

# What Would Victory against China Look Like?

MAJ DAVID GEANEY, USAF

## Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) framing of its purpose and the propaganda employed within China has stirred an ultranationalist—perhaps even jingoistic—public, who insist on nothing short of restoring China's mythical “Middle Kingdom” status from the past. The fervent nationalism exhibited by Chinese citizens wields a dual-edged blade that holds the capacity to erode the political legitimacy of the CCP and incite internal turmoil. By acknowledging the motivations and constraints faced by the CCP and the Chinese populace in a conflict with the United States, military leaders and decision makers can make more informed choices and pursue objectives that are more likely to hasten the conclusion of the war.

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For years, China has escalated actions in the South China Sea, portraying itself as a counter to US dominance in the world. This approach has enticed much of the Global South while seeking to undermine European support for the current global order.<sup>1</sup> Books such as Graham Allison's *Destined for War* have exhaustively debated whether war between the United States and China is avoidable.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, works like *2034* depict potential scenarios of a conflict with China.<sup>3</sup> However, what has received scant attention is the prospect of a triumphant outcome over China.

Understanding the plausible end state in a US–China war will reshape the decision-making process leading up to and during hostilities. By acknowledging the motivations and constraints faced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

<sup>1</sup> David J. Geaney, “China’s island fortifications are a challenge to international norms,” *Defense News*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/>; Rush Doshi, “The long game: China’s grand strategy to displace American order,” *Brookings Institution*, 2 August 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/>; and Ivo Daalder, “Xi is fixated on ending China’s century of humiliation,” *Politico*, 12 April 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/>.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Elliot Ackerman and James Stavridis, *2034: A Novel of the Next World War* (New York: Penguin, 2021).

and the Chinese populace in a conflict with the United States, military leaders and decision makers can make more enlightened choices and pursue objectives that are more likely to expedite the war's resolution.

### **Examining the Potential End State of a Conflict between the US and China**

In a war between two nuclear-armed powers, achieving victory is not as straightforward as merely capturing a key industrial city or the capital of a state. Should the United States be on the brink of a decisive triumph over China, what factors would deter the CCP from deploying its nuclear arsenal? What constitutes the threshold at which a nation concludes that it has endured sufficient conventional warfare and opts to employ nuclear weapons? Does the downfall of the central government equate to ending the war? Or does it potentially lead to greater complications if general officers or Politburo members with nuclear access take independent action? When contending with a democracy, the answer might involve inflicting enough damage to prompt the public to demand governmental change. However, this approach would be notably less effective against an authoritarian regime, particularly one that has tightly linked its legitimacy to the resurgence of the Chinese nation.<sup>4</sup>

The CCP has anchored its legitimacy in China's rejuvenation and the eradication of the 'century of humiliation,' spanning from the first Opium War (1840–1842) to the CCP's 1949 victory over the Kuomintang. The CCP's assertion posits that this era was an aberration resulting from the weakness of the Qing dynasty, rather than a recurring theme in Chinese empires. This reinterpretation of history overlooks the reality that inner China has experienced internal strife and foreign invasions for millennia, tracing back to at least the fall of the Zhou Dynasty in 256 BCE. However, it is the CCP's narrative that prevails among the Chinese populace.

At various junctures in its history, China has designated itself as the Middle Kingdom (中国, *Zhōngguó*), governing "all under heaven" (天下, *tianxia*). This appellation, chosen by the CCP, hearkens back to ancient eras (some predating even the Zhou) in a less interconnected world, when China wielded influence over neighboring nation-states and perceived itself as the world's center. The nomenclature the Party adopts for its nation could itself be construed as an effort to

<sup>4</sup> David J. Geaney, "Understanding China's Historical Impetus," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, March 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

evoke successful Chinese dynasties from the past and establish parallels with its own.

Xi Jinping's 2021 speech commemorating the CCP's centenary revolved around the notion that "without the Communist Party of China, there would be no New China and no national rejuvenation," alongside a commitment that "we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us."<sup>5</sup> In effect, Xi has firmly entrusted the responsibility for the future prosperity of the Chinese nation to the CCP. By making the CCP's *raison d'être* the continuous rise of China and its redemption from the "century of humiliation," which provides some insight into CCP's priorities and the incentives it would possess in a conflict.

The CCP's framing of its mission and the propaganda disseminated within China have nurtured an ultra-nationalistic (some may argue jingoistic) populace who demand nothing short of reclaiming China's legendary Middle Kingdom status from antiquity. The fervent nationalism exhibited by Chinese citizens is a double-edged blade that possesses "the potential to damage the political legitimacy of the CCP" and trigger internal unrest.<sup>6</sup> A clear instance of this jingoism and acute sensitivity to perceived offenses by foreign powers emerged in the eruption of fury by Chinese netizens and the large-scale riots that unfolded in 2012 when Japan opted to acquire the Senkaku (Diaoyu in China) Islands from their private owner.<sup>7</sup> Any sign of weakness or failure, especially in the face of Western powers like the United States or Japan, evokes memories of China's "sick man of Asia" epithet, casting doubts on whether the CCP merits the mandate to govern. Xi's vow that foreign bullies "will have their heads bashed bloody against a Great Wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people" further compels CCP leaders to heighten rhetoric and actions when they perceive China to be slighted or unjustly treated.<sup>8</sup>

This inclination toward escalatory conduct is exemplified by the emergence of "wolf-warrior" diplomacy and the prioritization of projecting strength through

<sup>5</sup> "Full text of Xi Jinping's speech on the CCP's 100th anniversary," *Nikkei Asia*, 1 July 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Florian Schneider, *China's Digital Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://academic.oup.com/book/2877/chapter-abstract/143481609?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Taylor, "Anti-Japan Protests in China," *The Atlantic*, 17 September 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Xi warns against Western 'bullies', to argue for one-party rule," *The Economist*, 3 July 2021, <https://www.economist.com/>; and David Crawshaw and Alicia Chen, "'Heads bashed bloody': China's Xi marks Communist Party centenary with strong words for adversaries." *The Washington Post*, 1 July 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

bombast and aggression to resonate with China's domestic audience, rather than cultivating relationships with countries seen as adversaries.<sup>9</sup> By establishing their *raison d'être* as the redemption of China's bygone glory, the CCP has erected formidable barriers against yielding or capitulating to foreign demands due to the domestic ramifications such actions would entail. The parallels such weakness would draw to the late Qing dynasty's shortcomings undermine the entirety of the CCP's narrative and invite challenges. While this elevates the probability of minor disputes or incidents escalating into conflict, it also renders the CCP's grasp on power precarious and its legitimacy performance-dependent, particularly amid a war.

Xi's pledges and the CCP's propagated narratives have substantially heightened domestic expectations regarding China's capacity to safeguard its claims and counter perceived hostilities. Recent fatalities of Chinese citizens in nations like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and Zambia have already cast doubt on China's ability to safeguard its citizens and interests abroad.<sup>10</sup> This places the CCP in a precarious position. However, the suppression of their netizens' voices and the inherent proclivity for groupthink in authoritarian regimes render it challenging to gauge the extent of these failures' impact on perceptions of the CCP. The CCP's adeptness in domestic propaganda, focusing on overcoming historical injustices, becomes evident in the public's adulation of wolf-warrior diplomats and the vehement outrage expressed by netizens on social media over perceived affronts. However, this could also breed discontent if the CCP fails to meet expectations and translate rhetoric into action.<sup>11</sup>

In the event of a war, a failure to achieve victories on the battlefield could result in both the populace and military leadership souring on CCP governance. If China suffered multiple defeats or substantial mainland damage, Chinese citizens might lean toward replacing CCP leaders with a supposedly "more capable" gov-

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Kaufman, "China's Wolf Warrior Ambassador Is a Hit in Beijing, Not Paris," *Foreign Policy*, 7 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Congo Mine Attack Kills Three Chinese Nationals: Xinhua," *Reuters*, 6 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/>; Jack Lau, "Xi Jinping calls for 'severe punishment' after Chinese killed in mine attack in Central African Republic," *South China Morning Post*, 20 March 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/>; Jenni Marsh and Chiwoyu Sinyangwe, "Three Chinese nationals were murdered and burned in Zambia, in a week when racial tensions were running high," *CNN*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/>; and Ghiselli, Andrea, "Continuity and change in China's Strategy to protect overseas interests," *War on the Rocks*, 4 August 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

<sup>11</sup> Kaufman, "China's Wolf Warrior Ambassador"; and Mark Metcalf, "The National Humiliation Narrative: Dealing with the Present by Fixating on the Past," *Association for Asian Studies*, Fall 2020, <https://www.asianstudies.org/>.

ernment. This shift could only occur if the People's Liberation Army (PLA) also attributed its losses to civilian oversight, or if a scapegoat was required to shoulder the blame for its failures.

Without the PLA's choice to oust CCP leadership, the risk of escalation beyond conventional warfare looms as CCP leaders seek to regain favor through a ruthless display of strength. Regrettably, this framework of CCP replacement could materialize only if the United States and its allies managed to repel Chinese forces across numerous fronts, likely at the cost of numerous Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Guardians, and Marines. While this scenario might not align with long-term US objectives, it could offer an interlude in the conflict during which terms could be negotiated. If such a situation unfolded and the United States demonstrated restraint by creating exit opportunities, the new Chinese government could salvage its image by attributing concessions to the failings of past "feeble leaders." This could potentially be the optimal, or even sole viable, resolution for the United States following a series of hard-fought Pacific victories.

The CCP's revanchist agenda has been fueled by perceived grievances, the conquest of which now defines not only the Party but also the Chinese public in many aspects. Dismantling the CCP's foundational arguments for governance might present an off-ramp in any prospective conflict, as it could incentivize the Chinese population and military to deflect blame for failure onto ineffective leadership, thereby granting a new regime the means to deescalate.

Ideally, the United States and China would never engage in war. However, should conflict become inevitable, we must contemplate the end state that victory would entail, as well as the strategies to attain it. 🌐

#### **Maj David Geaney, USAF**

Major Geaney has had multiple assignments and deployments to the Middle East and Pacific. He has been a featured guest on Air University Press' *Indo-Pacific Visions* vodcast and his articles on China have been published in *Foreign Policy*, *Defense News*, *Task & Purpose*, and the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the view of the Department of Defense or United States Air Force.

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