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Examining History to Explore the Future

France, the United States, and China 2050

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About the Author

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Acknowledgments & Disclaimers

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This essay seeks to summarize the main elements of work conducted by two author teams—one French and the other American—published under the titles “Franco-Chinese Relations from Yesterday to Tomorrow, and the Future of the CCP” and “CCP Weapons of Mass Persuasion: The Past and Potential Future of the United-Front Threat to America.” It was equally instructive and stimulating to take a deep dive in three very distinctive articulations of strategic thought, following the trail of such outstanding experts.

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Can history inform the future? Andrew W. Marshall believed looking into the past could be useful for identifying some defining features of what is to come. To practice net assessment, he said in a 2015 interview:

We needed to look back twenty years to make reasonable projections ahead five to ten years. You had to understand in great detail how we got to where we are. Some underlying change was taking place, things were steadily happening, and only by looking back could you get some insight into patterns of change.¹

Applying this thinking enabled Marshall and his Office of Net Assessment team to realize as early as 1987–88 that “the Russians were really finished and that the next thing we might have to worry about was China.”² Fast forward thirty-five years, and the United States and its main Asian and European allies appear to have finally caught up with the idea that China is indeed the thing they need to seriously worry about. Why did it take governments so long to catch up with Marshall’s foresight? How did the West get to this point? Can the history of Western countries’ relations with China yield some insight into patterns of change and consistency? Would identifying these patterns enable Western powers to steer their actions in a direction that favors success or, at a minimum, limits the potential for failure? This set of questions underlies the work of two research teams, one American and one French. The teams were asked to work in parallel to examine the seminal developments in the history and complex dynamics of their country’s relations with China and devise opposing scenarios for a future set in 2050.

If looking back twenty years enables reasonable projections for the upcoming five, researchers would need to rewind the clock to the end of the nineteenth century to project thirty years ahead. This was an interesting period for all three countries under study here. The Chinese empire, having been forced to cede effective control of slices of its territory to European and Asian imperialist powers, was in the midst of upheaval and had entered a phase of terminal decline. Despite being the world’s leading economy, the United States was just starting to develop its navy and did not yet imagine itself as a major power with global reach and the ability to shape the international order. France, relishing

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1 Adam Garfinkle, “The Exit Interview: A Conversation with Andrew Marshall,” *The American Interest*, April 9, 2015, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/04/09/the-exit-interview-a-conversation-with-andrew-marshall>.

2 Garfinkle, “The Exit Interview.”



the benefits of the industrial revolution, was determined to bolster its position in Europe and consolidate its colonial empire. A decaying power, a potential rising power, a power past its peak: All three were about to enter into wars, the magnitude of which would significantly alter their trajectories.

Covering over 120 years of national interactions with China in a few pages is obviously no small feat. Describing such a long arc of history with meticulous care and engaging form without losing sight of the main observable trends and patterns is challenging. But think about how much can be learned from such work! Surprising though it may seem, no French academic study of France's relations with China reviews their historical evolution since the first French Jesuit missions were sent to the Middle Kingdom at the end of the seventeenth century. Who, among the French public today, knows that France fought a war against China in 1884–85? And even attempted to invade Taiwan (then called Formosa)? Who is aware that the ancestors of some of the French compatriots in Polynesia and La Réunion were shipped from Guangdong and Fujian to be used as enslaved laborers? General public discussions and the official narrative seem to ignore the fact that the two countries' common history did not begin with De Gaulle's 1964 diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic. In contrast, the work presented by the French authors judiciously begins with a look at the early period, when France first began to take an interest in China, before describing the ebbs and flows of the Franco-Chinese relationship up until the current period. As they walk through various temporal junctures (First Indochina War, establishment of diplomatic ties with the PRC, end of the Cold War) and provide a comprehensive map of the main French actors currently involved in China-related policymaking, a central theme emerges that underpins the entire historical arc and is a key driver in Paris's calculations: France's obsession with its own greatness.

To all the governments that have ruled France since the mid-nineteenth century, China was never a central preoccupation per se. France's actions in the region were consistently guided by the pursuit of status rather than by a farsighted vision for the future of Asia that was backed by clearly articulated goals and corresponding resources and means. Before 1945, China was contemplated through the prism of France's contest for power, which was anchored and primarily unfolding in Europe. France's desire to be "of Asia" became more pressing as the nineteenth century came to a close only because of that competition for power and influence against its main European rivals, namely Britain and Germany. In the aftermath of World War II, despite the evident erosion of its international influence, Paris remained keen to preserve its status and assert itself as a "nation in the middle of the world."³ Inclusion in the broader Indo-Pacific construct in the first decades of the 21st century became an essential "calling card" that France continued to play to claim its enduring position as a power with global influence. However, during most of the years since the end of the Cold War, the reality of France's engagement with China was narrow. It was essentially driven by the siren call of an alluring Chinese market and its prospects for French business companies. The desire for market access and commercial gains led to many French concessions to Beijing on key issues such as human rights and Taiwan.

The incremental shift from projecting France's identity as a power that weighs in the world to a power that balances (*une puissance d'équilibre*) hardly erodes the key insight that emerges. In spite of (or because of) the world order's growing bifurcation into two main poles of power—one dominated by China, the other by the United States—France

“France’s actions in the region were consistently guided by the pursuit of status rather than by a farsighted vision for the future of Asia that was backed by clearly articulated goals and corresponding resources and means.”

3 Paul Charon, Antoine Bondaz, Pierre Grosser, et Stéphane Malsagne, « Franco-Chinese Relations from Yesterday to Tomorrow, and the Future of the PCC, » The Andrew W. Marshall Foundation, March 2023.

continues to claim its own distinctiveness as a nation that never was “aligned nor a vassal of any power whatsoever” and will strive to maintain its geopolitical independence and complete freedom of action.⁴ Although it is still wrapped in its pursuit of greatness, France may finally be coming to terms with the reality that it cannot incarnate, alone, a third pole, a middle way (*une troisième voie*). Therefore, Paris is now actively promoting Europe’s “strategic autonomy” as a proxy for the perpetuation of its own special status. Hence, the future of France’s relations with China may well echo past periods, when Asia was only deemed worthy of consideration inasmuch as it helped Paris’s jockeying for the position of leading power in Europe.

Whether observing the relationship from a resolutely Franco-centric perspective or flipping the focus to China’s strategy toward the United States, there is much worth studying in detail. A book (of possibly several volumes) examining a century of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political warfare efforts aimed at the United States would be a remarkable contribution, especially if it was based on forensic research and offered a solid theoretical backbone. A meticulous analysis of the CCP’s first united front campaign against the Nationalists (KMT), which was directly instructed by the Soviets, has already helped identify a recurring three-phase pattern in the CCP’s so-called united front tactics. A first phase of infiltration of the targeted unit under the guise of a friendly or accommodating face is followed by a second phase in which internal division and discord are proactively sown. Once the opponent has been sapped from within, the ultimate blow is delivered on the military battlefield, where Chinese forces now enjoy an advantageous position as they face a weakened, isolated, and disoriented adversary.

If political warfare is the magic weapon that allowed the CCP to prevail against its Nationalist adversaries despite the KMT’s military superiority, then it would be reasonable to assume the party uses the same methods against other opponents. Based on this assumption, one can examine how similar tactics were applied in two instances that involved the United States: the 1944 Dixie Mission and the 1945 Marshall Mission. The captivating story these case studies tell is a mix of China’s clever use of manipulative tricks and astonishing American gullibility. What explains the apparent enduring credulousness that American policymakers, military leaders, business and financial entrepreneurs, and academics have displayed over the years when confronted with China’s united-front work? The CCP’s carefully crafted influence operations in the 1930s and 1940s left U.S. political and military leaders without any clue about the depth of the party’s hostility or the extent of its ambition.⁵ This story is an illustration of China’s “winning without fighting” strategy, the essence of which is not an embedded aversion to using military force, but a principle of economy in its application. Violence may be used as the final blow to knock out an enemy after it has been relentlessly sapped, subdued, and undermined from within. Chinese strategists have repeatedly used these methods during periods when they had to confront enemies with superior strength. As the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) continues to modernize

“This story is an illustration of China’s ‘winning without fighting’ strategy, the essence of which is not an embedded aversion to using military force, but a principle of economy in its application.”

4 “Conférence des Ambassadeurs: Emmanuel Macron expose ses stratégies diplomatiques,” TV5MONDE, September 1, 2022, <https://information.tv5monde.com/info/conference-des-ambassadeurs-emmanuel-macron-expose-ses-strategies-diplomatiques-469892>.

5 Jacqueline Deal and Eleanor Harvey, “CCP Weapons of Mass Persuasion: The Past and Potential Future of the United-Front Threat to America,” The Andrew W. Marshall Foundation, December 2022, <https://www.andrewmarshallfoundation.org/library/ccp-weapons-of-mass-persuasion>.



“What would it take for the United States and others to appreciate the devastating effects that nonkinetic methods may have on their security? What will it take for them to finally consider the CCP a rival rather than a partner, especially when domestic interest groups continue to play along and “buy the [China] story”?”

its arsenal and enhance its ability to fight and win wars, will Beijing’s assessment of its own strength change? Will becoming militarily stronger impact the party’s apparent preference for nonkinetic means?

For the mooted book to be exhaustive and its theoretical hypothesis validated, it must pay attention to additional instances during which Beijing deployed its political warfare toolkit to manipulate U.S. perceptions, such as the Korean War, U.S.–China diplomatic normalization, the decades following Deng Xiaoping’s decision to reform and open China, and the period from the country’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) to Xi Jinping’s much-touted new era. Nevertheless, just putting the CCP’s 1920s smokeless war against the KMT next to its contest for supremacy against the United States elicits some damning observations about the risks posed by misunderstanding the importance of political warfare in China’s combatant toolkit. The list of mistakes made in considering China’s nonkinetic activities is long. Those activities are sometimes dismissed as the old-style propaganda that all authoritarian states tend to use, something too crude for smart outside observers to not detect and resist, or are misread as harmless manifestations of the soft power most countries supposedly try to wield. China’s influence operations should, instead, be understood for what they really are: a mighty weapon that the party-state uses to persuade, compel, and coerce its adversaries in order to achieve its political objectives. The American team’s illustrative scenario in which the CCP orchestrates the takeover of a global, decentralized, activist organization (one that has little geopolitical sensitivity to united-front tactics), mobilizes TikTok to flood content and trigger violent protests within the United States, and ends up channeling public opinion to force a shift by Washington political elites ought to feel much too realistic to any U.S. national security planner.

Although China’s deployment of its united-front tactics toward the United States is a compelling case study, focusing on the CCP’s maneuverings to manipulate American perceptions and decision making may underemphasize other important parts of the story. Beijing’s success in shaping U.S. perceptions cannot be solely attributed to some Leninist magic formula with Chinese characteristics or the CCP’s political warfare genius. In many of its activities, China has been pushing on an open door, reinforcing the preferences of American individuals and interest groups that believed they would benefit from closer relations with China—from the business entrepreneurs enthralled by the promises of a market of 1.2 billion Chinese consumers to the master strategists who believed engagement with China would counter Soviet power but China would never threaten American interests. The U.S. case is certainly not unique, but it is perhaps made even more complicated by its tradition of fighting militarily “foreign adversaries if and when they impinge on our freedom by attacking us.”⁶ What would it take for the United States and others to appreciate the devastating effects that nonkinetic methods may have on their security? What will it take for them to finally consider the CCP a rival rather than a partner, especially when domestic interest groups continue to play along and “buy the [China] story”?

6 Jacqueline Deal and Ella Harvey, “CCP Weapons of Mass Persuasion: The Past and Potential Future of the United-Front Threat to America,” The Andrew W. Marshall Foundation, December 2022, <https://www.andrewmarshallfoundation.org/library/ccp-weapons-of-mass-persuasion>.

7 Hudson Lockett, Cheng Leng, Primrose Riordan, and William Langley, “Global Bankers ‘Very Pro-China,’ Says UBS Chair,” *Financial Times*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/037cc9d0-b214-43a6-8bcb-43f76507f9c5>.

Notwithstanding their breadth and richness, the two teams raise additional questions and themes that merit further exploration. Two mirror studies come to mind. The first should describe the historical arc of American engagement with China and uncover the implicit and explicit U.S. strategic calculations that have underlain the relationship over time. The second should examine the CCP's hundred years of united front operations against France. These studies could be juxtaposed against those presented here in order to identify similarities and differences, first with regard to the factors that motivated the United States and France to design their China strategies and second with regard to how the CCP deployed its united-front tactics in two countries that are part of the "U.S.-led West," to use Beijing's formulation, but are nonetheless very different in their histories and geopolitical trajectories. In particular, it would be interesting to see whether the infiltration-split-attack pattern identified by the American team is also discernable in France-related case studies or whether the history of Chinese influence operations targeting France reveals differences in approach and purpose. The American team's case studies show that early Chinese political warfare was focused on making the United States believe in the democratic potential of the CCP and regard the Chinese communists as "sympathetic, freedom-loving patriots backed by a loyal army."⁸ In essence, Chinese propagandists numbed the defensive reflexes of their American enemy by cultivating the illusion of affinity and commonality, as if the CCP and the United States were two peas from the same democratic pod. Did operations targeting France follow the same pattern? Have Chinese propagandists been using the appearance of a common ideology with France to better ensnare their targets? What faked shared attribute have they used as a base for their united front operations in France? Have they been keen students of its history and identified France's yearning for greatness as a potential source of leverage? Could China's current eagerness to portray its own independent path as equivalent to Europe's "correct choice" regarding its "strategic autonomy" be the latest version of such artificial commonalities?⁹ Will any gaslighting technique do, even officially "firmly rejecting Cold War mentality and bloc politics,"¹⁰ when these are precisely the modes of thought and strategic approach that Beijing is embracing?

Another valuable addition to this effort would be related to the scenarios. The ones described by the American team focus on the domestic impact of Chinese influence operations while paying no heed to U.S. allies or the global environment. The scenarios designed by the French team also focus almost exclusively on China and the United States as they interact in the Indo-Pacific theater, with France's role barely mentioned. This may reveal something about American and French mentalities: Does the United States, despite its rhetoric, ultimately not care about its partners and allies and remain preoccupied with America, first? Does France, despite its claim to be a Pacific power, doubt that it truly belongs to the region and has it internalized that there is no possible third way? An exploration of possible futures makes it apparent that there is a major discrepancy between Paris's eagerness to

"An exploration of possible futures makes it apparent that there is a major discrepancy between Paris's eagerness to be seen as a relevant actor in the Indo-Pacific and its willingness to be actively involved when push comes to shove."

- 8 Jacqueline Deal and Ella Harvey, "CCP Weapons of Mass Persuasion: The Past and Potential Future of the United-Front Threat to America," The Andrew W. Marshall Foundation, December 2022, <https://www.andrewmarshallfoundation.org/library/ccp-weapons-of-mass-persuasion>.
- 9 Grzegorz Stec, "'Correct Choice' on Strategic Autonomy: What China Wants from the EU," MERICS, April 28, 2021, <https://merics.org/en/merics-briefs/correct-choice-strategic-autonomy-what-china-wants-eu>.
- 10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Reality Check: Falsehoods in U.S. Perceptions of China," June 19, 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619_10706059.html.



be seen as a relevant actor in the Indo-Pacific and its willingness to be actively involved when push comes to shove. Does France see the unfolding U.S.–China competition in the region as an opportunity to display its own power status without having to genuinely invest in or commit to its security? To examine these questions, it would be useful to ask the American team to explore possible futures based on the historical background written by the French team, and vice versa. The result may reveal the implicit expectations the two countries have about one another.

Finally, beyond the specifics of the French and American cases, the long history of nations' interactions points to enduring patterns. Some prominent Chinese theorists have also taken a keen interest in looking into history to identify persistent characteristics that may explain certain thoughts and behaviors. See, for example, the conclusions of the *éminence grise* who has served and advised several Chinese leaders since Jiang Zemin, puzzled by what he calls "the American phenomenon." Why has the United States, "with a short history of only two hundred years," become the world's leading power, the advisor wrote in early 1989, whereas China, with a long history of more than two thousand years, "is lagging behind the modern nations of the world"?¹¹ Whatever these enduring patterns should be called—collective mindset? national spirit? strategic culture?—they seem to persist deep under the surface; beyond contemporary policy debates; and irrespective of changes in governments, strategic environments, and even material power.

“Whatever these enduring patterns should be called—collective mindset? national spirit? strategic culture?—they seem to persist deep under the surface; beyond contemporary policy debates; and irrespective of changes in governments, strategic environments, and even material power.”

11 Wang Huning, *America vs. America* (self-pub., 2022).

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