**What is the Real Chinese Threat?**

[Harlan Ullman](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/harlan-ullman/)

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As The (House) Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party begins its work, the threat posed by China has garnered strong bipartisan support in Congress. Many members of both Houses are already critical of the President’s forthcoming FY ’24 defence budget for not spending enough money to counter what is seen as Beijing’s growing nuclear and conventional military power. And, to many Americans, China does indeed seem to be on a collision course challenging the US in virtually every sector including setting new rules for international relations favouring Beijing and not Washington.

Last week’s announcement that China had brokered a deal in which Saudi Arabia and Iran will restore diplomatic ties reinforced the perception of China’s growing influence. Given Washington’s bipartisan focus on out-competing China, the misperception has been created that a rise in Chinese clout automatically is balanced by a decline in American influence. The White House, while reacting positively to what was clearly a surprise-and that should raise questions as to the reach of American intelligence agencies-unsurprisingly downplayed the rapprochement. In fairness, the Chinese agreement would end Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia from Yemen.

The question that Americans and indeed the Select Committee need to address and answer is what precisely are or are the threats posed by China and to whom? The basic threats posed by China have been assumed or accepted without being rigorously challenged or tested. One is Graham Allison’s “Thucydides Trap” which foretells war when an emerging power, China, threatens to displace the existing great power, the US.

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Statistics and history can be tortured to produce almost any conclusion. Today is not Athens versus Sparta. Yet, given the profound historical, cultural, social and political differences between the US and China, by no means can friction, tension or worse be discounted in the relationships between the two superpowers.

Taiwan is the obvious flash point. While the “One China” policy has held since the Nixon visit in 1972 and the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, President Xi Jingping has been explicit and more aggressive in calling for reunification by the decade’s end. Across US administrations since Barack Obama’s, Taiwan has become an increasingly militarized issue centred on preventing an armed cross-strait massive Chinese amphibious invasion partially explained by the size of the PLA Navy and enhanced Chinese expeditionary capabilities. However, that conclusion is misplaced for several reasons.

Other, more effective options China could pursue in assimilating Taiwan such as a blockade are ignored or downplayed. A Porcupine or asymmetrical defence that would defeat any amphibious attempt has not been employed. And the US cannot be more worried about a Chinese invasion than the Taiwanese are.

But are clashes inevitable over Taiwan; technology; trade; theft of intellectual property; and other points of friction and possible conflict? Former Australian Prime Minister and soon-to-be ambassador to the US Kevin Rudd argues for “managed competition.” This column makes two additional recommendations.

The first is to undertake a rigorous examination of what exactly are the Chinese threats? The second is to shift from the focus of a strategic competition with China to one of defining our interests; recognizing those of China’s we can accept; and deciding how to deal with the others. The first can be done. The second is more doubtful.

Many in US regard China not just as an adversary but as an enemy. Calling for a more rational approach will be attacked as appeasement or weakness. When Richard Nixon acceded to the presidency, Red China was the enemy. The Soviet threat gave Nixon leverage to make a complete strategic reversal.

What could replace the USSR as today’s strategic leverage? The answer is the need for global stability and thus preventing disruptive attacks that impose massive damage on the international system, particularly war. The question is who will carry that message? Therein rests the crux of perhaps the most serious American problem with China. Who will lead?

*He writer is a senior advisor at Washington, DC’s Atlantic Council and a published author.*