

Opinion **US-China relations**

## A tale of two elites in Washington and Beijing

While American analysts worry about civil war, China's ones dream of global ascendancy

**GIDEON RACHMAN**



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**Gideon Rachman** YESTERDAY

Greg Treverton used to be America's forecaster-in-chief. As chair of the National Intelligence Council, he oversaw the US government's quadrennial [Global Trends](#) report. His 2017 report contained a cautious acknowledgment of America's own weaknesses. It noted "rising inequality" and "highly polarised politics". But the report concluded optimistically that America's "inclusive ideal . . . remains a critical advantage".

Four years on Treverton, now in academia, takes a dramatically more pessimistic view. Last week, he published an [article](#), co-written with Karen Treverton, headlined "Civil War is Coming". It argues that the divisions between red and blue America are now so extreme that some sort of split is inevitable. The division could be peaceful, involving "a much looser federation". But it also could be violent. The Trevertons note ominously: "Republicans are more than twice as likely to own guns as their Democratic counterparts."

If this were just an isolated view, it might not carry much weight. But other prominent American analysts are coming to similarly dystopian conclusions. Next month sees the publication of *How Civil Wars Start* by Barbara Walter of the University of California, a leading academic authority on the subject. She [argues](#) that America fits the criteria of a country on the brink of violent internal conflict. In her view this would be characterised by a “fairly consistent stream of terrorist attacks”, rather than clashes between standing armies.

Even scholars who are not explicitly focused on political violence are increasingly gloomy. Thomas Edsall, who follows trends in social science for the New York Times, [noted](#) last week that political scientists are increasingly arguing that a “return to traditional democratic norms (in America) will be extremely difficult, if not impossible”.

This kind of alarm and despondency is not confined to “blue” America. Republicans are even [more likely](#) than Democrats to say that the country’s democracy is in danger — a reflection of Donald Trump’s insistence that the 2020 election was stolen from him. Civil war talk is also common on the American right. Senator Ted Cruz [mused](#) last month about Texas seceding from the union. Michael Anton, who served on Trump’s National Security Council, recently [compared](#) today’s America with the state of the country before the civil war and argued that: “Americans are *more* divided, not less, than we were on the eve of that great conflict.”

The deep gloom of the US elite is connected to a broader sense of national decline. One of the few things that Republicans and Democrats agree upon is that America should now treat China as a serious and dangerous global rival. Until recently, most Americans assumed that, whatever its other problems, the US would retain a technological edge over China. But that can no longer be taken for granted. In a recent article, Graham Allison of Harvard University and Eric Schmidt, the former chief executive of Google, [argued](#) that “China will soon lead the US in tech.”

The mood of near-despair in America is nurturing the opposite emotion among the Chinese elite — a growing conviction that their country is outperforming the US and will eventually displace it as the world’s dominant power. In a recent speech, Xi Jinping, China’s leader, [proclaimed](#) that “the east is rising and the west is in decline”.

The fact that America has suffered 800,000 deaths as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, while China claims to have had a death toll of below 5,000, is frequently cited as evidence of the superiority of the Chinese system.

China's rising confidence is spilling over into official exchanges between the two countries. When Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state, condemned Chinese actions over Hong Kong and Taiwan, his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi reacted with theatrical scorn, [arguing](#): "The US does not have the qualifications to say that it wants to speak to China from a position of strength."

Of course, in a closed system such as China's, it is hard to know if official rhetoric about the superiority of the Chinese system reflects genuine confidence. Outspoken critics of Xi often end up in prison. [Zhang Zhan](#), a citizen-journalist who cast doubt on official versions of what happened in Wuhan, where the pandemic originated, was sentenced to four years in prison. But foreign observers and journalists who travel widely outside Beijing [report](#) that the central government's self-confidence and nationalism seems to be widely shared among local Communist party cadres, as well as the wider population.

The current combination of a crisis in American democracy — and the rising confidence of authoritarian powers — is reminiscent of the 1930s. The Great Depression convinced many in America and the wider world that liberal democracy was fatally flawed. The one-party states of the Soviet Union, Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany proclaimed their superior efficiency to their own people — and to political pilgrims from the west.

As it turned out, the gleaming images of the authoritarian powers of the 1930s disguised their deep problems, while America's surface weakness obscured its deeper resilience. Those who still look to the US as the global guardian of political liberty have to hope that history is repeating itself.

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*This article has been corrected to reflect that Donald Trump claimed the 2020 election had been stolen from him, not 2016.*

