

# US Power Has Been Creaking Under Trump, While China Strengthens

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Global Research, October 30, 2020

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

*Into the third decade of this century, China has continued its ascent as the world's second superpower. The United States, on the other hand, has been stumbling somewhat under Donald Trump's wrecking ball policies. The Trump era looks likely to be restricted to four years, as huge numbers of Americans turn out to cast their votes in the presidential election. Even so, a Joe Biden victory is not certain yet and Democratic supporters remain anxious, scarred by the experience of Hillary Clinton's failure four years ago.*

The Trump presidency has been a disaster, to put it mildly. Trump's actions, from further enrichment of the top 0.1% in society, to wide-scale deregulation and shredding of arms treaties – all to benefit multinational corporations – has led to a considerably increased threat of environmental crises and nuclear war occurring. The growing nuclear and climate threats have been highlighted for successive years by renowned experts, like those associated with the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, an organisation concerned with global security challenges and humanity's future.

The Atomic Bulletin analysts also manage the Doomsday Clock, whose hand has advanced closer to midnight in three out of the past four Januaries. These ominous warnings have coincided with Trump's arrival into office in January 2017; and, to a lesser extent, because of the election of other extremists in major states like Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), where deforestation in the Amazon has increased. In January 2020 the Doomsday Clock moved to 100 seconds to midnight, the farthest it has advanced since being established in 1947. (1)

On the international scene, there have been opportunities for Trump to reverse some of the US decline which has unfolded through the decades; most obviously in Latin America (consisting of Central and South America), regions which have mostly shifted back to the right over the past few years, partially because of the left's inability to tackle corruption and diversify their nations' economies. In the Barack Obama years, Washington exploited these weaknesses by encouraging rightist opposition groups and promoting instability in Latin American states, from Brazil and Argentina to Haiti. (2)

The right-wing governments that came to power have proven wholly inadequate, and Trump has shown little interest in Washington's traditional "backyard". Trump has visited Latin America only once in his presidency, when he arrived in Buenos Aires two years ago for the G-20 summit. Obama paid 16 visits to Latin America during his two terms, even flying to Cuba in the spring of 2016.

Trump has been unable to convince his Latin American allies to shun the overtures of China. One can witness the remarkable spectacle of far-right leader Bolsonaro praising Beijing, with him saying in late 2019 that "China is an ever greater part of Brazil's future". Money talks

and Beijing's financial might pays its weight in gold. China is now the largest trading partner of Brazil by far, with the Chinese government investing \$63 billion in Brazilian exports during 2019, leaving the US trailing in second place on just shy of \$30 billion (3). This is a significant development as Brazil is the strongest country in Latin America.

Mimicking Bolsonaro is the billionaire leader of Chile, **Sebastian Pinera**, who returned to power in March 2018. Pinera, another right-wing leader, spoke of his desire to "transform Chile into a business centre for Chinese companies". **Chile's biggest trading partner is China by some distance**, with Beijing in 2019 accounting for over \$21 billion of Chilean exports, more than twice that of the US (4). In Argentina, Latin America's third largest economy, China has also comfortably surpassed the US as a trading country there. China's investment in Latin America rose from \$12 billion in 2000, to \$224 billion by 2016. As a consequence, Latin America's largest trading partner is none other than China.

Even more concerning for US planners, **China is the largest investor in the Middle East**, recognised as the world's most important region because of its unmatched oil and gas reserves. China is the biggest foreign investor in both Iran and Iraq, two countries which together possess almost one-fifth of the world's oil sources. Another oil rich state, Saudi Arabia - a key US/British ally - has likewise doffed its hat to Chinese power. In 2019 nearly 20% of all Saudi exports, mostly consisting of oil, were sold to China, compared to just 2% of Saudi exports destined for the US. (5)

China is a very ambitious nation and one which is looking to the future with enthusiasm. It is dubious whether one can say the same for the US. China's aspirations seem to have grown since Xi Jinping became president in March 2013. He has since consolidated his power, and expanded Beijing's vast infrastructural projects like the Belt and Road Initiative.

America has boasted the world's largest economy since 1871, at a time when Britain first began its decline as the pre-eminent imperial force (6). China currently has the globe's second biggest economy and is closing in on the US, with Japan trailing distantly in third place (the UK is sixth). China's economy is measured in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as are the others. Qualifications are needed to gain a realistic picture of living conditions on the ground. GDP is concerned not with people but "finished goods and services made within a country".

Examining China more closely reveals that it is still a relatively poor nation overall, a statement which may sound strange to some. Among the world's countries, China lies in 85th place on the 2019 UN Human Development Index (HDI) table, a formula which measures life expectancy, per person income and education (7). China's modest position, on the HDI, is primarily because the average annual income of a Chinese citizen remains low, amounting to \$16,127 last year, compared to an average yearly salary for an American in 2019 of \$56,140. Despite its internal problems America retains much wealth, occupying 15th spot in the HDI table, and none of the countries situated above the US (like Norway and Ireland) are obviously a threat to US hegemony. Japan is in 19th, with an average annual income for a Japanese of \$40,799 in 2019.

However, there are mitigating circumstances when analysing China. Its population has been the world's largest for generations, far bigger than the US and Japan - this has posed daunting problems for consecutive leaders in Beijing, encompassing the reign of the communist revolutionary Mao Zedong (in power 1949-1976). There can be little doubt that Chairman Mao, as he was known, ranks as one of the most influential leaders in China's

millenia-long history. It was Mao who set China on to its course of rivalling American power; as he rid China of predatory outside influence and achieved full independence, but his legacy has often been derided to a severe and unfair extent.

The Mao biographer Philip Short, an experienced English historian, wrote that Mao “wielded powers equalled only by the most awesome of Chinese emperors” and that “changes which, in the West, had taken centuries to accomplish” instead “occurred in a single generation” under Mao (8). This includes the major advances in health care he achieved across China, but in other areas also.

Short noted that,

“In Mao’s lifetime, China made the leap from semi-colony to Great Power; from millennial autarky to socialist state; from despoiled victim of imperialist plunder to Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, complete with H-bombs, surveillance satellites and ICBMS”.

After more than 20 years of struggle, when Mao assumed control in 1949 at the age of 55, China was coming off one of its most damaging periods of decline ever. Once he gained power Mao expelled the imperialist states from China, restored the country’s pride in itself, and enacted the structures that would transform China into an international force.

Short acknowledged that Mao possessed “an extraordinary mix of talents: he was visionary, statesman, political and military strategist of genius, philosopher and poet” who had “a subtle, dogged mind, awe inspiring charisma and fiendish cleverness”; while those who succeeded him “were merely a succession of fallible leaders, not better and not worse than in any other country”. (9)

The communist ideology which Mao espoused, and went to enormous efforts in implementing, effectively died with him in September 1976, as China thereafter tilted towards capitalism. In the final months of his life, Mao was aware that his policies would disappear with him into the grave. He had failed to find what he perceived to be anything approaching an adequate successor. Two years after Mao’s death, Deng Xiaoping took charge of China and he quickly moved the country towards capitalism, despite Deng admitting later that “without Mao there would be no new China”.

Mao had criticised Deng for his bourgeois and capitalist tendencies, unfairly many thought. In fact, as Short wrote, Deng “did establish a regime which, while ‘nominally socialist’, was capitalist in every other respect. Mao had been right about Deng Xiaoping: improbable though it had seemed at the time, he was a ‘capitalist-roader’ all along”. With Deng in power “the moment he was in a position to do so, he began dismantling the socialist system Mao had built”. (10)

A recent in-depth study reveals that, since Mao’s death, wealth accumulation in the top 10% of society in China has increased considerably, along with a sharp growth in inequality (11). It can be noted that wages for the Chinese masses are altogether higher now, in comparison to the Mao years, when grinding poverty was more widespread. Yet Beijing’s adoption of capitalism is patently clear, and a symptom of this are the current numbers of Chinese millionaires, 4,400, and billionaires, 878 (12). Elite wealth in China is below that of America, but it is safe to say that Mao would not have tolerated these developments.

China's drift towards capitalism has only reached a certain point. Beijing has snubbed the most virulent form: the neoliberal model introduced in the West by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher; whereby corporate and business influence dictates government strategy, seeping down to affect a nation's education and health systems. In the US, the world's leading neoliberal state, the number of hospital beds is dictated by profiteering, as it is in many other rich countries. An extra supply of hospital beds is pivotal for a functioning health service. Hospitals are instead run according to neoliberal doctrine, meaning there is no provision of extra hospital beds as zero profits can be made from it. This is a shabby system in normal times and a recipe for disaster in extraordinary circumstances.

In 1975, during the pre-neoliberal era, there were almost 1.5 million hospital beds in America. By 2018 it had fallen to just over 900,000 beds in US hospitals (13). Bearing in mind, the US population grew by about a third during this period. In a non-neoliberal state like China, in 2018 there were 6.5 million hospital beds there, almost twice larger than the US in per capita figures. This is one indication of the significant advantage that China has over its Western rivals.

The average life expectancy of a Chinese person is merely a couple of years less than an American. The majority of credit for China's health care progress should indeed be attributed to Mao. As he entered office in 1949, the typical life expectancy in China was 36 years. When he died in 1976, China's average life expectancy had climbed to 64 years, an almost three decade increase. It ranks as one of the most rapid growths of life expectancy in human history, all the more commendable considering China's size and population (14). During the same time, life expectancy in America increased by less than seven years.

In China 85% of major corporations are today state-owned, as the World Economic Forum reports to its displeasure (15). Under **Xi Jinping**, Beijing's control over big business has increased. The US economist Nicholas Lardy, a noted expert on the Chinese economy, outlined of China in July 2019 that, "Since 2012 private, market-driven growth has given way to a resurgence of the role of the state".

From a global strategic viewpoint the US remains in a superior position to China, with Washington continuing to enjoy most of the gains made by its victories in World War II. The US military, far larger than its Chinese counterpart, still dominates the Pacific Ocean - which covers 30% of the planet's surface - while the US Armed Forces hem China in around its coastline, and beyond, with hundreds of bases and high tech weaponry. In the Western hemisphere China's military presence is barely discernible.

Repeatedly each year US destroyers sail astride China's shorelines, such as in the Taiwan Strait; American warships even dare to roam further up the coast through the East China Sea, and even entering the Yellow Sea, less than 500 miles from Beijing. Two US destroyers were spotted at separate times this year sailing nonchalantly in the Yellow Sea, placing them within striking distance of the Chinese capital; and much closer again to Shanghai, China's most populous city, where early this summer the USS Rafael Peralta was sighted fewer than 135 miles from Shanghai (16). On the European mainland, the US retains a foothold across that continent under the NATO military organisation. By 2004 NATO expanded to Russia's borders and is continuing to enlarge.

US decline did not begin to unfold this century, but can be traced to the late 1940s. The "loss" of China to communism in 1949 is perhaps the heaviest blow to strike American hegemony to date (17). Gradual US regression occurred in following years. By 1970, with

the complete recovery from the war of industrial states like Japan, the US share of world wealth dropped to 25%, half of what it was in 1945.

American power received a hefty boost with the Soviet Union's demise in 1991, but Washington largely squandered the opportunities this had provided, with the Americans suffering a lasting defeat in Iraq early this century following its invasion. Over the past decade, US influence has also dwindled in resource rich Central Asia, formerly part of the Soviet Union. China has promptly moved in, not militarily but through financial means, and Beijing is the largest investor in Central Asia, a strategically important region linked firmly to the Belt and Road.

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## Notes

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