

China vs. America

by Conrad Black



There can be little doubt the United States is now in a contest with China over which will be the most important country in the world. In important respects, we are replicating the German challenge to the United Kingdom prior to World War I and the renewed German challenge of the 1930s, or the Soviet challenge for 45 years after World War II. As China grows stronger and bolder, and especially as the United States fumbles its way through periods of great distraction and internal political strife, the Chinese-like Hitler-become more brazen and provoking.

Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland in 1936 when the French easily could have forced him back, but did not. He swallowed Austria whole in early 1938 and the French and British regarded it as nothing more than the expression of Austria's national wishes. They recognized that they could not go to war to prevent German Czechs (Sudetenlanders) from becoming Germans, but their action at the Munich Conference destroyed

the state of Czechoslovakia that their leaders, along with President Woodrow Wilson, had created not 20 years before. Only when Hitler seized what is now the Czech Republic as well, did the British begin to respond seriously. Even then, their prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, entered World War II only reluctantly after the invasion of Poland.

Of course, Chinese leader Xi Jinping is not remotely as psychotically belligerent as Hitler, who was a deranged genocidal romantic who actively sought war as long as it was in advantageous circumstances. Hitler had professed to have enjoyed his four years of trench warfare in World War I, in the course of which he was wounded, gassed, and twice decorated for bravery. He felt that he must unleash aggressive war on Europe according to a strict timetable because his obsessive hypochondria led him to believe that he would die prematurely. (He did, but only because he had provoked irresistible forces to destroy him.)

Nor could Xi be even slightly compared to Kaiser Wilhelm II, who had a childish ego and impetuosity and gave the decrepit Habsburg empire in Vienna the infamous "blank check" to plunge all of Europe into war. The comparison with Stalin must also be used with great caution; barbarous though he was, and intent though he and his successors were in stirring up Communist revolutions in different countries from Greece to the Congo to Cuba to Indonesia, neither Stalin nor any of his successors ever dared a military confrontation with United States.

There is no reason to believe Xi would either, but the whole world has seen China steadily raising the ante and becoming more brazen and provoking in its behavior. For decades it has exploited the belief of the well-meaning leaders of the West that good treatment would be reciprocated. But China has ignored its trade and monetary commitments and made a mockery of Western concepts of human rights by its oppression of the Uighurs and of all forms of religious practice. And it has

torn up the Hong Kong treaty with the United Kingdom, which remains one of the world's most important and respected countries. To judge from the Chinese regime's public announcements, it only wishes to cuff its would-be rivals around a little and make the point that *it* is actually the world's leading power to whom all other nations owe great deference.

While this is undoubtedly less onerous than what Hitler or Stalin or possibly even the Kaiser had in mind for us, no one should imagine that the overlordship and general suzerainty of Communist China is anything the West would wear lightly.

The West has been guided by Greco-Roman and then Judeo-Christian values since about 600 B.C.. No one should underestimate how demeaning and demoralizing it would be if those values were effectively subordinated to an ethos dictated by the Chinese Communist Party. The humiliation implicit in such an epochal upheaval of the world would shatter the morale of our society and we might enter a period of eclipse as lengthy and profound and miserable as that from which China has just emerged.

The Kaiser and Hitler managed to convince themselves that the leaders of the rival powers were weaklings, and Xi seems to have come—at least in the last few months—to a similar conclusion. On the facts it is hard to fault them for that conclusion, but what the German emperor and Führer did not take into account was that H. H. Asquith and Paul Painlevé and Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier would shortly be replaced by Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill, and Charles de Gaulle, and life would become much more complicated. Communications and diplomacy are now much more informative than they were then and the ubiquity of nuclear weapons imposes a sobriety upon all world leaders unlike anything that obtained in the pre-nuclear era.

All three regimes, Wilhelmine Germany, the Third Reich, and

Stalin's Soviet Union, foundered on the identical and immense strategic error of underestimating the United States. With World War I in stalemate on the western front between Germany and the French and British Empire armies, the Kaiser made the catastrophic mistake of agreeing to attack American merchant shipping on the high seas to try to strangle Britain and France. The United States had no choice but to go to war against Germany, which President Wilson portrayed as a "[war to end all wars](#)" and a way to "make the world safe for democracy." Though he was the principal founder of the League of Nations, he failed to gain United States adherence to it, and though he was the first person to inspire the masses of the world with a vision of enduring peace, he produced the Treaty of Versailles, which was admirably described by the supreme commander of the Allied armies, France's Marshal Foch, as "not a peace. It is an armistice for 20 years."

Hitler had learned the lesson of not attacking American shipping, even after President Franklin D. Roosevelt extended American territorial waters from three to 1,800 miles and ordered the U.S. Navy to attack, on detection, any German ship (as, under Lend-Lease, he sold the British and Canadians anything they wanted on generous terms). Hitler did not take the bait, but he didn't coordinate with the Japanese either. And when Roosevelt shut off oil supplies to Japan—which imported 85 percent of its oil, mainly from the United States—Hitler did not devise any plan for supplying them from the Middle East and coordinating his planned attack on Russia with the Japanese attack from the Far East. And when Japan, rather than accept the humiliation of suspending its barbarous invasion of China and Indochina, attacked Pearl Harbor, Hitler declared war on the United States. In doing this on the heels of his invasion of the Soviet Union he found himself at war with the United States, the USSR, and the British Commonwealth and Empire, which between them possessed, as Churchill said at the time, "twice, or thrice the power of Germany." And when Stalin declined Roosevelt's offer of an immense economic

recovery program and recognition as a coequal superpower in the world, and ignored his Tehran and Yalta commitments to free elections and evacuation of Eastern Europe, he entered into a Cold War that the USSR ultimately could not win.

Xi Jinping does not seem to possess any of the childishly intemperate and reckless tendencies of Kaiser Wilhelm, nor any of the madness of Hitler, and possesses a much subtler and more patient concept of advancing the Chinese interests than Stalin and his successors had about Soviet interests. He must have some recognition of the American reserves of national purpose and manifest destiny to maintain its unique standing in the world.

But people generally—especially very powerful people unaccustomed to being contradicted—tend to believe what they want to believe. The longer the West placates China and pretends that it is not being aggressively challenged by China and is currently losing that challenge, the more the future of the West will be in doubt. The next president of the United States will have both a mandate and a duty to restart this contest and to contain China within tolerable parameters. The longer we wait the more difficult it will be.

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