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Ambitions of Chinese Hegemony: An Analysis of the Hundred Year Marathon

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Introduction

Few national security threats challenge the magnitude posed by the People's Republic of China toward the United States. This is due to various factors, including Chinese persistence in implementing a grand strategy while facing minimal U.S. resistance due to various foreign policy missteps over the last half-century. China's overarching approach to geopolitics has been a subject of much discussion and has often been referred to by some experts as the 'Hundred-Year Marathon.'¹ The term derives its name from China's objective of usurping America's position as hegemon by 2049, a significant year that falls on the one-hundredth anniversary of the CCP attaining power in China under Mao Zedong. One such expert is Michael Pillsbury, an accomplished China expert with decades of experience regarding China policy. His 2015 book, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, delves deep into the intentions, history, and nature of China's grand strategy, as well as the role that the U.S. has played in facilitating the PRC's deceptive aims. The issue's relevance for U.S. policymakers is evident throughout the book, the contents of which will be discussed and evaluated extensively in what follows.

Summary

Pillsbury begins by establishing a series of false assumptions held by the U.S. about China and a fundamental lack of understanding of how Chinese culture and, more specifically, Chinese strategic thought, differ from those of Western origin. For example, American society rests on a set of standards from which it derives its sense of time. As an example, "American businesses live by quarterly reports, U.S. politicians operate on short election cycles, and successful stock market strategies may be based on trading conducted in a single day."² Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger noted that "China's sense of time beats to a different rhythm from America's."³ According to Pillsbury, a lack of understanding of how China views fundamental systems such as time contributes to a significant misunderstanding, the impacts of which are detrimental and expansive.

Moreover, misjudgments in how time is perceived are only one of the numerous misconceptions the U.S. has historically held about China. Other, perhaps more critical misconceptions would include understanding China's level of fragility, its democratic trajectory, its willingness to cooperate, and the influence of hardline CCP members. Pillsbury asserts that China is not fragile, is not on a democratic trajectory, is less willing to cooperate than initially thought, and is heavily influenced by the hardline hawks.

The American understanding of China, however, is not only based upon misconceptions or ignorance, but is also heavily informed by how the CCP presents itself to America. Pillsbury strongly suggests that deceptive actions and words have been used for decades to hide any evidence of a grand strategy, especially one which aims to usurp U.S. hegemony. China's proper perspective, according to Pillsbury, causes them to see a multipolar world as merely a strategic waypoint en route to a new global hierarchy in which China is alone at the top."⁴ However,

¹ Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2016), 35.

² Ibid, 40.

³ Ibid, 31.

⁴ Ibid, 39.

China's strategy does not manifest itself physically, rather it ingrains itself in the minds of leaders and policymakers in Beijing. China's strategy is internally so well known that to have it written would be a liability. In this way, China's execution of its grand strategy "operates through stealth."⁵ Stealth serves as China's chief advantage in their ambitious aspirations. There exists no consensus on the intentions of a particular nation-state, effective policies cannot easily be crafted or implemented in response. According to Pillsbury, the key theme that the People's Republic is eager to convey to the United States is that China is definitively not a threat, and "America should help China peacefully emerge as a global power."⁶ As a message largely successfully disseminated, the execution of China's marathon relies "on goodwill from other countries, especially the United States."⁷

China's inclination towards deception is apparent, as evidenced by Michael Pillsbury; however, its existence is not an anomaly. China has long derived lessons from various periods in its history. The most significant is the Warring States period, an era of Chinese history often overlooked and consistently dismissed for its irrelevance by the CCP. Instead, China has emphasized its culture's pacifist and Confucian aspects while omitting any reference to Warring States-era tactics. This is done not to alert the U.S. of any hidden motives and induce complacency.⁸

The era of the Warring States was 254 years, ending in the 3rd century B.C. when China was divided into multiple states, each of whom was in a constant battle for regional supremacy.⁹ As a result of the brutal nature of the Warring States period, valuable strategy and rich literature were produced, which China's leaders today heavily draw upon for guidance in their geopolitical struggles. One of the most influential works that drew on lessons from this period was the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, written by Wang Jingze whose influential work draws parallels to Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Lessons from this writing reveal the value Chinese culture has been placed on deception and ambiguity. Rather than American strategies that favor direct and decisive action, all the stratagems are designed to "defeat a more powerful opponent by using the opponent's strength against him, without knowing he is even in a contest."¹⁰ Doing this requires a long-term strategy. One of the most vital lessons that China's leaders learned from the Warring States period is that "only long-term plans spanning hundreds of years [lead] to victory."¹¹ The Warring States' texts and lessons inspired nine critical principles upon which China's current marathon strategy rests. These are: "induce complacency to avoid alerting your opponent; manipulate your opponent's advisers; be patient—for decades, or longer—to achieve victory; steal your opponent's ideas and technology for strategic purposes; military might is not the critical factor for winning a long-term competition; recognize that the hegemon will take extreme, even reckless action to retain its dominant position; Never lose sight [of the guiding force] of shi; Establish and employ metrics for measuring your status relative to other potential challengers; always be vigilant to avoid being encircled or deceived by others."¹² These principles reveal the marathon strategy themes of manipulation, patience, persistence, and deceit. Mastery of such

⁵ Pillsbury, *The Hundred Year Marathon*, 16.

⁶ Ibid, 122.

⁷ Ibid, 115.

⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁹ Mark Cartwright, "Warring States Period," in *World History Encyclopedia* (Surrey: World History Foundation, 2009-), article published July 12, 2017, https://www.worldhistory.org/Warring_States_Period/.

¹⁰ Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, 4.

¹¹ Ibid, 40.

¹² Ibid, 35.

tenets enables China to show the U.S. only what it wants the U.S. to observe because the “China that Beijing leaders want [the U.S.] to see is not the real China.”¹³ This strategy relies on the reality that alerting the U.S. of China’s methods and intentions would significantly weaken the effectiveness of their Warring States-inspired strategy. If China’s strategy is not immediately visible, it must then be sought out, which can happen when history, worldview, and culture converge.

For decades, China’s strategy has relied on varying degrees of U.S. partnership to further advance its strategy. Modern Sino-American diplomatic relations reopened under the leadership of President Nixon in 1969. The Nixon administration became quite cooperative with the PRC because the U.S. provided various types of military assistance. This aimed at forging a harmonious relationship with China, which, unfortunately, was based on the false assumption that an enduring partnership would peacefully guide the country toward the path to democratization. The U.S. would not come to understand this mistake for decades. As the 1970s began, U.S. assistance towards China only increased. China-U.S. relations underwent their most significant increase in the late 1970s as Deng Xiaoping attained power in China following the death of Mao Zedong. The Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations focused on building up China in a military and economic sense. According to Pillsbury, the result was that “American foreign policy became a series of initiatives to strengthen China against its adversaries.”¹⁴ The eventful decade ended with the most-favored-nation status being granted to China, thus allowing for the expediting of China’s economic growth and modernization. Reagan’s China policy closely followed those of his three predecessors. Under Reagan’s administration, covert military cooperation significantly expanded, effectively making China a full strategic partner in secret. Therefore, to a large extent, the U.S. facilitated the rapid rise of China through various policies. At the same time, China’s intentions went unnoticed by the U.S. due to significant intelligence failures.

The hope for a liberalized China heavily dwindled following the Tiananmen Square incident, which saw the implementation of martial law, thereby silencing a series of mass protests calling for expanded personal rights. The incident was also a clear example that CCP hardliners and hawks wielded more power in the CCP than previously thought. Despite the clear sign that the CCP did not intend to liberalize as many so-called “China experts” in government and academia viewed it as a mere setback to a still-liberalizing China. Pillsbury asserts that the Tiananmen Square incident was the catalyst for “the collapse of liberalizing trends of Chinese governance, as Deng aligned with” the hyper-nationalist hawks in the CCP.¹⁵ Such conservatives are often referred to as hawks due to their aggressive foreign policy and hyper-nationalist worldview. Hawks often were scholarly military generals within the CCP who wielded significant influence within the party hierarchy. Pillsbury asserts that “ignoring the rise of China’s Hawks may be the greatest intelligence failure in our history.”¹⁶ China’s hawks remain highly influential in the highest levels of the Chinese government in the 21st century.

Many of the trends and practices that characterized U.S. presidential administrations from the 1970s to the 1990s toward China have continued throughout much of the 2010s. Pillsbury asserts that if the U.S. does not drastically depart from policies that facilitate China’s economic and military growth, China’s vision to attain global dominance will likely come to fruition.

¹³ Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, 215.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 236.

Pillsbury discusses a series of policy suggestions that he believes would significantly improve America's position in its competition with China. The first step to combat China's attempt to replace the U.S. for global dominance is to acknowledge the magnitude of China's threat to U.S. national security. Furthermore, policymakers need to recognize China's view that the U.S. is an "enemy in a global struggle they plan on winning."¹⁷ This is evidenced by actions taken by Chinese intelligence, which have consisted of developing extensive measurement systems for determining how they competitively compare to America based on a wide variety of metrics. Such measurements also inform the CCP on how long it will take before China overtakes the United States. Pillsbury asserts that the U.S. should also adopt similar measures of competitiveness with China. Additionally, there is a significant lack of accounting for all "activities funded by the U.S. government to aid China."¹⁸ To prevent further aiding China, Pillsbury advises that Congress require an annual report of all aid provided to the People's Republic. Although such measures would correct the ineffectiveness of the past, dramatically increased efforts on the fronts of a competitive strategy are required to deter China from its goal ultimately. Such an undertaking would require significant proactivity by U.S. military leaders and policymakers in Washington. Pillsbury believes that such change not only requires the commitment of the current president but also that of future administrations. This belief comes from his knowledge that only a long-term effort can thwart China.

Critique and Analysis

The Hundred-Year Marathon has shown itself to be a substantial work of scholarship through the topics and dynamics formerly discussed. Oriana Mastro of Stanford University has largely substantiated Pillsbury's chief claims about China in her 2021 research publication *Chinese Grand Strategy*. Her findings largely echo that of Pillsbury, adopting the view that the nature of the Sino-American relationship is characterized by great power competition. Mastro also shares an aligning position with Pillsbury on the nature of China's marathon strategy, which is comprised of a "combination of leadership [viewpoints] and Chinese foreign policy behavior to piece together an overarching vision about China's desired role in the world."¹⁹ Mastro's work expands upon Pillsbury's ancient and 20th-century account of Sino-American relations by addressing current Chinese president Xi Jinping's approach to China's long-term strategy. Mastro found that in terms of China's overall grand strategy, Xi has designated a powerful military, "one prepared to fight and win local wars," which is vital for Chinese success in the hundred-year marathon.²⁰ Mastro also observed that foreign policy under Xi had expanded China's interests over a larger geographic area. This is readily visible through The Belt and Road Initiative which provides a wide array of infrastructure projects to developing countries around the world under the guise of charitable motivations. However, the program has inevitably produced a plethora of Chinese soft power, yet in many instances also results in economic turmoil for nations who accept these infrastructure projects by borrowing well beyond their means. The BRI is a clear manifestation of the CCP's ambitious global interests. Although its

¹⁷ Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, 111.

¹⁸ Ibid, 216.

¹⁹ Oriana S. Mastro, "Chinese Grand Strategy," in *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, 7th ed, ed. John Baylis, James J. Wirtz, and Jeannie L. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 322.

²⁰ Ibid, 322.

long-term repercussions have yet to unfold, international investment seems to be a key strategy in Xi's interpretation of China's grand strategy, a sentiment also shared by Pillsbury.

Despite Pillsbury's credible work, he neglects to provide a complete context by not addressing the likelihood of Chinese success in implementing its grand strategy. However, observing the RAND Corporation's 2020 report, *China's Grand Strategy* can illuminate the broader context. While RAND's study agrees with both Pillsbury and Mastro that China's long-term "objectives bring China into competition, crisis, and even potential conflict with the United States and its allies," their purpose is to precisely determine the level of probability and most likely scenarios for China.²¹ RAND proposed that by 2050 four distinct scenarios would characterize China's level of success as it relates to its grand strategy: a triumphant China, ascendant China, stagnant China, and imploding China. Of these four scenarios, RAND has concluded that the most likely outcome is either an ascendant China or a stagnant China due to the high likelihood that the PRC will experience a mixture of successes and failures in the next thirty years. A stagnant China has failed to achieve its long-term goals, while an ascending China has primarily been "successful in achieving many, but not all, of the goals of its grand strategy."²² In either of the likely cases, a remarkably successful China that has completely replaced the U.S. for global hegemony is least likely. This is because it supposes "little margin for error and the absence of any major crisis, [such as impending demographic problems or potential social unrest] between now and 2050."²³ RAND's conclusions about the proposition of a highly successful China slightly contrast with what Pillsbury alludes to throughout *The Hundred-Year Marathon*. Based on his remarks, Pillsbury leads one to believe that a triumphant China is highly probable if the U.S. does not significantly alter its foreign policy toward China. RAND's studies have concluded that a highly successful China is not likely. However, Pillsbury's threat assertions are merited because China's high probability of ascending or stagnating still requires great urgency to combat China, as it remains the most significant national security threat to U.S. interests.

Conclusion

The Hundred-Year Marathon is a considerable work of scholarship that significantly expands one's understanding of China's overarching strategy. Pillsbury effectively explains how and why The People's Republic of China has become America's greatest threat in the realm of national security. China's vastly different culture and values have contributed to great misunderstandings among U.S. policymakers for decades. Such missteps resulted in the U.S. facilitation of China's economic and military rise. Pillsbury's central claims are corroborated by experts such as Oriana Mastro. The greater context of probability that Pillsbury does not address can be fulfilled by understanding and observing the work of the RAND Corporation, which dramatically increases awareness of the likelihood of success regarding China achieving its long-term aspirations. Although foreign policy mistakes have characterized U.S.-China relations in the last half-century, the next fifty years will be defined by how the United States attempts to correct its course in preventing the achievement of global hegemony by the Chinese Communist Party.

²¹ Andrew Scobell et al., *China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition*, RR-2798-A (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), 10, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2798>.

²² Ibid, 10.

²³ Ibid, 10.

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