as follows: “If the U.S. removes the promotion of democracy from its foreign policy, if the U.S. ceases to interest itself in the fate of other democracies and democratic movements, then autocracies will quickly take our place as sources of influence, funding, and ideas.” Similarly, president Biden (United States 2021) has also said, “We’re in a contest, not with China per se, ... with autocrats, autocratic governments around the world, as to whether or not democracies can compete with them in a rapidly changing 21st century.” It is understandable why the U.S. would like to portray itself as a defender of democratic values. However, all seasoned geopolitical analysts know that when countries have to choose between interests and values, they always choose interests. Indeed, this has been true in the U.S.-China relationship too.

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A love affair began between the U.S. and China in 1971 when Henry Kissinger made his famous secret visit to Beijing. It was followed by a historic path-breaking visit by president Richard Nixon to Beijing in February 1972, exactly fifty years ago. It is vital to remember here that, at that time, China was still in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, a period which had seen far greater deprivations of human rights in China than anything seen today. Yet, the U.S. could choose to completely ignore these human rights violations in China and focus on its key interest of finding an ally against the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

It is also vital to add here that, during the Cold War, both Brazil and the five founding members of ASEAN (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) were clearly more closely aligned with the U.S. than with the Soviet Union. Indeed, when ASEAN was created on August 8, 1967, it was denounced by the Soviet Union as an American imperialist creation. As a Diplomatic Dictionary edited by then Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko noted, ASEAN was under undisguised pressure from the U.S.A. and other countries, which hoped to impart on the association an anti-socialist orientation, to urge them into confrontation with Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and to convert ASEAN into a military-political grouping. China too vociferously condemned the creation of ASEAN. Mao's government denounced it as a "neo-imperialist" creation. The Peking Review called the founding members "the handful of U.S. imperialism's running dogs in Southeast Asia" and denounced ASEAN as "an out-and-out counter-revolutionary alliance rigged up to oppose China, communism and the people, another instrument fashioned by U.S. imperialism and Soviet revisionism for pursuing neo-colonialist ends in Asia" (see Mahbubani 2018).

Hence, during the Cold War, both Brazil and ASEAN did not have to make difficult choices, ASEAN countries stood solidly with the U.S. However, in the U.S.-China contest, difficult choices must be made, both Brazil and ASEAN want to maintain good ties with the U.S. There are many powerful reasons for doing so, but now it is also in the interest of Brazil and ASEAN to maintain good ties with China. Indeed, China has become a more important trading partner. In 2000, it took Brazil one year to export \$1 billion to China, while it took one month to export \$1 billion to the U.S. Today, it has reversed: it took Brazil only 72 hours to export \$1 billion to China in 2020, while it took 12 days to export a similar amount to the U.S. (see Mahbubani 2021b).

Similarly, ASEAN's trade with China has become much larger than its trade with the US. In 2000, US trade with ASEAN was \$135 billion, more than three times the trade of China with ASEAN of \$40 billion. However, by 2020, China's trade with ASEAN had grown to \$680 billion, almost double US trade with

ASEAN, which stood at \$362 billion. However, the cumulative investment by U.S. companies in ASEAN is much larger than the cumulative China investment in the ASEAN region, at \$318 billion in 2019 compared to \$110 billion from China (see Mahbubani 2021c).

Against this backdrop, it is clear that Brazil and ASEAN share a common interest in maintaining equally good ties with both the U.S. and China. The Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Hsien Loong (2020, 61), was probably speaking on behalf of several ASEAN states when he said that “Asia-Pacific countries do not wish to be forced to choose between the United States and China. They want to cultivate good relations with both. They cannot afford to alienate China, and other Asian countries will try their best not to let any single dispute dominate their overall relationships with Beijing. At the same time, those Asian countries regard the United States as a resident power with vital interests in the region.”

Given this fundamental common interest between Brazil and ASEAN in maintaining good ties with both the U.S. and China, it would be advisable for them to work out a common position on that contest and design a common set of messages to put across to all parties. Indeed, Brazil and ASEAN would be demonstrating that they are good friends of both the U.S. and China in putting across their common messages intended to enhance the national interests of both the U.S. and China. And what would these common messages be?

The first message would be to call on the U.S. and China to press the “pause” button on their contest. Indeed, both would benefit more if the pause button is pressed. Concerning the U.S., the pause period would enable it to work out a comprehensive and thoughtful long-term strategy for managing the U.S.-China contest; China would benefit

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by being able to focus on the continuing developmental challenges it faces at home. Equally importantly, both the U.S. and China today face common global challenges, like Covid-19 and climate change. Climate change cannot be defeated by either the U.S. or China alone, both would have to cooperate with the rest of the world to contain this challenge. This is why I conclude *Has China Won?* (2020) with the following observation: “Humans would look pityingly at two tribes of apes that continued fighting over territory while the forest around them was burning. But this is how the U.S. and China will appear to future generations if they continue to focus on their differences while the earth is facing an extended moment of great peril (282).”

One of the most shocking aspects of the U.S.-China geopolitical contest is that the U.S. has decided to launch it without first working out a comprehensive strategy. This is not my insight. This was told to me by one of the greatest statesmen in American history, Dr. Henry Kissinger, at a one-on-one lunch in New York in March 2018. Other eminent American commentators have also confirmed it. The diplomat who translated into Chinese for president Richard Nixon during his historic 1972 visit was Ambassador Chas Freeman. He has also confirmed that the approaches of the U.S. towards China have been “strategy-free”. This is what he said:

After the end of the Cold War, the United States has been somewhat adrift... We seem to have lost the capacity to think strategically. After the end of the Cold War, we regarded foreign affairs generally as a discretionary activity. In this context, various ideological agendas came to the fore. We became quite strident about human rights. We became concerned as time went on that we were losing our primacy in Asia to the Chinese. We did not come up with a new objective to replace the one we had followed over the years, namely integrating China into the global system, and we began to engage in ad hocery across the board (see Kuo 2018).

The lack of U.S. strategy towards China is also demonstrated by the fact that the U.S. has never clearly spelled out what objectives it hopes to accomplish in the U.S.-China contest. Stop China’s economy from becoming number one? Isolate China? Overthrow the Chinese Communist Party? As you can tell from the listing of such goals, it is clear that none of them is achievable. No U.S. leader has ever spelt out what goals the U.S. is trying to accomplish by launching this contest. This also confirms the lack of strategy.

The U.S.-China contest was first launched by president Donald Trump when he set the trade war against China on January 22, 2018. When president Joe Biden took over in January 2021, he reversed many of Trump’s policies to the rest of the world. Yet, he could not reverse any of Trump’s policies toward China, including the trade war, as a very strong anti-China consensus has built up in the American body politic. Curiously, during his election campaign, Biden himself explained well why the trade war against China would not work. He said: “President Trump may think he’s being tough on China. All that he’s delivered as a consequence of that is American farmers, manufacturers and consumers losing and paying more” (see Pramuk 2019).

The Biden administration has also carried on with the strong anti-China rhetoric of the Trump administration. Unfortunately, some of its comments on China

have not been carefully thought through. For example, Avril Haines, the director of National Intelligence in the Biden administration, said “China is a challenge to our security, to our prosperity, to our values across a range of issues” (see Senator Susan Collins 2021). Many Americans may have applauded her for bluntly stating the truth, but every aspect of her statement is factually incorrect.

First, China is not challenging American prosperity, the Chinese are smarter than this. They see American prosperity as an asset that has helped and will continue to help propel the Chinese economy to prosperity. The American economy has been the main economic locomotive that has enabled the Chinese economy to go from being one-tenth the size of the American economy in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, in 1980, towards becoming larger than the U.S.’s by 2014. So, contrary to Haines, if president Biden were to propose to China an economic deal that would benefit the American economy (and American workers) and also benefit that country, China would enthusiastically embrace such a deal. American prosperity is an asset to China, not a liability.

Second, China is not a threat to American security, it is not threatening a military invasion of the U.S. (and its armed forces are an ocean away) nor a nuclear strike on the U.S. (with its nuclear warheads being one-twentieth the size of the U.S.’s). China is also not threatening American military supremacy in regions like the Middle East. Indeed, it is not even rivalling American defence budgets. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin observed that for twenty years the U.S. has been focused on the Middle East while China has been modernising its military: “We shall maintain the edge,” he noted, “and we’re going to increase the edge going forward” (see Garamone 2021). Fareed Zakaria (2021) was absolutely right when he wrote, in a March 2021 op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*, that

what Austin calls the U.S.’s ‘edge’ over China is more like a chasm. The United States has about 20 times the number of nuclear warheads as China. It has twice the tonnage of warships at sea, including 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, compared with China’s two carriers (which are much less advanced). Washington has more than 2,000 fighter jets, compared with Beijing’s roughly 600, according to national

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security analyst Sebastien Roblin. And the United States deploys this power using a vast network of some 800 overseas bases. China has three. China spends around \$250 billion on its military, a third as much as the United States.

If Haines is right to describe China as a threat to the U.S. security, the logical conclusion would be that China would be happy to see a reduction in the U.S. defence budget, in its number of aircraft carriers, jet fighters, and naval bases. Actually, China would be unhappy. Chinese strategic planners are absolutely thrilled that the U.S. is wasting so much money fighting unnecessary wars as well as maintaining a huge and bloated defence budget that weakens U.S. competitive edge in more critical areas, like education, research and development. The huge American defence budget gives the U.S. the same competitive edge that a dinosaur gets from its bulk: not very much!

Finally, when Haines says that China is a threat to American “values across a range of issues,” it would only be true if China were either threatening to export its ideology to the U.S. or threatening to undermine the electoral process there. Neither is happening. Yet, an amazing number of Americans, even thoughtful and well-informed ones, are sure that China is set on undermining American values. This belief may be a result of two major misconceptions about China. The first is that, since China is run by a communist party, it must, like the former Soviet Union, be on a campaign to prove that communism is superior to democracy. Yet, empirical evidence shows that China stopped supporting fellow communist parties decades ago. Its main dream is to rejuvenate Chinese civilization, not waste time exporting communist ideology. The second misconception is that when China becomes the largest economic power in the world, overtaking the U.S., it will, like the U.S., go on a universalizing mission and export the Chinese “model,” just as the U.S. exported the American model. This is a perfect example of the U.S.’s ignorance of its strategic rival. The Chinese do not believe that anybody can be a Chinese in the way that Americans believe that anybody can be an American. The Chinese believe, quite

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simply, that only Chinese can be Chinese, and they would be puzzled if anybody else tried to become Chinese.

If American strategic thinkers could accept that China is not trying to export a Chinese model to replace the American model, it would enable them to step back and fashion a more thoughtful, more viable response to the challenge coming from China. Right now, most American policymakers and pundits are secretly terrified that China's economy, which is already bigger than the U.S.'s in PPP terms, could also become bigger in nominal market terms within a decade.

Yet, there is absolutely no reason why the U.S. could not remain the most "admired and influential country" in the world (as it was, say, under president John F. Kennedy), even after it became the second-largest economy in the world. This is the metric that American policymakers should pay attention to, not the size of U.S. GNP. Fortunately, one of the U.S. wisest strategic thinkers, George Kennan, gave precisely this instruction when advising the U.S. on how to handle the Soviet challenge.

Even though Kennan is remembered mostly for his containment policy (which would not work against a globally integrated power like China), he emphasised, in his article *The Sources of Soviet Conduct* (1947), that the U.S. standing in the world, relative to that of the Soviet Union, would depend on its ability to "create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time."

There are four facets of this critical piece of advice from Kennan: a country that (1) knows what it wants; (2) is coping successfully with its internal problems; (3) is coping successfully with global responsibilities; and (4) has spiritual vitality. *Vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union, the U.S. was ahead on all four counts. Today, *vis-à-vis* China, the U.S. is behind on all four. A concrete example illustrates the point. The world was happy to hear Joe Biden say "America is back." Yet, one would have to be a complete strategic idiot if one did not ask the obvious follow-up question: for how long?

One mistake that many American strategic planners and thinkers make is to underestimate the intelligence of the rest of the world. Most observers of the U.S. know that Trump personally, or Trumpism more broadly, has at least an even chance of returning to the White House in 2024. In July 2021, Edward Luce wrote that "as long as Donald Trump is breathing, the odds are that he will run again in 2024. . . . The [Republican] party as a whole now has one truth, which is whatever Trump says, even if it is different after breakfast than before" (see Luce 2021). If Trump becomes president again, he will probably withdraw from multilateral agree-

ments and institutions once more (like the Paris Climate Accords and WHO), disparage allies (like France and Germany) or ask them to pay more (like South Korea and Japan), and withdraw H1B visas from friendly countries like India. Can any American stand up and say, with certainty, that this will never happen again? And if Americans cannot say this confidently, is it not reasonable for most countries in the world to carefully hedge their bets in the competition between the U.S. and China?

This is precisely why it is important for Brazil and ASEAN to send a common message to both U.S. and China and call upon them to press the pause button on the U.S.-China contest. As the analysis above shows, the U.S. does not have a strategy, let alone a winning strategy, to deal with China. At the same time, a strong case can be made that the continuation of this contest is effectively jeopardising the interests of the 1.7 billion people who live in the U.S. and China and the six billion other people on planet Earth. How so? The simple answer is that all 7.8 billion people on planet Earth now have more pressing issues to deal with, including Covid-19 and climate change. The U.S.-China contest is not just preventing an effective and coordinated response to these common global challenges. It is actually leading to the loss of many human lives, including in the U.S. and China.

Take the case of Covid-19. When it emerged and spread around the world, the wisest response of humanity to this common global challenge should have been to declare that this virus was a common threat to all of humanity. Hence, all of humanity should have put aside all their differences to focus on this common challenge. Indeed, the virus confirmed that all the world has become a small and interdependent community. In my book on global governance, entitled *The Great Convergence* (Mahbubani 2014), I used a simple boat metaphor to explain how the human condition had changed. In the past, when 7.8 billion people lived in 193 separate countries, it was akin to living in 193 separate boats. Now, as a result of rapid globalisation and the effective shrinking of our world, the 7.8 billion people of our world no longer live in 193 separate boats. Instead, we all live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat. This analogy explains perfectly well why Covid-19 could spread to virtually all countries in the world.

Many of us have travelled on cruise lines. We know instinctively that if we are on a cruise liner in the middle of the ocean, our immediate response to a fire in one cabin would not be to argue about who started the fire. Instead, we would all rush to put out the fire before arguing about who started it. It does not require a genius to figure out the correct response. It is common sense. Despite this, what was the response of the Trump administration when Covid-19 erupted in Wuhan in January 2020? Instead of offering a hand and trying to eradicate Covid-19, it focused its efforts on blaming China. Indeed, throughout 2020, the Trump administration

kept making irresponsible claims that the virus was deliberately leaked from a Chinese laboratory without providing evidence. For example, Mike Pompeo claimed, in an interview on May 3, 2020: “There is enormous evidence that that’s where this began... I can tell you that there is a significant amount of evidence that this came from that laboratory in Wuhan” (see Borger 2020). Indeed, the Trump administration never once offered to help China deal with Covid-19.

By contrast, when the U.S. triggered a similar global crisis—global financial crisis—in 2008/09 through the spectacular collapse of the Lehman Brothers in September 2008, both the Bush and Obama administrations turned to China for assistance to overcome the crisis. And China responded positively to this.

All these points reinforce a key message of this essay and of my book *Has China Won?* The U.S. has made a huge strategic error by launching a geopolitical contest without first working out a thoughtful, long-term strategy to manage the geopolitical challenge from China. So, how should the U.S. go about formulating a thoughtful and comprehensive strategy towards China?

When I served in the Singapore Foreign Service, I was also assigned to write long-term strategy papers for the Singapore government. The big lesson I learned from Singapore’s three exceptional geopolitical masters (Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam) was that the first step to formulate any long-term strategy is to frame the right questions. If one gets the questions wrong, the answers will be wrong. Most importantly, as Rajaratnam taught me, in formulating such questions, one must always “think the unthinkable.”

In this spirit of “thinking the unthinkable,” I would like to suggest ten areas that provoke questions that the American strategic planners should address.

In this spirit of “thinking the unthinkable,” I would like to suggest ten areas that provoke questions that the American strategic planners should address. Having met George Kennan once in his office in the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, in the late 1990s, I believe that he would favour confronting head-on the toughest issues that lie ahead.

THE BIG TEN

1. With 4% of the world’s population, America’s share of the global GDP was close to 50% at the end of World War II. Throughout the Cold War,

the GDP of the Soviet Union never came close in size to that of America, reaching only 40% that of America's at its peak. Could America's GDP become smaller than China's in the next thirty years? If so, what strategic changes will America have to make when it is no longer the world's dominant economic power?

- 2.** Should America's primary goal be to improve the livelihood of its 330 million citizens or to preserve its primacy in the international system? If there are contradictions between the goals of preserving primacy and improving well-being, which should prevail?
- 3.** In the Cold War, America's heavy defence expenditures proved prudent as they forced the Soviet Union, a country with a smaller economy, to match America's military expenses. In the end, this helped to bankrupt the Soviet Union. China learned a lesson from the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is restraining its defence expenditures while focusing on economic development. Is it wise for America to continue investing heavily in its defence budget? Or should it cut down its defence expenses and its involvement in expensive foreign wars and instead invest more in improving social services and rejuvenating national infrastructure? Does China want America to increase or reduce its defence expenditures?
- 4.** America did not win the Cold War on its own. It formed solid alliances with its Western partners in NATO and cultivated key third world friends and allies, like Brazil and China, Pakistan, Indonesia and Egypt. To preserve these close alliances, America kept its economy open to its allies and generously extended its aid. Above everything else, America was acknowledged for its spirit of generosity in the Cold War. The Trump administration has announced an America First policy and threatened to impose tariffs on key allies like the EU and Japan and third world friends like India. Can America build up a solid global coalition to counterbalance China if it also alienates its key allies? Was America's decision to walk away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) a geopolitical gift to China? Has China already mounted a preemptive strike against a containment policy by engaging in new economic partnerships with its neighbours through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?
- 5.** The most powerful weapon that America can use to bring its allies and adversaries into line and conform to its wishes is not the U.S. military, but the U.S. dollar. The U.S. dollar has become virtually indispensable for global

trade and financial transactions. In this regard, it serves as a global public good servicing the interdependent global economy. Since foreign banks and institutions cannot avoid using it, America has been able to indulge in the extraterritorial application of its domestic laws and impose huge fines on foreign banks for violating its domestic laws on trading with Iran and other sanctioned countries. American adversaries like North Korea and Iran were also forced to the negotiating table because of crippling financial sanctions. American sanctions on these countries worked best when they were supported and endorsed by multilateral institutions, like the UN Security Council, whose decisions are binding on UN member states. Under the Trump administration, America has switched from multilateral to unilateral sanctions and weaponized the dollar to use against its adversaries. Is it wise to weaponize a global public good and use it for unilateral ends? Right now, there are no practical alternatives to the U.S. dollar. Will that always be the case? Is this the Achilles' heel of the American economy that China can pierce and weaken?

6. In developing a strategy against the Soviet Union, Kennan emphasised that it was vital for Americans to “create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country” that was successful domestically and enjoyed a “spiritual vitality.” Professor Joseph Nye described this as American soft power. From the 1960s to the 1980s, American soft power soared. Since 9/11, America has violated international law and international human rights conventions (and became the first Western country to reintroduce torture). American soft power has declined considerably, especially under Trump. Are the American people ready to make the sacrifices needed to enhance American soft power? Can America win the ideological battle against China if it is perceived to be a “normal” nation rather than an “exceptional” one?
7. General H. R. McMaster, president Trump's national security adviser from 2017 to 2018, has said that at the end of the day, the struggle between America and China represented the struggle between “free and open societies and closed, authoritarian systems” (see ASU 2020). If this statement is correct, all free and open societies should feel equally threatened by the Chinese Communist Party. Of the world's three largest democracies, two are Asian: India and Indonesia. Brazil is also one of the world's largest democracies. None of these democracies feel threatened in any way by Chinese ideology. Neither do most European democracies feel threatened.

Unlike the Soviet Union, China is not trying to challenge or threaten American ideology. By treating the new China challenge as akin to the old Soviet strategy, America is making the classic strategic mistake of fighting tomorrow's war with yesterday's strategies. Are American strategic thinkers capable of developing new analytical frameworks to capture the essence of the competition with China?

8. In any major geopolitical competition, the advantage always goes to the party that can remain rational and cool-headed over the party that is driven by emotions, conscious or unconsciously. As Kennan wisely observed, that “loss of temper and self-control” is a sign of weakness. But are America's responses to China driven by reason? Or by subconscious emotions? The Western psyche has long harboured a deep, unconscious fear of the *yellow* peril. Kiron Skinner, former Director of Policy Planning at the United States Department of State in the Trump administration, pointed out that the contest with China was with a power that was “non-Caucasian” (see Ward 2019). In doing so, she put her finger on what is driving the emotional reactions to China. In the politically correct environment of Washington, DC, is it possible for any strategic thinker to suggest such a politically incorrect but truthful point without getting politically skewered?
9. Sun Tzu, one of China's greatest strategic masters, once advised: “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” Does America know its Chinese rival? For example, is America making a fundamental error of perception when it views the CCP as a Chinese Communist Party? This would imply that the soul of the CCP is embedded in its communist roots. Yet, in the eyes of many objective Asian observers, the CCP actually functions as the “Chinese Civilization Party.” Its soul is not rooted in the foreign ideology of Marxism-Leninism but in Chinese civilization. The most important job for a strategic thinker is to try to step into the mind of the adversary. So here is a test: What percentage of a Chinese leader's mind is preoccupied with Marxist-Leninist ideology and what percentage with the rich history of Chinese civilization? The answer would probably surprise many Americans.
10. Henry Kissinger in *On China* (2011) emphasised that Chinese strategy was guided by the Chinese game of wei qi (围棋), not Western chess. In West-

ern chess, the emphasis is on finding the fastest way to capture the king. In *wei qi*, the goal is to slowly and patiently build up assets to tip the balance of the game in one's favour. The emphasis is on long-term strategy, not short-term gains. So is China slowly and patiently acquiring assets that are progressively turning the strategic game in China's favour? Interestingly, America has made two major efforts to thwart two long-term moves by China to gain advantage. Both failed. The first was the Obama administration's attempt to prevent its allies from joining the Chinese-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2014–2015. The second was the effort by the Trump administration to prevent its allies from participating in the Chinese-initiated BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). Is America setting aside enough resources for the long-term competition? Does the American society have the inherent strength and stamina to match China's long-term game?

The goal of raising these questions is to stimulate a strategic debate, think the unthinkable, and dissect and understand the many complex dimensions of the U.S.-China geopolitical contest that will unravel in the coming decade. One of the goals of this article is to promote hard-headed, rational thinking on an inevitably complex and shifting subject.

One fundamental question that any American strategic thinker must pose before plunging into a major geopolitical contest is one that is inconceivable in America. In short, can America lose? The thought seems inconceivable. Both in physical and moral terms, America has long seen itself as the strongest nation. The U.S. economy, and consequently its military, has been the strongest in the world for over a century. Its natural advantage of occupying a lightly populated and resource-rich continent, combined with the innovativeness and vigour of American institutions (especially its free markets, its rule of law, its universities) and the American people, have convinced America that no nation can come close to its level of ingenuity and productivity.

In the moral dimension, to most Americans, the idea that a free and open society like America, the world's strongest democracy, could lose a contest against a closed communist society like China is inconceivable. Americans are prone to believe that good always triumphs over evil and that no political system is inherently as good as the one envisaged by the founders of the republic. This may partially explain the increasing demonization of China in recent years. The more China is portrayed as an evil actor (especially in violating American expectations that China would progressively open up and become a democratic society as it engaged Amer-

ica), the easier it has become for Americans to persist in the belief that they would eventually triumph against China, no matter the odds.

Americans also assumed that since they had the most open society on the planet, the various mechanisms of this open society would alert America if it took a major wrong turn. Sadly, this has not happened in recent decades. Most Americans are unaware that the average income of the bottom 50% of their population has declined over a thirty-year period. This did not happen because of one wrong turn. America has turned away significantly from some of the key principles that defined social justice in American society. America's greatest political and moral philosopher in recent times has been John Rawls. Through his works, he tried to distil the wisdom of the philosophy of the great European philosophers, which America's Founding Fathers learned from. Unfortunately, many Americans are unaware of how much they have turned away from some key founding principles.

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The global context in which the U.S.-China rivalry will be played out will be very different from that of the Cold War. The world has become a more complex place. It is clear that America remaining the preeminent world power, while not impossible, is going to become more and more unlikely, unless America adapts to the new world that has emerged.

In the arena of civilizational dynamism, the world is returning to something like a historic balance among different human civilizations. For over two hundred years, Western civilization vastly outperformed the rest of the world, allowing it to overturn the historical precedent; from the year 1 to 1820, China and India were always the largest civilizations in terms of economic strength. The past two hundred years have therefore been an aberration.

One reason the West can no longer dominate the world is that the rest have learned so much from the West. They have imbibed many Western best practices in economics, politics, science and technology. As a result, while many parts of the Western civilization (especially Europe) seem exhausted, lacking drive and energy, other civilizations are just getting revved up. In this respect, human civilizations are like other living organisms, they have life cycles. Chinese civilization has had many ups and downs. It should be no surprise that it is now returning in strength.

Having survived over two thousand years, China has developed strong civilizational sinews. Professor Wang Gungwu has observed that while the world has had many ancient civilizations, the only ancient civilization to fall down four times and rise again is China (see Mahbubani 2020). As a civilization, China is remarkably resilient. The Chinese people are also remarkably talented. As the Chinese look back over two thousand years, they are acutely aware that the past thirty years under CCP rule have been the best thirty years that Chinese civilization has experienced since China was united by Qin Shi Huang in 221 BCE. For most of the past two thousand years, the large pool of brainpower available in the Chinese population was not developed under the imperial Chinese system. During the past thirty years, for the first time in Chinese history, it has been tapped on a massive scale. Cultural confidence, which the Chinese have had for centuries, combined with what China has learned from the West have given Chinese civilization a special vigour today. A Chinese American psychology researcher from Stanford University, Jean Fan, has observed, after visiting China in 2019, that “China is changing in a deep and visceral way, and it is changing fast, in a way that is almost incomprehensible without seeing it in person. In contrast to America’s stagnation, China’s culture, self-concept, and morale are being transformed at a rapid pace—mostly for the better” (Fan 2019). If an index could measure the relative strength and resilience of different human civilizations based on their real performance over two thousand years, Chinese civilization might rank number one. The extraordinary vigour of Chinese civilization today is not unique. Other Asian civilizations are also thriving because the West has taught the world well and they have shared its example widely.

I can confidently speak about the civilizational vigour of the many different societies in Asia as the result of an unusual cultural quirk. I have cultural connections with diverse societies in Asia, where half of humanity lives, all the way from Tehran to Tokyo. I was born to two Hindu Sindhi parents in Singapore in 1948. As a result, I am connected with over a billion Hindus in South Asia. Nine of the ten Southeast Asian states have an Indic cultural base too. When I see stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata—so much a part of my childhood—performed in Southeast Asia, I feel my connection to them. Over 550 million people live in this Southeast Asian Indic space. My parents left Pakistan in 1947 because of the painful partition between Hindu India and Islamic Pakistan. As a child, I learned to read and write the Sindhi language with its Perso-Arabic script. My name, Mahbubani, also comes from an Arabic-Persian word, *mahboob*, which means “beloved.” Hence, when I visit the Arabic or Iranian cultural spheres, I can also feel a cultural connection with them. When I visit Buddhist temples in China, Korea, and Japan,

I can also feel the tug of cultural affinity. Buddhism, which has roots in Hinduism, originated in India. My mother would take me to pray in Buddhist temples, as well as Hindu temples, when I was young.

This personal connection with a remarkably wide range of Asian societies, as well as my ten years as an ambassador to the United Nations (UN), has convinced me that in the realm of international affairs, the texture and chemistry of the world have also changed in a way that most Americans are unaware of. One hundred ninety-three nation-states are members of the UN. One simple question we should ask is: which country—China or the United States—is swimming in the same direction as the majority of the other 191?

Most Americans assume that America's policies and aspirations abroad are naturally in harmony with the rest of the world, since America has provided leadership to the rest of the world for decades. After World War II, America did set the broad directions for the liberal international order (which should be more appropriately called the "rules-based international order"). The main global multilateral institutions, including the UN, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, were all created at the height of American power. They reflect American values. In terms of cultural identity, they are Western in orientation, not Asian or Chinese. Yet, despite the fact that they entrench Western values and priorities, in recent years America has been walking away from these institutions, while the rest of the world, especially China, has been walking toward them.

In short, it is far from certain that America will win the contest. China has as good a chance as America of emerging as the dominant influence in the world. In fact, many thoughtful leaders and observers in strategically sensitive countries around the world have begun preparing for a world where China may become number one.

This is precisely where Brazil and the ASEAN countries can be helpful to the U.S. We can help nudge the U.S. to drop its illusions about China and engage in more realistic assessments of China's current capabilities and future potential. Indeed, Brazil has in the past been a good friend of the U.S. in providing frank advice when the U.S. was about to make geopolitical mistakes. In early 2003, as the U.S. was building up the forces to invade Iraq, Brazil was one of the few countries to publicly speak out and advise the U.S. not to proceed with its invasion. As then president Lula said, "In my opinion, it disrespects the United Nations... it doesn't take into account what the rest of the world thinks. And I think this is serious" (United Press International 2003). It is clear that if the U.S. heeded the advice of Brazil

on Iraq in 2003, it would have spared a costly and destructive war in Iraq, which eventually weakened the U.S.

Similarly, the U.S. would be better if it were to heed the joint advice of Brazil and ASEAN countries and adopt more realistic and pragmatic policies towards China. All the current U.S. attitudes and policies towards China are based on the unrealistic assumption that China can never become the number one power in the world. But China can and is likely to become the number one power. Therefore, instead of engaging in a futile unilateral effort to thwart the rise of China, which will fail, the U.S. should work with Brazil, ASEAN and other countries to forge a multilateral approach, based on existing multilateral norms and processes, to work out a new balance of power which will enable both China and the U.S. to thrive together with Brazil, ASEAN and other countries. This is why closer coordination between Brazil and ASEAN on the U.S.-China contest is critical. We will be advancing our own long-term interests, and also help China and the U.S., if we could work out a coordinated approach to managing the U.S.-China contest. This is why I hope this essay will result in a new chapter of Brazil-ASEAN cooperation. ▬

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