

10 'unthinkable questions' for the US on relations with China

This is an excerpt from the book, *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge To American Primacy*, by Kishore Mahbubani

One thing is certain. The geopolitical contest that has broken out between America and China will continue for the next decade or two.

Although President Donald Trump launched the first round in 2018, it will outlast his administration. The president has divided America on all his policies, except one: his trade and technological war against China. Indeed, he has received strong bipartisan support for it, and a strong consensus is developing in the American body politic that China represents a threat to America.

Yet, even though the American establishment has, by and large, enthusiastically supported Trump on China, it is curious that no one has pointed out that America is making a big strategic mistake by launching this contest with China without first developing a comprehensive and global strategy to deal with China.

The man who alerted me to this was one of America's greatest strategic thinkers, Dr Henry Kissinger. I still remember vividly the one-on-one lunch I had with him in a private room in his club in midtown Manhattan in mid-March 2018.

On the day of the lunch, I was afraid that it would be cancelled as a snowstorm was predicted. Despite the weather warning, he turned up. We had a wonderful conversation over two hours. To be fair to him, he didn't exactly say that America lacked a long-term strategy toward China, but that was the message he conveyed over lunch. This is also the big message of his own book, *On China*.

By contrast, America thought hard and deep before it plunged into the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The master strategist who formulated America's successful containment strategy against the Soviet Union was George Kennan.

When I served in the Singapore Foreign Service, I was also assigned to write long-term strategy papers for the Singapore government. The big lesson I learned from Singapore's three exceptional geopolitical masters (Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, and S. Rajaratnam) was that the first step to formulate any long-term strategy is to frame the right questions. If one gets the questions wrong, the answers will be wrong. Most importantly, as Rajaratnam taught me, in formulating such questions, one must always "think the unthinkable."

In this spirit of "thinking the unthinkable," I would like to suggest ten areas that provoke questions that the State Department policy planning staff should address.

Having met George Kennan once in his office in the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, in the late 1990s, I believe that he would favour confronting head-on the toughest issues that lie ahead in trying to formulate a long-term strategy against China.

1 Could America's GDP (gross domestic product) become smaller than China's in the next thirty years? If so, what strategic changes will America have to make when it no longer is the world's dominant economic power?

2 Should America's primary goal be to improve the livelihood of its 330 million citizens or to preserve its primacy in the international system? If there are contradictions between the goals of preserving primacy and improving well-being, which should take priority?

3 Is it wise for America to continue investing heavily in its defence budget? Or should it cut down its defence expenses and its involvement in expensive foreign wars and instead invest more in improving social services and rejuvenating national infrastructure? Does China want America to increase or reduce its defence expenditures?

4 Can America build up a solid global coalition to counterbalance China if it also alienates its key allies? Was America's deci-



America is making a big strategic mistake by launching a geopolitical contest with China without first developing a comprehensive and global strategy to deal with China, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

sion to walk away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) a geopolitical gift to China? Has China already mounted a preemptive strike against a containment policy by engaging in new economic partnerships with its neighbours through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?

5 Under the Trump administration, America has switched from multilateral to unilateral sanctions and weaponised the US dollar to use against its adversaries. Is it wise to weaponise a global public good and use it for unilateral ends? Right now, there are no practical alternatives to the US dollar. Will that always be the case? Is this the Achilles' heel of the American economy that China can pierce and weaken?

6 In developing a strategy against the Soviet Union, Kennan emphasised that it was vital for Americans to "create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country" that was successful domestically and enjoyed a "spiritual vitality".

Professor Joseph Nye described this as American soft power. American soft power has declined considerably, especially under Trump. Are the American people ready to make the sacrifices needed to enhance American soft power? Can America win the ideological battle against China if it is perceived to be a "normal" nation rather than an "exceptional" one?

7 General H. R. McMaster has said that at the end of the day, the struggle between America and China represented the struggle between "free and open societies and closed authoritarian systems".

Neither the Indian nor Indonesian democracies feel threatened in any way by Chinese ideology. Neither do most European democracies feel threatened. By treating the new China challenge as akin to the old Soviet strategy, America is making the classic strategic mistake of fighting tomorrow's war with yesterday's strategies.

Are American strategic thinkers capable of developing new analytical frameworks to capture the essence of the competition with China?

8 Are America's responses to China driven by reason? Or by subconscious emotions? The Western psyche has long harboured a deep, unconscious fear of

the "yellow peril". Kiron Skinner pointed out that the contest with China was with a power that was "non-Caucasian". In so doing, she put her finger on what is driving the emotional reactions to China. In the politically correct environment of Washington, DC, is it possible for any strategic thinker to suggest such a politically incorrect but truthful point without getting politically skewered?

9 In the eyes of many objective Asian observers, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) actually functions as the "Chinese Civilisation Party". Its soul is not rooted in the foreign ideology of Marxism-Leninism but in the Chinese civilisation.

The most important job for a strategic thinker is to try to step into the mind of the adversary. So here's a test: What percentage of a Chinese leader's mind is preoccupied with Marxist-Leninist ideology and what percentage with the rich history of Chinese civilization? The answer would probably surprise many Americans.

10 Henry Kissinger in *On China* emphasized that Chinese strategy was guided by the Chinese game of *wei qi*, not Western chess. In Western chess, the emphasis is on finding the fastest way to capture the king. In *wei qi*, the goal is to slowly and patiently build up assets to tip the balance of the game in one's favour. Is America setting aside enough resources for the long-term competition? Does American society have the inherent strength and stamina to match China's long-term game?

The goal of raising these questions is to stimulate a strategic debate, think the unthinkable, and dissect and understand the many complex dimensions of the US-China geopolitical contest that will unravel in the coming decade. One of the goals of this book is to promote hard-headed, rational thinking on an inevitably complex and shifting subject.

One fundamental question that any American strategic thinker must pose before plunging into a major geopolitical contest is one that gets at the scale of risk involved. In short, can America lose?

It is far from certain that America will win the contest. China has as good a chance as America of emerging as the dominant influence in the world. Yet, just as it has been a strategic mistake for American thinkers to take success for

granted, it would be an equally colossal strategic mistake for China to assume the same. Despite the many advantages China has in size and civilisational resilience, it would be unwise for Chinese leaders to underestimate the underlying strengths of the American economy and society.

If I were a senior Chinese leader advising President Xi Jinping, I would strongly urge Mr Xi to overestimate rather than underestimate America's strengths.

And if I were asked to draft a memo to President Xi on America's great strengths, I would write the following:

MEMO TO COMRADE XI JINPING: PREPARING FOR THE GREAT STRUGGLE WITH AMERICA

January 1, 2020

In twenty years, we will mark the two hundredth anniversary of the most humiliating period in China's history. The people of China were forced by the British to accept opium as payment for our valuable tea.

As Comrade Xi has said, "with the Opium War of 1840, China was plunged into the darkness of domestic turmoil and foreign aggression; its people, ravaged by war, saw their homeland torn apart and lived in poverty and despair".

We were weak. We suffered a hundred years of humiliation until Chairman Mao said at the founding ceremony of the People's Republic of China that "the Chinese people have stood up".

Today, we are strong. No power can humiliate China. We are well on the road to national rejuvenation.

Yet we now also face the biggest challenge to China's rejuvenation. We had hoped that the "beautiful country" (America) would continue to remain sleeping as China rose. Unfortunately, it has now woken up.

It would be a huge strategic mistake for us to underestimate the great strengths of America. The Chinese people fear chaos. It is the one force that in the past brought China to its knees and brought misery to the Chinese people. Clearly, America is suffering chaos now.

Chaos should be a sign of weakness. Yet for America, it is a sign of strength. The chaos is a result of the people arguing loudly and vociferously over the direction that America should take. And the people argue loudly because they believe that they, not the government, are the owners of the country. This sense of ownership of the country

creates a tremendous sense of individual empowerment among the American people.

This sense of individual empowerment has enabled American society to produce some of the most powerful individuals on planet earth.

No society has as powerful an ecosystem as America for producing strong individuals. Our society cannot replicate this great strength of America. China stood up again after a hundred years because of a towering figure like Mao Zedong. American society produces many Mao Zedongs.

The second great strategic advantage of America is that it has access to humanity's best and brightest. As Lee Kuan Yew wisely pointed out, America has the ability to attract the best talents from anywhere in the world. Many of the chief executive officers of major companies have been foreign-born US citizens, including Indra Nooyi of PepsiCo, Sundar Pichai of Google, Satya Nadella of Microsoft, and Andy Grove of Intel.

The third great strategic advantage of America is its strong institutions. While American society believes in and encourages individual empowerment, it does not rely on strong individual leaders. Instead, it relies on strong institutions to protect society.

The strength of American institutions and rule of law explains why the whole world has faith in the American dollar. This faith in the American dollar underlies its status as the dominant global reserve currency, giving it the "exorbitant privilege" of printing money to sustain its fiscal and current account deficits. In recent years, America has also used the US dollar as a powerful weapon to sanction or put pressure on other countries. China does not have this weapon.

The fourth great strategic advantage of America is that it has the best universities in the world. Throughout the long history of humanity, the most successful societies have always been those that fostered diverse schools of thought. Today, America leads the world in fostering diverse views. In field after field, America produces more Nobel Prize winners than any other country.

These great universities serve another critical purpose for America. They provide the conduits through which the best minds in the world are attracted to live and work in America.

The fifth great strategic advantage, which also explains the extraordinary success of its universities, is that America is also part of a great civilisation, the Western civilisation.

America is not the only member of this civilisation. The great countries of Europe, as well as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, are also members. Hence, in any geopolitical competition, America will not be alone.

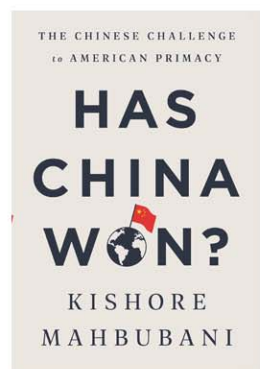
In conclusion, as we begin our great struggle with America, the biggest strategic mistake we could make is to underestimate its power and strength. Despite its youth or perhaps because of it, it is one of the most dynamic societies ever created in human history.

Let us prepare ourselves for the greatest geopolitical contest ever seen. We will have to win this contest if we are to achieve our historic goal of complete national rejuvenation by 2049.

This memo may be fictional, but I believe it accurately captures the actual perceptions of America among the Chinese elite. They genuinely respect the great strengths that America has. As a result, the Chinese leaders will make a massive effort to avoid, as long as possible, an all-out geopolitical contest with America.

It is a paradox of the great geopolitical contest that will be played out between America and China in the coming decades that it is both inevitable and avoidable. It is inevitable because many of the policymakers who will make the tactical decisions that will drive this contest are possessed by a psychology that sees all competition among great powers as a zero-sum game. Yet, there is no fundamental conflict of interest between the United States and China.

One key goal of this book is to blow away the thick fog of misunderstanding that has enveloped the Sino-American relationship, to enable both sides to better understand – even if they cannot approve of – each other's core interests.



The book, published by Public Affairs, 2020, is available for \$55 in hardcover and \$33 in paperback, exclusive of GST, from leading bookstores in Singapore and Amazon.com. (It can be ordered online from Kinokuniya during this circuit breaker period when stores are closed). A Kindle version is also available.