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American Exceptionalism and the Rise of China: Competing Visions of Global Order

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamic relationship between American exceptionalism and China's emergence as a global powerhouse, examining how these contrasting ideologies influence modern international affairs. By integrating recent academic insights and contemporary geopolitical shifts, the study investigates the foundational principles of both exceptionalism perspectives, their impact on foreign policy and economic rivalry, and the broader consequences for global stability. The analysis highlights how China's growing influence has prompted a reassessment of America's self-identity while reinforcing China's vision of civilizational superiority. Ultimately, the article considers possible avenues for coexistence within an increasingly multipolar global order.

Key words: America, exceptionalism, China's predominance, ideological, multipolar world.

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a profound geopolitical shift as China's rapid ascent challenges the post-Cold War unipolar moment of American dominance. This transformation represents more than a simple power transition—it constitutes a fundamental clash between two distinct visions of global order, each rooted in deeply held beliefs about national exceptionalism. The United States' self-conception as the indispensable nation and shining city on the hill now confronts China's assertion of its rightful place in world affairs through the framework of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

American exceptionalism posits that the United States is inherently distinct from other nations due to its revolutionary founding, democratic institutions, and moral mission to promote freedom globally. This belief hinges on narratives of divine favor, historical uniqueness, and a perpetual "frontier" spirit.

Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis (1893) shows that the frontier shaped American democracy by fostering individualism and innovation, but it ignored its violence and exclusion. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his work *Democracy in America*, suggested that the relatively new nation must have had some extraordinary features to prosper. According to him, the United States' success is as a constitutional republic, an emerging representative democracy, egalitarianism, liberty, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.

This paper argues that the current tensions between the U.S. and China have not stemmed merely from material competition but also a collision of historical narratives and identity constructs. As Yang Jiemian observes, America's attachment to American exceptionalism makes it more difficult for the U.S. to learn from its historical experiences and the lessons of other countries.

"There are three major schools of thought within American international relations theory: realism, liberalism, and constructivism, each of which essentially serves U.S. hegemony and leadership."

Yang Jiemian

Meanwhile, China's particularistic exceptionalism has evolved from **"a modest acknowledgment of developmental challenges into an increasingly confident assertion of civilizational identity and an alternative vision of modernity"**.

The legitimate contender to the United States-led world order is China, and it has fundamentally challenged the American canon of exceptionalism – the rudimentary doctrine of U.S. national identity.

The Crisis of American Exceptionalism

The doctrine of American exceptionalism—the belief that the United States occupies a unique moral and historical position as the vanguard of freedom and democracy—faces its most significant challenge since the Cold War. China's unprecedented economic success and technological advancement have systematically dismantled key pillars of this exceptionalism thinking. The world has already moved on from the Americans' post-Cold War win lap, US exceptionalism is frailer than ever.

The concept of American exceptionalism portrays China's rise as a challenge to U.S. dominance. During the Cold War, the U.S. positioned itself in opposition to communism; after the Cold War, it increasingly viewed China as a rival, particularly when China's economic reforms did not lead to the expected democratization. The "China Threat" narrative stems from concerns that an authoritarian state could compete with or surpass the U.S., disrupting its self-perception as the world's indispensable leader. This shift is evident in U.S. policies such as trade tariffs, technology sanctions (e.g., Huawei), and the CHIPS Act, which signal a move from engagement to containment, motivated by both strategic interests and an underlying identity crisis. China's success challenges the belief that liberal democracy is the sole path to economic prosperity, shaking fundamental assumptions of American exceptionalism. China, in turn, advances its version of exceptionalism, drawing from its historical identity as a peaceful, non-expansionist civilization. Ideas such as the "peaceful rise" and Xi Jinping's "China Dream" emphasize national rejuvenation and global harmony, presenting a contrast to what is seen as Western aggression. Chinese scholars argue that this exceptionalism is primarily defensive, centered on sovereignty and economic development, rather than a universalist mission like that of the U.S. However, actions such as territorial claims in the South China Sea and economic pressure on countries like Australia indicate a more assertive approach, posing a challenge to the U.S.-led global order. The tension between these competing exceptionalisms makes coexistence challenging. The U.S. struggles to accept a rival that does not share its values, while China resists external pressure to adopt Western norms. Some view this rivalry as a potential precursor to a new Cold War, with both nations presenting their systems as superior. Others, such as Singapore's George Yeo, argue that fostering mutual understanding—acknowledging the U.S. as

a missionary power and China as an anti-missionary one—could help prevent miscalculations. However, the U.S.'s polarized and inward-focused domestic politics, along with China's centralized governance, constrain adaptability and limit opportunities for compromise.

Various global rankings suggest that the United States does not always align with its claims of exceptionalism. According to The Economist's Democracy Index, the U.S. ranks 26th, classified as a **"flawed democracy"**, placing it closer to Botswana and Chile than to Canada or Australia. Reporters Without Borders ranks the U.S. 42nd in its World Press Freedom Index, noting a concerning rise in press freedom violations despite the country's historical reputation for free speech. In a 2021 Commonwealth Fund analysis of 11 high-income nations, the U.S. had the highest healthcare spending but the worst outcomes among surveyed countries. Additionally, the United Nations Human Development Index places the U.S. at 21st, assessing factors like education, healthcare, and standard of living. While these rankings do not necessarily indicate a decline, they serve as a reminder that despite discussions of American exceptionalism, there are valid arguments suggesting the U.S. does not always meet the high standards it promotes on the global stage. According to the Democracy Index 2023, the worst category for the U.S. was political culture (6.25 points), which measures support for democracy. America's exceptionalism has become increasingly forceful, even as the tangible and ethical foundations supporting this notion, —assuming they ever existed, have significantly diminished.

The top-performing countries overall are Norway, the Netherlands, and Australia. The United States ranks last overall, despite spending far more of its gross domestic product on health care. **After a hundred years of steady progress in press rights across the United States, the nation is now facing an unprecedented and sustained downturn in press freedom in contemporary times.**

Economic Assumptions Challenged

The long-standing belief that market economies require democratic governance has been disrupted by China's model of authoritarian capitalism. Analysts highlight that China's economic success has fundamentally questioned the assumption that free markets and democratic systems are inherently linked.

Technological Expectations Reversed

American exceptionalism once embraced the idea that internet freedom would inevitably weaken authoritarian regimes, a belief reinforced during the Arab Spring's "Twitter Revolutions." However, by 2016, China demonstrated how technology could strengthen state control rather than undermine it. Additionally, the notion that authoritarianism hinders innovation has been disproven, as China has emerged as a global leader in AI, quantum computing, and biotechnology.

Declining Global Leadership

Following World War II, the U.S. promoted free trade and took on disproportionate alliance costs—an approach atypical for nation-states. However, this generosity was driven by superpower maintenance rather than altruism and is now proving unsustainable. The Trump administration's tariffs and Biden's continuation of strict China policies reflect a shift toward a more conventional nation-state approach.

This erosion of foundational beliefs has led to what analysts describe as "a full-blown moral panic in America," evident in extreme responses such as the securitization of industries from solar panels to social media platforms and rhetoric portraying China as an "existential threat."

Chinese Exceptionalism: Characteristics and Evolution

China has developed its form of exceptionalism, distinct from the American model. While American exceptionalism asserts the universal applicability of its values, Chinese exceptionalism emphasizes the uniqueness of its civilizational path, encapsulated in the phrase "with Chinese characteristics." Chinese exceptionalism is characterized by a commitment to great power reformism, a philosophy of benevolent pacifism, and an emphasis on harmonious inclusion. While it is grounded in historical and cultural realities, its narrative is shaped through a selective fusion of factual elements and mythological interpretations drawn from China's extensive past.

Key Elements of Chinese Exceptionalism

Civilizational Continuity: China views its governance system as shaped by its historical, geographical, and cultural context, specific to its conditions and not intended for export.

Development Priorities: The Chinese model prioritizes economic rights and poverty alleviation before civil-political rights, challenging the Western approach of emphasizing political freedoms first.

Non-Interventionist Approach: Unlike the U.S., which actively promotes its system globally, China follows a "pull, not push" strategy—its culture may inspire others, but is not forcibly imposed.

However, this exceptionalism carries risks, including ethnonationalism and regional dominance aspirations, particularly regarding China's historical perception of its *rightful place* as East Asia's center. The Western *China threat* narrative partly stems from concerns about this trajectory.

Soft Power Competition and Economic Influence

The rivalry between American and Chinese exceptionalism is evident in soft power and economic strategies. As Jaffer (2024) notes, American exceptionalism has traditionally been reinforced by cultural exports (Hollywood, universities) and claims to moral leadership, but is increasingly burdened by domestic inequalities and historical contradictions. Meanwhile, China has leveraged economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to project soft power through "win-win" partnerships and shared development narratives.

Recent economic trends indicate a shift in this competition. As of March 2025, the MSCI China index had risen by 19% year-to-date, while the S&P 500 entered correction territory—a reversal from previous years when "American exceptionalism" dominated investment narratives. This change reflects China's technological advancements (such as DeepSeek's R1 AI model) and growing concerns over U.S. economic policies under Trump's second term.

Psychological and Strategic Drivers of Conflict

The tension between American and Chinese exceptionalism extends beyond material competition to deeper identity conflicts:

Identity Through Opposition: American identity has historically been defined in contrast to an adversary—communism during the Cold War, terrorism post-9/11. Analysts suggest that "just as Batman needs a Joker, American identity struggles to exist without an enemy to define itself against." China's rise provides this necessary counterpart during a period of American uncertainty.

Moral Universalism vs. Relativism: American exceptionalism insists its values are universally applicable, while Chinese exceptionalism views values as culturally specific, leading to fundamental disagreements on global governance norms.

Projection of Intentions: The U.S., accustomed to global dominance, assumes that any rival power would seek similar hegemony. However, this perspective may not align with China's historically inward-focused strategic culture. As Professor Claes Ryn notes, Washington often portrays China's leadership as a monolith, overlooking its internal complexities.

Military and Strategic Posture

United States: The U.S. remains the world's most dominant military power, with a 2023 defense budget of \$816 billion, extensive global military bases, and strong alliances such as NATO and AUKUS. Its navy and air force enable worldwide power projection, although its shipbuilding capacity is significantly smaller than China's. U.S. strategy focuses on deterring China through Indo-Pacific partnerships, including strengthened ties with the Philippines, and maintaining its commitment to Taiwan's defense under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, despite the absence of a formal treaty obligation.

China: China has rapidly modernized its military, boasting the largest navy in the world by ship count and a shipbuilding capacity 200 times greater than the U.S. It has also developed advanced hypersonic missile technology. While its 2023 defense budget stood at \$296 billion, lower

operational costs enhance its purchasing power. China prioritizes regional dominance in the Western Pacific, asserting control in the South China Sea and near Taiwan. Although it avoids large-scale conflicts, it engages in border skirmishes, such as those with India and the Philippines. Its strategic partnerships with Russia, Iran, and North Korea are expanding, though they lack the depth and global reach of U.S. alliances.

Can they co-exist?



In his account of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides

observed that war became unavoidable due to Athens' growing power and the apprehension it created in Sparta. Building on this idea, Harvard scholar Graham Allison coined the term "Thucydides Trap" to explain the dynamics of Sino-American relations, suggesting that tensions often arise when an emerging power challenges an established one.

Yuan Sha, an Assistant Research Fellow at the China Institute of International Studies, expresses optimism about Sino-American relations, arguing that their conflict is largely based on perception rather than inherent rivalry. She points out that China and the US are not natural adversaries, as they have no territorial disputes, historical grievances, or immediate conflicting interests. Given China's comparatively weaker military, economic, and soft power influence, he contends that it would be irrational for China to directly challenge US global dominance. Managing relations between major powers requires strategic diplomacy to prevent perceived tensions from escalating into actual conflicts. Divergent political structures, economic strategies, and ideological differences have fostered mutual suspicion, while subjective threat perceptions intensify the security dilemma. The US prioritizes global leadership, viewing its national interests in broad terms. Washington often asserts its stance on contentious matters like Taiwan and the South China Sea, actions that China sees as encroaching upon its interests and security.

Coexistence as a principle of global order is rooted in the recognition of diverse political systems. During the Cold War, the structure of International Relations remained vague, acknowledging systemic differences under the UN framework while simultaneously permitting hegemonic post-colonial policies. This allowed dominant mindsets to persist without challenge. As that framework has weakened, alongside rising global inequalities and China's re-emergence as a major international force, the existing terms of coexistence require reevaluation. Washington is open to cooperation with Beijing as long as both sides engage in reciprocal efforts to ease tensions, advance mutual interests, and secure beneficial outcomes. The United States is willing to collaborate when China's actions align with American priorities, but it insists on balanced participation in managing bilateral relations. It refuses to take on an outsized role in reducing friction or making concessions under pressure. Any meaningful progress will depend on both nations committing to equal contributions and adjustments in their diplomatic engagement.

Several approaches could help manage tensions between these competing exceptionalism models:

Priority Pluralism: Recognizing a core set of universal values while allowing nations to prioritize them differently based on historical experience. This approach questions whether

the U.S. can accept China's sequencing of economic development before political liberalization as a valid model.

Cultural Humility: Moving away from cultural superiority toward humility would require the U.S. to acknowledge that China was "never America's to own, shape, define, or direct." This aligns with Chinese concepts like "unity in diversity," which could help reconcile opposing perspectives.

Functional Cooperation: Despite ideological differences, both nations have demonstrated pragmatic collaboration in the areas of climate change and global health. Expanding issue-based cooperation could build trust while avoiding direct ideological confrontations.

Conclusion

The clash between American exceptionalism and China's rise is not merely a geopolitical power shift—it represents a collision of historical narratives, identity constructs, and visions for global order. Current tensions stem not only from China's growing capabilities but also from how this growth challenges America's self-perception and global role. China's approach to foreign policy and international politics reflects its vision for a global order aligned with its strategic interests. The country actively shapes diplomatic relations, economic partnerships, and geopolitical strategies to promote norms and rules that support its preferred world order. By advocating for sovereignty, non-interference, and multipolarity, China seeks to challenge Western-centric governance models while reinforcing its influence in global institutions.

Moving forward, both nations must transcend zero-sum thinking. For the U.S., this means reconciling with relative decline and redefining its role in a multipolar world. For China, it requires exercising restraint in wielding its expanding influence. Ultimately, the ability of these competing exceptionalism models to coexist will determine whether the 21st century is marked by conflict or cooperative engagement. As the world transitions beyond unipolarity, embracing pluralism and mutual recognition may offer the most viable path to stability.

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