Opinion

Chinese police officers in front of the Tiananmen Gate. Credit: Betsy Joles/Getty

Is China preparing for war?

There's a reason Beijing is aggressively pursuing a policy of total national self-sufficiency

BY Maajid Nawaz

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China is on a war footing. While the Covid-19 outbreak has exposed some grave political miscalculations behind decades of international strategic relations with Beijing, the depths of our problem are only just beginning to dawn on us.

Fuelled by our desire for ever cheaper goods, the world has collectively sleepwalked into a supply-side dependency on the People's Republic.

The gamble had been pitched as a trade-off. China was expected to evolve democratic norms and embrace relations with the international community, while we got richer from globalisation. But we have been played.

Whether it's clothing and factory-fashion, personal protective equipment or hardware parts, too many of our manufactured goods today rely on a 'Made in China' supply-chain. At the same time as it was busy taking control over our manufacturing, China was busy cloning western software, via her lackadaisical respect for international copyright rules.

And while the world relies on China for hardware, China avoids software dependency on outsiders by creating substitutes: TikTok to replace snapchat, Weibo instead of Twitter, WeChat & RenRen for Facebook. Indeed, there is an alternative Chinese version for almost any platform.

Further reading
We've cosied up to China for too long
By Nick Timothy

With manufactured goods and hardware 'Made in China', and software increasingly 'Cloned in China', what of natural resources? Through the 'Belt & Road' initiative — a '21st century Silk Road' connecting China to Europe over a network of land and sea trade routes, the People's Republic has embarked on huge infrastructure projects in 60 countries, including loans and construction projects that secure key ports and mines as collateral to China for payment.

Look to Pakistan, African or southeast Asian nations to see China's rapid expansion in ownership of mines and ports. Look to the UK and China's attempts to secure our telecoms industry via the Huawei deal, her recent purchase of British Steel, and her quest to secure the nuclear power industry. Beijing even secured a deal to develop British nuclear station Hinckley point C in Somerset, thus paving the way globally for China to enter the global market to dominate nuclear power.

Over decades, we have naively outsourced or lost manufacturing, software, natural resources and critical infrastructure to China. The economic benefits of globalisation are well trodden, yet as Covid-19

has shown, it has left our society vulnerable during a major crisis, unable to manufacture the most basic of necessities such as PPE. Meanwhile, China has achieved self-sufficiency.

While pursuing economic dominance abroad, China's communist one-party state has centralised political power at home, gained unprecedented command over her own population via wide ranging and well-documented spy-tech, and placed anything between 1 to 2 million Uigur Muslims in gulags.

Considering what we know of colonial history, there is little room for doubt that China is at a pre-colonial stage. States at this stage attempt to centralise domestic power under a strong leader, dominate global supply chains and monopolise industry, all the while expanding abroad to secure natural resources. China is aggressively pursuing total national self-sufficiency, and the question arises as to why.

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My conclusion is that China is preparing for war: total, not limited war. The kind that seeks to rebalance the world order, tipping it in her favour by replacing the US as the dominant global power. Historically, major conflicts have arisen when the leading global power is challenged by a rival, a problem known as the Thucydides trap — and China is expected (by some metrics) to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy this decade.

Also, and crucially unlike us, China is preparing for the next type of war. The People's Republic knows that she cannot beat the US militarily — and she knows that type of ground war is almost over.

Instead, by securing global supply chains, maintaining IT independence, and having a cast-iron grip over her own population, China can focus on building her cyber and biological war capabilities while remaining relatively safeguarded against the same herself. Considering all of this, from steel to nuclear to telecoms, our policy towards China until 2020 can best be described as one of miserably failed economic appeasement. From China's perspective, she has successfully gifted us a Trojan Horse.

So what is the solution? Do we take that bait and prepare for war too? No. We must first understand what happened, and grasp how it came that we so willingly handed China the very tools by which to defeat us.

For too long, China has had a strategy for dealing with us, while we have had no strategy for dealing with China. We must urgently pivot our strategic relationship, one that entails assuming that China is in a Cold War with us already, and ends our current naivety.

We must minimise our total global supply-chain dependency on China, or any one nation for that matter. Trade with China, yes, but we must ringfence critical infrastructure: nuclear, telecoms and natural resources such as steel.

As recent politicisation of the WHO highlights, the post-war international community — supposedly governed by the UN — is no longer serving its purpose, and perhaps more than ever the UN faces a crisis in moral authority. Instead, NATO-style, we must reorder our strategic and military alliances around the Pacific and build an international consensus against the broader expansionist desire of the Chinese Communist Party.

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By Jonathan Tepper

Just like with nuclear non-proliferation, there must be newly-developed global consequences for negligence in cyber and bio hazard safety. Post-Covid, we would be wise to build a new global consensus on which punitive measures are suited to states that violate our cyber or biological safety.

Whatever happens in China does not stay in China. Whereas our Orientalist based 'othering' of China created this blind spot, only our hubris and naivety would allow for us to continue thus blind. We have been outmaneuvered, but this pandemic has magnified our failures and brought them to the fore. We would only be deserving of loss if we did not learn the lessons now.

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And well before 1942 and before their Civil War.

George Cumming-Thorburn   April 21, 2020
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Christine Schoenfeld   April 21, 2020
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