

China, the West, and the rest in the eerily reminiscent "New Era"

The looming confrontation with the PRC is not just an issue for the West. There are countries in East Asia, like Japan and Taiwan, which lie east of China and have been affected by the tensions at least as profoundly, and arguably earlier, than the U.S. and other western democracies. Similarly, Australia down under in the Deep South was among the first countries that woke up to the challenge; in fact, Canberra's response preceded and in many respects inspired the current debate in the U.S. India has recently experienced small-scale but lethal military confrontations with the PLA along its long Himalayan border with China. Vietnam, the Philippines, and other ASEAN members have seen maritime skirmishes and other forms of intimidation in the South China Sea. Beijing's foreign policy initiatives like the BRI are now explicitly global in scope. In short, the PRC party-state has been increasingly challenging the whole international order, far beyond what we traditionally understand as the West (itself a movable concept).

There is a whole new emerging vocabulary trying to capture this new situation. Terms like Great Power Competition, Systemic Rivalry, even a New Cold War have been applied. Among these, I would argue the EU's wording *Systemic Rivalry*, first coined in the [2019 Strategic Outlook](#), is preferable to the U.S. term *Great Power Competition* introduced (in the Chinese context) in the 2018 [National Defence Strategy](#). While the term Great Power Competition suggests that the conflict lies between major powers, or just between THE two super powers, China and the U.S., the European term "Systemic Rivalry" implies a much broader, "systemic" challenge that affects just about everybody. It's not only a bilateral contest for global leadership or hegemony between the PRC and the US. The outcome will have profound impact not just on the resulting international pecking order, but more importantly, on the nature of international relations as such, and indeed on the way our societies are organized, and on our way of life in these societies. Ultimately, at stake is nothing less than the rights and freedoms we have grown to take for granted in open societies. The US might be doing itself a disservice by employing a term that implicitly excludes potential allies in this existential strive to preserve individual freedoms and a value- and rules-based international order.

If the current tension with China indeed is a "Systemic Rivalry" with aspects of "Great Power Competition", can the talk of a "New Cold War" be justified? Are the democratic world and China sliding back to the conflict characteristic of the Maoist period before the "Opening of China" paved with Nixon's visit in 1971, the Shanghai Communiqué in 1972, the end of the Cultural Revolution and Mao's death in 1976, and the normalization of relations with the US in 1979? To contemplate this question, we might want to employ "informed empathy" and reflect on the way the current Chinese leadership views it.

The current paramount leader of China, the CCP Central Committee Secretary General Xi Jinping, sees the history of China since the 1949 takeover evolving in three distinct "eras" (shidai). The first was the era of Mao Zedong from 1949 through 1976 when the Communist Party followed the right, orthodox Leninist policies of centralized control, but didn't yet possess the right tools to efficiently implement them. Central planning in the economy and top-down control of the society were difficult to achieve, and ultimately failed in all

"socialist" countries in the Soviet Bloc. In China, too, they had ended with an economic, social, and political turmoil at the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

To save the country from collapse, Deng Xiaoping ushered in the second era of "reform and opening" (Gaijie Kaifang) in late 1978. He loosened the social and economic controls, and even experimented with a partial divorce of the Party from the State. These reforms resulted in a phenomenal rise that has made China an economic and military superpower second only to the United States. According to Xi Jinping and his party theoreticians, however, there had been fundamental downsides to this experiment, too. The loosening of controls had led to widespread corruption and rising inequality, retreat of the communist ideology, and overall decline in social discipline. Cumulatively, these reform side-effects had again started to threaten the stability, even the survival, of the CCP regime in China.

That is why Xi Jinping introduced his "new era" (Xin Shidai) in 2017, meant to rein in the excesses of Deng's Reform Era and bring back the discipline. In line with the Marxist theory of Historical and Dialectical Materialism, the New Era will not simply negate the previous Reform Era, but rather bring it to a qualitatively new level. Xi himself has put forth the slogan "The two that cannot negate [each other]", meaning that the Reform Era cannot negate the Mao Era, and vice versa. They form dialectical opposites, different stages of development that Xi Jinping's own New Era is now bringing to a synthesis. China is now in position to implement the "original intent" (Chu Xin) of Mao's orthodox Leninist policies, but at a qualitatively new stage of development. It can make use of the new economic base, and especially the new technologies like Big Data and AI, that make it possible for the CCP to succeed where all the other "socialist" countries had previously failed - to execute a top-down, centralized control of the economy and the society. In short, finally a functional Leninist society, after some trial and yet more error.

Xi Jinping's tech-driven New Era Leninist paradigm has implications for Beijing's new muscular foreign policy as well, but to go back to the original question of a "New Cold War", let's try to apply his Historic Materialism logic. Through this prism, we are indeed heading back to a previous era characterized by at least the potential for a Cold War-like confrontation, but at a qualitatively new level. You don't enter the same river twice, and in between these two historical stages lies 30 years of unbridled globalization that has created unprecedented interdependencies between China and the World. The old-style Cold War of two strictly delineated blocs is hard to imagine.

Yet the basic nature of the looming conflict does remain the same. It is a "systemic rivalry" between two opposite views of social and political organization and the relationship between the state and the individual. In that sense, the essence of the Old Cold War persists in the "New Era".

We could also plausibly argue that the Cold War never really ended as we had somewhat naively concluded in the triumphant years of the "end of history" and the "flat world". In the euphoria of the Third Wave of Democratization, we left one Leninist power behind, blindly believing that it would in time by and of itself "converge" with global mainstream and become a "responsible stakeholder" in it. Rather than converging, the Leninist power has reinvented itself in Deng's Reform Era, and now confronts the democratic World again in

Xi's New Era. The "rejuvenated" PRC comes roaring back to the world stage, transformed and equipped with economic and technological tools that make it a more formidable opponent than the USSR ever was.

Cold War or not, the coming conflict will be both different and eerily familiar.