**The US-China race**

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There has been little let up in the US-China tensions, this time on the perennial issue of Taiwan. During a meeting, which lasted nearly an hour, between Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe and his US counterpart Lloyd Austin last Friday on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue security summit in Singapore, Beijing emphatically stated that it will “not hesitate to start a war” and “smash to smithereens” any efforts for Taiwan’s independence. “If anyone dares to split Taiwan from China, the Chinese army will definitely not hesitate to start a war no matter the cost”, the Chinese defence minister cautioned his American counterpart. However, despite the belligerent tone, talks with Austin “went smoothly”, Wei stated.

No doubt China is an emerging global power, which many believe will surpass the US though many in the US believe otherwise. To begin with, China is a huge country both in terms of population and geography. With over 1.4 billion people, about 19 per cent of the global population, it is the world’s most populous country. With a total area of 9,596,960 square kilometers, spanning five geographical time zones and bordering 14 different countries, China is the fourth largest country in the world after Russia, Canada and the US. Prudent policies, coupled with timely reforms and the supply of cheap labour, have truly turned China into the ‘world’s factory’. It is, therefore, no surprise that China is the world’s second-largest economy after the US and is also the world’s largest trading nation. China is the largest trading partner of 124 countries, while the US is a major trading partner of 56 nations. China has the world’s largest foreign-exchange reserves and is also the world’s leading exporter, manufacturer, energy consumer, and auto market. It is also the world’s largest user of steel, cement, and copper.

Given all these imposing statistics and superlatives, can China challenge and surpass the US? This is one of the most interesting and most debated subjects in US policy circles. In his authoritative book titled ‘China Goes Global: The Partial Power’, eminent China scholar David Shambaugh comprehensively examines China’s global emergence and rules out the possibility that China will be on the horizon anytime soon to challenge the US or its Western allies. He argues that China is not a global power as is conventionally believed. At best, he asserts, China is a partial power with far less influence in global political, economic, military and cultural spheres. The author maintains that Beijing falls far behind Washington in terms of going global and challenging Western dominance in global economic and political institutions. Shambaugh’s core argument is summed up in these words: “The elements of China’s global power are actually surprisingly weak and very uneven. China is not as important, and it is certainly not as influential, as conventional wisdom holds”.

In his research article titled ‘China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure’, Professor Beckley compares economic, technological, and military indicators of the two rivals. “Over the last two decades, globalization and US hegemonic burdens have expanded significantly, yet the United States has not declined; in fact it is now wealthier, more innovative, and more militarily powerful compared to China than it was in 1991”.

In his 2018 book, ‘Unrivaled: why America will remain the world’s sole superpower’, Beckley argues that “the United States has more than twice the wealth and military capabilities of any other nation”. He employs various indicators to assess the future prospects of the eight most powerful countries: the US, China, Russia, Japan, Germany, the UK, France, and India. In terms of geography, the US is a natural economic hub and military fortress. It has enormous stocks of natural resources, more natural transport infrastructure than the rest of the world combined, and is surrounded by ‘friends and fish’ (Canada, Mexico, and two huge oceans) whereas all the other major powers border powerful rivals.

Similarly, concerning institutions and demography, the US is ahead of all its rivals and allies as it has “the most productive population, and its working-age population is set to grow during this century, unlike the populations of its competitors”. In contrast to the US, the author argues that the one child policy has created a demographic nightmare for Beijing.

Based on his comprehensive analysis, Beckley debunks the established narratives of ‘declinist’ regarding the rise of China and US decline. “The United States will remain the world’s sole superpower for many decades, and probably throughout this century. We are not living in a transitional post–cold war era”, Beckley sums up.

Somewhat similar arguments have been put forward by Rush Doshi in his 2021 book titled ‘The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order’. Doshi claims that China has adopted a grand strategy of “displacement” – an ambitious strategy oriented towards displacing American hegemony and moving China to the centre stage of global politics.

He calls China’s three-prong strategy as “blunting, building and expanding” by which he means an approach focused on undermining the key pillars of American hegemony; building its own regional institutions beyond the control of the US and displacing the US while expanding its own soft and hard power to emerge a new global hegemon. However, Doshi also offers a brief acknowledgement that “China has a fast-aging population, enormous debt, slowing growth, and a currency still far from rivaling the dollar”.

Another very interesting but not equally insightful title is Pentagon official Michael Pillsbury’s bestselling ‘The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower’. Here, the author has argued – although quite overstatedly – that Beijing has had a grand plan for global hegemony. To this end, he argues that Beijing has a cherished desire and plan to avenge a century of humiliation and aspires to replace the US as the economic, military, and political leader of the world by the year 2049 (the one-hundredth anniversary of the Communist Revolution). Whether China has any such plan and whether it can be capable of doing so, only time can tell.

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