

BOOK REVIEW

Daring to Struggle: China's Global Ambitions Under Xi Jinping, by Bates Gill. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 306 pp.

There is no shortage of excellent books on China under Xi Jinping; so, what should the time-pressed reader choose? This reviewer recommends Bates Gill's comprehensive study of China's rise to power under Xi as a strong candidate to be near or at the top of the list.

Gill constructs his book through an examination of how and why China has risen as a global power from the wreckage left from Mao Zedong's rule. The combination of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution left China in disarray; thus, Mao's successors had a huge task before them as they struggled to rebuild China after 1976. While Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao started China down the road to prosperity and global power, they largely kept their progress concealed ("hide one's capacities and bide one's time"), concerned partly that China's progress would stimulate rival powers to react. Xi Jinping would take a much different road.

The son of well-placed Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials, Xi grew up in comfortable circumstances, until the mass purges of Party officials directed by Mao and his henchmen swept up Xi's parents. Xi survived, however, and assumed the lead political role in 2012. He immediately began to push away the "hide-and-bide" strategies of his predecessors, and most of Gill's book concentrates on the areas where Xi places his focuses.

Xi rooted his goals in his perspectives on China's history, the country's capacity, and potential weaknesses. The "century of humiliation" was a major narrative for Xi's robust defense of his modernization efforts. Gill notes that Xi also learned lessons from the Soviet Union's collapse, blaming it on the failure of the Communist Party. His remedy was to rebuild the legitimacy of the CCP through the narrative that it was the Party that saved China from the century of humiliation, a theme that undergirded much of Xi's vision. This view transmitted to Xi's emphasis on Chinese sovereignty, including extending protection for Chinese citizens abroad, the resolution of contested borders, and a renewed emphasis on China's claims in the South China Sea—and Taiwan in particular.

The growth of China's economy under Deng and his successors gave Xi benefits and concerns. He inherited a robust economy, but his need to maintain Party legitimacy pushed him to increase CCP control over the heavily privatized economy, as he enlarged the state sector and clipped the wings of China's more successful entrepreneurs, like Alibaba founder Jack Ma. However, Xi's most notable contribution to China's economy and its global reach is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has spread China's economic connections to 138 countries that have

agreed to co-develop more than 2,000 BRI projects, costing untold hundreds of billions of dollars. The BRI encountered problems and international resistance, but for Gill, Xi and his compatriots quickly adjusted to the initial shortcomings of BRI, reduced its scope, and collaborated more closely with partner countries as it developed.

For Gill, another of Xi's signature achievements was to boost China's hard power, and in particular, its military might. While Xi's three predecessors were reluctant to bulk up Chinese military forces, Xi displayed no such hesitancy. Xi increased China's naval power substantially, making it the largest navy in the world, with more than 355 ships and submarines. Xi also ordered the modernization of China's nuclear forces, with new long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles filling silos in western China. China stepped up its territorial claims in the South China Sea, fortifying small islands with military facilities and reinforcing its 70-year-old "nine-dash line" that delineated China's sovereign claims to the area enclosed by the line—flaunting international laws and ignoring rival claims to the areas inside the line. China also used its hard economic power to punish countries that criticized China's internal and external policies, threatening countries like Australia with a trade cutoff because of Australian criticism of China's policies and South Korea due to that country's partnering with the United States on missile defense.

Under Mao, China aspired to leadership in the Non-aligned Movement and contested with the former Soviet Union for control of the so-called "communist world." However, under Xi, China has expanded its leadership aspirations to the global level. China has joined numerous regional and international organizations and created yet other institutions with global reach. China is also involved in telling its story to the world, moving from the harsh propaganda jargon under Mao to a more sophisticated narrative that has promoted China's governance and economic systems as more acceptable forms than the systems advocated by the West.

China enjoys many advantages in its rise under Xi, including a remarkable boost for its economy and a truly global presence. However, China also faces considerable challenges, as Gill highlights. A declining birth rate and overcapacity threaten Chinese economic growth. China's more aggressive power stance on its periphery has helped to unify neighbors, as India, the United States, Australia, and Japan have formed "the Quad" to coordinate cooperative efforts against China's expansive potential. China's slowing economic productivity is a threat to Xi at home and abroad. Xi's orchestrated crackdown on the Uyghur population risks alienating Muslim-majority countries, many of which are important to the success of the BRI. China's military buildup has encouraged other Asian countries to modernize their own military forces. And as Gill underscores,

Xi's assumption of almost total power has squelched internal debate over China's present and future directions. By disabling discussion, Xi places China at risk of suffering through the same disasters that Mao inflicted upon the country during his own single-minded rule.

For Gill, several policy recommendations for the United States and its allies and friends flow from his diagnosis of China's aspirations. First, understand the balance—China poses challenges and potential opportunities for cooperation. Second, there is strength in numbers, and the United States must step up global engagement. And, perhaps most significantly, prepare for a long struggle, as Beijing thinks in long time periods; so, Washington must do the same (a difficult recommendation for a short-term-oriented United States to follow).

The book has many strengths. It is balanced, based on solid evidence, and free from one-sided judgment. Gill underlines China's accomplishments and its vulnerabilities under Xi and offers wise recommendations for the United States and other major Asian powers on how to respond to Xi's China. He highlights the importance of competition and cooperation but notes that the strategic competition between the two powers has become so intense that cooperation carries increased risk for both Beijing and Washington.

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