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The Last Thing This Country Needs

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The idea of a Cold War II between the West and China has quickly evolved from a misleading analogy into a self-fulfilling prophecy. But contemporary China is nothing like the Soviet Union, and in today's world, we simply cannot afford another clash of mutually exclusive systems.

BERLIN – This month's G7 summit seemed to confirm what has long been apparent: The United States and China are entering into a cold war similar to the one between the US and the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century.

The West no longer views China just as a competitor and rival but as a civilizational alternative. Once again, the conflict seems to be about mutually exclusive “systems.” Amid an escalating clash of values and competing claims to global power and leadership, a military confrontation – or at least a new arms race – seems to have become a distinct possibility.

But on closer examination, the Cold War comparison is misleading. The systemic rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union was preceded by one of the most brutal and catastrophic “hot” wars in history, and reflected the frontlines of that conflict.

Though the US and the Soviet Union were the principal victors after the German and Japanese surrenders, they had already been ideological foes before the war. If Hitler's Germany and imperial Japan had not both sought world domination through military conquest, the US and the Soviet Union never would have been allies. As soon as the war was over, the faceoff between Soviet communism and Western democratic capitalism resumed, their enmity intensified by the brutality of forced Sovietization in Central and Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1948.

At the same time, the dawn of the nuclear age had fundamentally disrupted power politics by making any future war for global hegemony impossible without self-annihilation. Mutual assured destruction kept the superpower confrontation “cold,” even as it threatened all of humankind with nuclear catastrophe. If the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact had not collapsed four decades later, the conflict presumably would have dragged on indefinitely.

The situation between the West and China today is totally different. Though the Communist Party of China calls the country “socialist” to justify its political monopoly, no one takes that label seriously. China does not define its difference from the West according to its position on private property; rather, it simply does and says whatever is necessary to maintain one-party rule. Since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s, China has established a hybrid model that accommodates both markets and central planning, and both state and private ownership. The CPC alone stands at the top of this “Market-Leninist” model.

The Chinese system's hybrid character is what accounts for its success. China is on track to surpass the US both technologically and economically by around 2030 – a feat that the Soviet Union never had a chance of accomplishing at any point in its 70-year history. China's “Billionaire Socialism” is clearly better equipped to compete with the West than the old Soviet system ever was.

If today's systemic rivalry isn't the same as in the Cold War, what should a Cold War II really be about? Is the goal to force China to become more Western and democratic? Or is it simply to contain China's power and isolate it technologically (or, at a minimum, slow down its ascent)? And if the West were to achieve any of these objectives, what then?

In fact, none of these objectives could ever be satisfied at a reasonable cost for the parties involved. China is home to 1.4 billion people who can see that their historic opportunity for global recognition has come. Given the scale of the Chinese market and the economic interdependencies it engenders, the idea that China can be isolated is absurd.

But perhaps the issue is more about power than economics. Who will be the twenty-first century's hegemon? By uniting with the rest of the West, can the US really change the historical trajectory of China's rise and the West's relative decline? I doubt it.

The West's recognition that China will not become more democratic by dint of its economic development and integration into the global economy is necessary and long past due. Greed kept that fantasy afloat for far too long.

But I will venture a prediction that the twenty-first century will not primarily be characterized by a return to great-power politics at all, even if that looks where things are headed now. The experience of the pandemic forces us to take a longer and wider view. COVID-19 was a mere prelude to the looming climate crisis, a global challenge that will force the great powers to embrace cooperation for the sake of humankind, regardless of who is "Number One."

For the first time ever, the pandemic has made "humankind" more than an abstraction, turning that concept into a material field for action. Containing the coronavirus and sparing everyone from the threat of dangerous new variants will require more than eight billion vaccine doses. Assuming that global warming and the overburdening of regional and global ecosystems continue apace, this same global field of action will become the dominant one in the twenty-first century.

In this context, the question of who is on top will be decided not through traditional great-power politics, but by which powers step up to provide the leadership and competence that the situation demands. Unlike in the past, a cold war would hasten, not prevent, mutually assured destruction.