

America's Fantasy that China will soon Collapse like the Soviet Union did is Based on Arrogance and Ideology, not Facts and Reason

Description

by Tom Fowdy

Washington's dream that Beijing is doomed to failure seems as strong as ever, despite events of the last year showing that American triumphalism is misplaced, misguided and potentially moribund.

2020 was a year to forget, but it was also immensely geopolitically significant. The outbreak of Covid-19 was a world-changing event which will profoundly alter the globe. Not least because the political shockwaves it created have brought relations between the United States and China to their lowest ebb in modern times.

In what many describe as a "new cold war," the Trump administration has used its remaining time in office to escalate confrontation with Beijing and forcefully set a legacy for Joe Biden to follow. In setting out this scenario, some in the United States have framed the situation and its risks in very "short termist" thinking. It assumes China only has a short space of time to achieve its goals before, apparently, it becomes economically and socially depleted.

An article published in Foreign Policy, titled ["China Is Both Weak and Dangerous"](#) and covering the book *The China Nightmare: The Grand Ambitions of a Decaying State*, by American Enterprise Institute's Dan Blumenthal, argues that China's political system is weak and lacking in legitimacy. It then proceeds to argue that it is therefore, apparently, ideologically incapable of generating sustained growth or the innovation required to truly become a superpower and "displace" the US. As a result, the piece argues, Beijing only has a short period of time to "accomplish its goals," thus making it dangerous.

Not surprisingly, I don't buy into this argument. If anything, I would describe this kind of attitude, which I term "collapsism" as an ideological expression of overconfidence from some within the United States. It is a view which has become endemic since the end of the Cold War in 1991, which simply assumes China must be destined to fail at some point, while America marches on.

This of course is to be expected from the American Enterprise Institute, which, it goes without saying, is a ridiculously neoconservative and pro-war institution, but it nevertheless represents a broader and more misleading set of assumptions in American politics. The idea, perhaps more famously put by Gordon Chang's "The coming collapse of China" (2001), is simply that the Chinese system is doomed to implode because it doesn't tick the right ideological boxes. If anything, this view risks America being overconfident.

"Collapsism" better known as the "end of history thesis" is a strand of Cold War thinking which assumes that liberal capitalism is the only way to create a successful and stable country. It holds that all other ideologies are fundamentally flawed and cannot truly replicate the success of the West, even if they represent a geopolitical threat. It is an expression of American triumphalism following the collapse

of the Soviet Union, based on the premise that in the end the West became more prosperous than the USSR and had outmatched it on innovation.

Liberalism, having evolved out of Christian thought, has embedded the idea that one's own "divine destiny" is inevitable and, in the same way, believes western political thought is "the way, the truth, the life." On top of this, it also holds that only liberalism allows creativity and critical thinking, and, thus, technological success.

You don't have to read heavy books on international relations to find this view; attitudes towards China are riddled with it. Mike Pompeo [once boasted](#), "The Communist Party knows it can't match our innovation," spreading the misleading trope that the only way China can obtain technology is by "stealing" it, and claiming all Chinese students in the US are "sent" to do that. Overall, this is an expression of overconfidence that clouds US foreign-policy making. The idea that if China can be contained quickly and harshly, it can be beaten as its political system is leaning on borrowed time.

Not surprisingly, this view is also endemic in the mainstream media and commentary. When Covid-19 broke out in February, newspapers rushed to [frame the outbreak in ideological terms](#) and assumed naively such a catastrophe could never happen in a transparent and progressive society like in the West. This had to be a failure of China's system. This is obviously a trait of this ideologically driven discourse outlined in 'The China Nightmare' and the events of 2020 proved it wrong before it was even published, which shows how short-sighted the analysis is.

First of all, it talks about China's growth slowing down and facing the "Middle Income Trap"—this is the idea that, like some countries in Latin America, nations reach a certain point then fail to grow further. However, where is the evidence for this happening? China is already passing the middle-income mark and is set to be designated a [high income country by 2023](#).

It is also projected to become the world's largest economy by 2028. The reason why many countries failed to surpass the middle-income mark was because of US led capitalism, not in spite of it. Mexico for example, cannot innovate because its economy is completely hegemonized by the US, who dominates its key industries and extracts Mexican talent for itself.

China does not face these problems or pitfalls. It has an increasingly educated workforce, universities which are increasingly competitive globally, [a number of "unicorn" startups](#) to rival the US and record levels of [foreign direct investment in 2020](#). Does this really seem like a society "on the brink" with no potential to innovate? The author might want to consider that China [has published more scientific papers](#) since 2018 than any other country in the world, and files [more intellectual property patents](#) than anyone else too. Not bad for a nation that apparently "steals" everything, right?

Given this, the idea that China is weak and does not have time on its side is one based exclusively on ideology, not facts. Whilst the book highlights upcoming challenges, such as demographic decline, these are treated in a fatalist manner as if China has no way to absolve them, such as encouraging inbound immigration in the way Western nations have done. If anything, last year should have been a stark warning that China's political system is not easily overcome or contained and, contrary to US hysteria, is not rampaging on a zero-sum path to world domination or to displace the US. This is a neoconservative fantasy which simultaneously believes Beijing is coming for Washington, yet cannot understand why China has not collapsed already.

As a result, the real danger in US-China ties is the belief that a path of confrontation on Washington's behalf, as we have seen with Trump, can upend Beijing quickly and affirm US supremacy. Realism is needed, rather than ideological and triumphalist thinking. China's strategy has involved hedging against American pressure by consolidating more economic agreements and options with others, rather than barging headfirst into a bloodthirsty conflict, that suggests it is a country that is biding its time.

It would be very happy to stabilize its ties with Washington. If anything, American complacency and the belief China can be stabilized, encapsulated by Pompeo's legacy, is inherently dangerous. Beijing has been written off too quickly many times before, and history does not always repeat itself and run in straight lines, as the US has assumed since 1991.