Running the Race of the Century

The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower
By Michael Pillsbury
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Reviewed by Thomas E. Kellogg

MICHAEL PILLSBURY has some regrets. Over his five decades as a China watcher, in posts at the RAND Corporation, the US Defense Department and on various congressional committees, Pillsbury consistently urged the US government to engage with China. In the 1970s, he was among the many experts who urged normalization of relations; in the 1980s, while at the Defense Department, he worked directly with Chinese military and intelligence officials on joint programs to undermine the Soviet Union, including efforts to arm anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan. Consistently throughout his career, Pillsbury believed that US engagement with China would help forge a productive working relationship, and also bolster moderate reformist voices within the Chinese political system.

The end result of America’s efforts, Pillsbury believed, would be that China would become “a democratic and peaceful power without ambitions of regional or even global dominance,” and a strong and productive US-China relationship, one that transcended any differences of history, culture, or politics. It was only in the early 2000s, after decades spent as a leading voice in favor of engagement with China, that Pillsbury began to have doubts. Over time, he came to believe that the Chinese hawks — military officials, nationalist academics and deeply paranoid Communist Party officials — were not a small minority. Instead, they were driving the bus.

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forward in US-China relations. And indeed, in some ways it was, in that it opened up the trading relationship between the two countries. But Pillsbury neglects to mention various colonial-era elements of the treaty that the US forced on the Chinese, including a provision granting so-called extra-territoriality rights to Americans in China, which meant that US citizens were not subject to Chinese law while in-country. This provision meant that US citizens were not subject to Chinese law while in-country. This was a spot-on in his analysis of the ability of Chinese leaders to take advantage of American political rivalries and preoccupations. In passages that echo and draw from two of the best histories of US-China relations, James Mann’s About Face and Patrick Tyler’s A Great Wall, Pillsbury calls attention to moments when Chinese leaders were able to identify and exploit divisions between Democrats and Republicans, or even between different arms of the same administration, and, in so doing, extract better deals from their American counterparts than they otherwise might.

In Pillsbury’s view, such moments are evidence of Chinese efforts to manipulate the US as part of its larger strategy to win the hundred-year marathon. But one could argue that such efforts are better seen as evidence of clever, hard-nosed diplomacy in pursuit of China’s national interest. If the US were to start regarding any country that attempts to exploit American political divisions as an enemy, it would have few friends left.

What about Pillsbury’s argument that China wants to eventually surpass the US to become the preeminent global power? It may well be the case that, as Pillsbury suggests, Chinese leaders would like to see their country rise to the top. What country’s leaders don’t allow themselves to dream of national greatness? Pillsbury’s reading of China’s long-term strategic goals begs two questions: first, how close is China to catching up with the US? Second, what, if anything, should the US do in response to China’s rise?

On the first question, despite all the progress it has made, China remains far behind the US. By almost any measure — economic, diplomatic, military or otherwise — China remains, in the words of one leading scholar, a partial power. In Pillsbury’s view, such moments are evidence of clever, hard-nosed diplomacy in pursuit of China’s national interest. If the US were to start regarding any country that attempts to exploit American political divisions as an enemy, it would have few friends left.

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One might also infer from Pillsbury’s book that Beijing has honed the execution of its strategy, and that the US is, at best, asleep at the wheel. It is true, by and large, that the CCP has played its hand well in recent years, especially in terms of its engagement with the international community. Yet Beijing’s record is by no means as perfect as The Hundred-Year Marathon would have readers believe.

with potential allies in the US, key among them prominent American China hands, while at the same time broadcasting a false message of continued weakness, so that American analysts will underestimate China’s growing strength.

There is no doubt that Chinese leaders are influenced by classic Chinese texts, and that it has put to good use many of the specific strategic tools that Pillsbury describes. One of the strengths of Pillsbury’s book is that it reminds us that many of the key ideas that form the intellectual backbone of China’s leadership class are very different from those that animate political life in the US. That said, Pillsbury’s portrait of Chinese strategic thinking suggests more discipline and fewer mistakes than is actually the case.

Throughout the period that Pillsbury surveys, China has been riven by internal conflicts, with the losers often paying a heavy price for their perceived insubordination. The list of senior officials who found themselves on the losing end of internecine power struggles within the CCP is long. It includes officials from across the political spectrum and stretches back over several decades. An incomplete list would include

Lin Biao (1971), Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four (1976), Hu Yaobang (1987), Zhao Ziyang (1989), Bo Xilai (2012), and Zhou Yongkang (2014). If the Chinese leadership were so unified around a strategic goal of surpassing the US, why have so many different political figures, often favoring very different policies, found themselves in jail, in exile or worse? Pillsbury would have us believe that the most hard-line voices tend to win out in China, and that they are behind China’s long-term strategy to beat the US: could it be that domestic debates in China are much more contentious, and much more contingent, than Pillsbury suggests?

One might also infer from Pillsbury’s book that Beijing has honed the execution of its strategy, and that the US is, at best, asleep at the wheel. It is true, by and large, that the CCP has played its hand well in recent years, especially in terms of its engagement with the international community. Yet Beijing’s record is by no means as perfect as The Hundred Year Marathon would have readers believe. One need look no further than China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea in recent years, such as China’s effectively shutting down the Six Party Talks and instead present a friendly face to Washington. Yet Beijing’s record is by no means as perfect as The Hundred Year Marathon would have readers believe. One need look no further than China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea in recent years, such as China’s effectively shutting down the Six Party Talks and instead present a friendly face to Washington.

Another concern I had with The Hundred-Year Marathon was that it often suggested that the Chinese leadership is more unified, disciplined, and strategically savvy than history has shown it to be. Pillsbury’s book, with its emphasis on strategies derived from classic Chinese texts such as Sun Tzu’s Art of War, gives the impression that the Chinese Communist Party has adhered unwaveringly and largely successfully to the same, very wise set of precepts since 1949, or at least since the 1960s, which is when Pillsbury’s story begins.

Pillsbury argues that Chinese officials, drawing heavily on texts from as far back as the War Ring States period (475-221 BCE), have charted a course of action that has allowed China to quietly grow stronger as it bides its time, waiting for the US to make mistakes that will damage its own hegemonic position. As it grows more powerful, Beijing knows that it must avoid tipping its hand, and instead present a friendly face to Washington. Otherwise the US might discern China’s plans to surpass the US and take its place as the world’s leading power. To that end, it looks to curry favor

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