**[An inescapable contest?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1639586/an-inescapable-contest)**

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THERE has been a profusion of books on China from the perspective of the contest for global primacy between the US and the world’s newest superpower. This is understandable as it is the world’s most consequential relationship. China is Washington’s top foreign policy priority. The Biden administration has frequently reiterated this and also said relations with China will have three aspects — adversarial, competitive and cooperative.

The two [high-level exchanges](https://www.dawn.com/news/1613600/tough-us-china-talks-signal-rocky-start-to-relations-under-biden) between them in Alaska and more recently China, indicate that greater turbulence lies ahead in their relations. After talks in Beijing, Chinese officials described Washington’s “adversarial rhetoric” as a thinly veiled attempt to “suppress and contain China”, adding that relations faced “serious difficulties”. They also cautioned America to not treat China as an “imaginary enemy”.

Most recent books on the US-China relationship have been written from a Western perspective except one, but more of that later. The very titles of these books are revealing. The World Turned Upside Down by Clyde Prestowitz, How China Loses by Luke Patey and The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order by Rush Doshi. The latter is now director for China at America’s National Security Council.

All these books see America’s competition with China as this century’s defining dynamic although they reach different conclusions about who will prevail. They also offer policy advice to the Biden team on how to effectively counter China to maintain America’s global dominance. The book that offers a starkly different perspective is by distinguished Singaporean academic and former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani titled Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy. This doesn’t mean he predicts an outcome, which of course depends on several factors and cannot be predetermined.

The future course of the world’s most consequential relationship will have far-reaching global ramifications.

Rush Doshi argues that the struggle between the US and China is over who will dominate the regional and global order. China, he says, wants to eclipse America by 2049. In asking whether China has a grand strategy he first defines this. It is how a country pursues its strategic objectives “that is intentional, coordinated, and implemented across multiple means of statecraft — military, economic, and political”. “What makes grand strategy grand is not simply the size of the strategic objectives” but also how disparate “means” are “coordinated together” to achieve them.

He claims that China’s grand strategy to displace the American order comprises two elements practised sequentially — first to blunt the hegemon’s control and then build control over other states to secure its predominant position. Doshi describes the third part of the strategy as global expansion which is aimed at displacing the hegemon by using both ‘blunting’ and ‘building’ methods. His argument rests on identifying forms of control that a rising power challenges and then exercises to ensure ascendancy. A hegemon’s position in the regional and global order emerges from three broad “forms of control that are used to regulate the behaviour of other states: coercive capability (to force compliance), consensual inducements (to incentivise it), and legitimacy (to rightfully command it)”.

Doshi seeks to substantiate his thesis by using Chinese Communist Party texts and their leaders’ speeches among other sources. He devotes separate chapters to China’s military, political and economic strategies in pursuit of its strategic objectives to claim that its leaders “want to restore China to its due place and roll back the historical aberration of the West’s overwhelming global influence”. How should the US respond to this challenge? Doshi rejects both confrontation and accommodation and suggests an “asymmetric competitive strategy” that takes a leaf from China’s own blunting approach.

**Read:** [*America’s China preoccupation*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630604)

The problem with this otherwise interesting book is that it assumes China’s behaviour and objectives mirror those of the US when it was a rising power. It overlooks the civilisational history of a global power that wants to be respected but doesn’t aspire to become a hegemon like other powerful states in history. This is what Mahbubani’s book seeks to explain by offering a persuasive antidote to such assumptions but in a balanced way that identifies strategic mistakes by both global powers.

The book poses sharp questions and offers nuanced answers. Does the US have a strategy in its geopolitical competition with China? No, says Mahbubani and argues that America is committing the “classic strategic mistake of fighting tomorrow’s war with yesterday’s strategy” as it is treating the China challenge similar to the old Soviet threat. The US is focusing on military spending (“geopolitical gifts to China”), displaying rigidity in decision-making, draining its power by involvement in military conflicts, and misreading China by erroneously attributing aggressive and expansionist designs to Beijing. All this because groupthink rules in Washington. He is surprised at this because America has the world’s “largest strategic thinking industry”.

He argues convincingly that while China wants to “rejuvenate its civilisation” it has no mission to take over the world or recreate it in its image. Despite its growing power China has not intervened in the affairs of other countries. The militarism attributed to it is similarly mistaken because it has never sought to conquer territories as European powers have done and this despite “often being the single strongest civilisation in the Eurasian landmass” for over 2,000 years. China avoids military options and has sought to secure its borders by consolidating relations with neighbouring states. That hardly makes it expansionist. In fact, China’s “primary goal is to preserve peace and harmony” at home, not influence the lives of six billion people who live outside.

Mahbubani’s critique of America’s flawed assumptions is as compelling as his analysis of the strategic mistake China made in “alienating” the US business community (by “squeezing companies”) that could have restrained Washington’s adversarial approach. His conclusion, by his own admission, is paradoxical: the contest between the two “is both inevitable and avoidable”. Even though America has convinced itself that China poses an existential threat yet there are areas of convergence that should urge them towards cooperation. His hope is that if both focus on their core national interest — improving the well-being of their citizens — they will find no contradictions in their long-term interests. Many would share that hope as continuing confrontation between them will have far-reaching global consequences.

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