

[Leiter on Doshi, 'The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, November 30, 2022

Rush Doshi. *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. Bridging the Gap Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 432 pp. \$18.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-19-752787-0; \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-752791-7.

Reviewed by Samuel Leiter (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) **Published on** H-War (November, 2022) **Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57102>

How the United States Is Losing the Long Game

The Long Game makes an unyielding argument that China has been preparing to overtake the United States and become the world's preeminent superpower for decades while US policymakers have been pursuing economic engagement that has enabled China's rise. Today, the perceived national security risk posed by China has led successive US administrations to condemn engagement as foolish. The emerging consensus in Washington instead seeks to build a containment chamber around the rising Asian power. *The Long Game* helps to inform the new consensus, and while it identifies elements of China's grand strategy, it overstates the rigidity of Chinese grand strategy and ultimately fails to fully grapple with the evidence that America's decline is self-inflicted.

Rush Doshi, now the director for China on the National Security Council, argues that China methodically chipped away at US power for thirty years through a sequential strategy of "blunting" instruments of US power in Asia, then "building" a regional order it commands, and now taking blunting and building strategies globally. Though China is the focus of the book, Doshi argues that his framework applies to all rising powers. A weak rising power will choose between blunting a threatening hegemon or accommodating a less threatening one. Once the rising power has narrowed the gap in national capabilities, it will choose between building its own order if it perceives the hegemon to be threatening or dominating other states in the system if it believes the hegemon is nonthreatening and unlikely to intervene.

China is argued to be an easy case for a country with a long-term grand strategy because the centralized structure of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) facilitates coordination and its nationalist orientation ensures that the CCP seeks to enhance national power. To demonstrate the existence of such a long-term strategy, Doshi uses fastidiously collected classified and open source CCP documents. As the analysis turns toward more recent decisions, it is necessarily more reliant on the open source, but one of *The Long Game's* valuable contributions is its record of the recent history of Chinese foreign policy and strategic thinking.

The book proceeds chronologically through the last thirty years of Chinese foreign policy and documents the military, economic, and political aspects of China's grand strategy in each phase of its rise. The first phase, "blunting," begins with the "traumatic trifecta" of the Soviet Union's collapse,

the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the performance of the US military in the First Gulf War. These events led Beijing to focus its efforts on reducing its vulnerability to US coercion. This strategy of blunting seeks to weaken the hegemon's "forms of control," including military coercion, economic incentives, and political legitimacy (p. 3). It is necessarily the first stage of a rising power's strategy to displace a hegemon because the rising power cannot challenge the hegemon so long as it is vulnerable to the hegemon's forms of control.

In the blunting phase, the rising power seeks to reduce the perception that it is a threat to the hegemon and so avoids any actions that may be perceived aggressively. But China's foreign policy shows more deviation from this strategy than is acknowledged in *The Long Game*. Militarily, China's focus on sea mines, submarines, and anti-ship missiles instead of carriers does show a focus on low-threat military blunting. However, the Chinese missile tests that precipitated the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits crisis demonstrate China's willingness to raise its threat profile over core interests. Politically, China blocked the US from institutionalizing influence in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) but created the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in part as a "platform for order-building in Central Asia" not just blunting (p. 130). Economically, it ensured consistent access to US markets and technology by securing permanent normal trade relations in 1999. While blunting offers a good general description of China's behavior in the first period, the Taiwan Straits crisis and the creation of the SCO reveal a more turbulent, less sequential strategy than the one *The Long Game* advances.

The 2008 financial crisis prompted China to the "building" phase. In the wake of apparent American weakness, China began constructing regional institutions and capabilities that would grant it the forms of control the United States has long enjoyed through the building of political legitimacy, consensual inducements, and coercive power. It did this militarily by advancing its carrier program, expanding its surface fleet, multiplying the size of its amphibious force, and establishing a military base in Djibouti. Politically and economically, it created alternatives to American institutions, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the China International Payments System (CIPS) financial messaging system, and the Belt and Road Initiative. However, it is unclear how complete of a shift occurred. For example, Doshi argues that the CIPS is part of building because it may one day be used by China as a form of control. But by providing an alternative to the Society for Worldwide Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) financial messaging system, CIPS also blunts the "threat of Western financial sanctions" and helps China to "bypass American structural power" (p. 254). This overlap of blunting and building provides a more complicated picture of China's grand strategy than the march to world domination that Doshi's narrative suggests.

Finally, the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, and the poor response to the COVID-19 pandemic initiated China's shift to a strategy of "expansion." There is less evidentiary support that China has adopted this strategy, but this may be because of its recency. Militarily, it is poised to acquire basing rights at strategic locations throughout the Indo-Pacific. Politically, China uses the leadership of UN agencies for influence in global governance and has established new China-led regional diplomatic forums. Economically, it invests in advanced technologies and seeks to control key nodes in global supply chains. However, in all areas, but especially militarily, these developments appear to be in the early stages. Chinese military analysts recognize that China cannot yet challenge the US military in Asia, let alone globally.[1] China still lacks the political influence of US alliances. Since China remains highly dependent on energy imports, it would be challenging for China to engage in any

supply chain manipulation that would not leave it vulnerable to retaliation.

Despite the unique features of China's system, assessments that characterize it as having "pursued a grand strategy to displace American order first at the regional and now global level" ought to be cautious about the degree of cohesion and centrality they ascribe to such a plan (p. 10). In a 1968 *World Politics* article, the late Robert Jervis hypothesized that "actors tend to see the behavior of others as more centralized, disciplined, and coordinated than it is." [2] *The Long Game* may face this problem as its own evidence can be interpreted to endorse the view that China's plans are reactive and dynamic. In addition to the variations in strategy noted above, throughout the book there are debates among Chinese leaders and foreign policy strategists providing a record of the dissension, not consensus, within the government.

To the extent there is an overarching grand strategy, it is cognizant of the status of the United States. Doshi's own argument is that each strategy was triggered not by China's achievements but by events in the United States. The US push for global hegemony in the early 1990s, then its apparent weakness in the 2008 financial crisis, and finally its further decline due to recent poor leadership triggered each new grand strategy. Yet Doshi argues that China aims to displace the United States "by 2049," a fixed date (p. 272). China assuredly aims to grow more powerful, but China's foreign policy record shows it to be patient and responsive to the relative balance of power with the United States, not a train predetermined to arrive at global domination by 2049. It is more likely that a future shock demonstrating American decline will stimulate the next shift in Beijing's strategic thinking.

The issue of American decline points to a peculiar dissonance that pervades the book and culminates in the penultimate chapter's recommendations for US policy. In a tale of China's rise at the expense of the United States, the self-inflicted wounds that have hastened US decline and been seized as opportunities by China go largely uninterrogated. Instead, the book proposes policies for countering China's order-building efforts and building on the foundations of the United States' ability to influence the international system. But this American grand strategy would not address the sources of domestic dysfunction that have emboldened China. Even though Doshi argues that the 2008 financial crash triggered China's decision to transition from blunting to building, he does not advance any ideas to prevent future speculation-fueled financial disaster. While there are passing references to inequality and misinformation, there is no solution put forward to prevent another demagogue like Trump from seizing power or to avoid a repeat of the United States' disastrous COVID-19 response. One could contend that domestic political solutions would be out of place in a book about foreign policy, but the story of *The Long Game* is not primarily one of China undermining US power; it is one of China filling the vacuum being left by US decline. To address that vacuum, the US foreign policy establishment ought to reckon with the long-term national security risks posed by problems at home.

The policy recommendations in the book instead emphasize blunting Chinese order as the most cost-effective way to win the competition for global order. While some of the policies, such as countering technology theft, are commendable, in a world where both powers can effectively blunt the other's attempts at order building, the end result may be a less desirable, more anarchic world. To illustrate this point, consider that Doshi laments China's dispatch of an "anti-piracy naval task force to the Gulf of Aden" as an example of its maritime power projection (p. 204). Yet reducing piracy is a shared interest. The US and China even conducted joint anti-piracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden in the past.

Doshi's approach closes the door on any possibility of benefits to China's order-building efforts, including reducing the burden on the US military and taxpayers in providing global public goods.

The Long Game is a consequential book. It cements the turn in US policy from engagement with China to strategic competition. Doshi emphasizes nonmilitary competition more than some American strategists but is part of the new conventional wisdom in Washington that sees no end in sight for US-China competition and little room for cooperation on global issues. That makes it all the more important that scholars and practitioners learn from and engage critically with Doshi's insights in *The Long Game* so that the way forward can be constructed peacefully, or so a way out might be found.

Notes

[1]. Eric Heginbotham, *China Maritime Report No. 14: Chinese Views of the Military Balance in the Western Pacific* (Newport, RI: Chinese Maritime Studies Institute, June 2021).

[2]. Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics* 20, no. 3 (1968): 475, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009777>.

Samuel Leiter is a political science PhD student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology studying international relations and security studies.

Citation: Samuel Leiter. Review of Doshi, Rush, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2022. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57102>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).