

The great paradox of Trump's plan to combat China

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The great paradox about the response of US President Donald Trump's administration to the challenge from China is that it is both overestimating and underestimating this challenge. The overestimation is clear; the underestimation, which is more dangerous, less so.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spelt out clearly his case for overestimation in his speech at the Nixon Library on July 23. "We're seeing staggering statistics of China trade abuses that cost American jobs and strike enormous blows to the economies all across America, including here in Southern California," he said. "And we're watching a Chinese military that grows stronger and stronger and indeed more menacing."

One could be forgiven for believing that China is about to mount a military invasion of the United States. Yet, there is no doubt that in the military field, the US is much stronger than China.

In his speech, Mr Pompeo said: "We've called on China to conform its nuclear capabilities to the strategic realities of our time."

If China heeded his call, then it

would have to add more than 5,500 nuclear weapons to its stockpile since it has only over 300 weapons, compared with almost 6,000 for the US.

Mr Pompeo also declared that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was exploiting America's "free and open society" and "sent propagandists into our press conferences, our research centres, our high schools, our colleges and even into our PTA (parent-teacher association) meetings".

In short, Chinese agents of influence have infiltrated all segments of American society and could undermine it. The most telling word Mr Pompeo used to describe the CCP was "Frankenstein". This word implies that a monster was now threatening America. It would be reasonable for an American to feel scared after hearing the speech.

Yet, even though the recent speeches on China by Trump administration officials have been strident, they ultimately underestimate the challenge posed by China because they fail to realistically explain its nature.

Mr Pompeo makes it clear that it is the communist ideology of the CCP that is threatening America. As he said: "General Secretary Xi Jinping is a true believer in a

bankrupt totalitarian ideology. It's this ideology that informs his decades-long desire for global hegemony of China communism."

If global hegemony was indeed China's goal, then Americans can relax. Any such ambition of global hegemony will fail. The world will reject it.

The CCP is actually a far more formidable competitor to America because its primary goal is not global hegemony. It is to revive the world's oldest and most resilient civilisation and restore its natural place as the most successful civilisation for most of human history. And the CCP is doing a very good job at this process of revitalisation. One little-known fact about the CCP is that since the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, 71 years ago, this is the strongest it has ever been.

A Harvard Kennedy School Ash Centre study titled *Understanding CCP Resilience*, published last month, explains why the CCP is so popular in China. "Regime theory has long argued that authoritarian systems are inherently unstable because of their dependence on coercion, over-centralisation of decision-making, and the privileging of personal over institutional power," according to

the report. "Over time, these inefficiencies tend to weaken the legitimacy of the ruling government, leading to generalised unrest and citizen dissatisfaction."

This is what should have happened in China. Instead, as this report says, "the party appears to be as strong as ever. A deeper resilience is founded on popular support for regime policy". This is why the report concludes that "there is little evidence to support the idea that the CCP is losing legitimacy in the eyes of its people".

Mr Pompeo was also underestimating and misunderstanding the Chinese challenge when he spoke of the distinction between the CCP and the Chinese people. He said: "We must also engage and empower the Chinese people – a dynamic, freedom-loving people who are completely distinct from the CCP."

Here are some important statistics. Each year, more than 20 million Chinese apply to join the CCP. About 12 per cent of them get in, making it as difficult to join the party as it is to get into leading universities in America. In short, the CCP is not a party about to crack up under American pressure: It is floating on an ocean of legitimacy among 1.4 billion Chinese people, who are now happy as they are

experiencing a new high tide in the history of Chinese civilisation. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer reports that 90 per cent of the Chinese people support the Chinese government.

All this explains a key weakness of the American strategy towards China. No country, with the possible unwise exception of the current Australian government, has jumped onto the American bandwagon as it rushes to confront China. Not even close allies such as the United Kingdom. One influential British figure noted in Davos in January that the UK would proceed to install 5G technology from Huawei as British intelligence agencies had thoroughly scrubbed the Huawei software. He confidently asserted that the US could not arm-twist the UK as the US needed the UK as much as the UK needed the US.

By last month, the UK had capitulated. One can only imagine the arm-twisting that took place. What a contrast to the Cold War when the UK and the US were complete comrades-in-arms.

The Trump administration is right on one point. There are rising levels of concern around the world on the new assertiveness displayed by China, from the "wolf-warrior" diplomats in Europe to the killings

of the Indian soldiers in the Himalayas.

An intelligent and thoughtful American strategy that tried to balance Chinese assertiveness by developing a wide network of friends across the globe could work. Instead, as American foreign policy expert Richard Haas says, "under this administration, we treat the European Union as an economic foe, bash South Korea and Japan... it is not realistic to expect allies to stand up to a powerful neighbour if they cannot count on us".

If the Trump administration or the US is serious about taking on the Chinese challenge, it needs to do a complete reboot and work out a thoughtful long-term strategy. It should also heed the advice of its previous strategic thinkers in trying to understand the real nature of the CCP.

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