

Misoverestimating China

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One of the storylines of American foreign policy for many of the years since World War II has been that American power and influence is about to be eclipsed. During the Cold War, particularly the early Cold War years, there was a fear that, from a military angle at least, the U.S. would lose its supremacy to the Soviet Union. One of the key issues on which John F. Kennedy successfully campaigned for president in 1960 was the missile gap which indicated the U.S. was falling behind the USSR. It turned out the missile gap did not exist, but the fear people felt certainly was.

In the 1980 and 1990s, as the U.S. manufacturing sector slumped, many Americans feared that Japan, buoyed by its extraordinary economic growth would soon eclipse the U.S. as the top global power. This turned out to be wrong as well. Today, nobody is worried about Japan; and the Soviet Union does not exist anymore, but China looms as the next great power and the biggest threat to the U.S. position as the global hegemon. The failure of the Soviet Union and Japan to supplant the U.S. should not be used as a reason to dismiss the reality of relative American decline, but can be useful cautionary tales regarding the danger of overstating the threat raised by global competitors.

China is clearly an economic power which can become the world's major power if the U.S. continues to make mistakes and if China avoids some major economic, political and environmental crises that are on its own horizon. However, China's rise to global supremacy is hardly an inevitability and should not be seen as one. For the U.S., therefore, it is important both not to underestimate China's potential, but also not to overestimate it either. Recent media coverage of China seems to have clearly veered towards the latter mistake.

Nowhere is this more clear than on the opinion pages of the *New York Times*. Thomas Friedman's [semi-regular columns](#) on the [greening of China](#) portray China as on the cutting edge of green technology and a virtual environmental paradise. This would come as surprising news to thousands of Chinese workers whose health is destroyed every day, millions of Chinese whose water sources and farmlands have been damaged or any casual visitor to Beijing, Shanghai or many other Chinese cities who has tried to breathe. Friedman, a generally astute man, seems to have been taken in by some kind of Chinese Green Potemkinism.

While Friedman's writing on Chinese environmental policy fail to tell the whole story, it serves two useful purposes. First, his work continues to stress how important it is for the U.S. to work on green solutions and to address the problem of global climate change; and, while overstating China's commitment to the environment, it reminds readers that China

is now a power that is able to innovate and can help solve global problems which we all share.

Nicholas Kristof's writings on China have been even more puzzling than Friedman's. Kristof's recent pieces on the [state of education in China](#), [female chess champions](#) and [the need for Americans to study Chinese](#) have sought to instill fear of China by portraying the country as being populated by Confucian geniuses bent on taking over their world through their charm, intellect and diligence. Kristof, who has written eloquently on human rights abuses in Sudan and elsewhere, seems to have a blind spot when it comes to China. His piece on China's education system stressed China's Confucian values arguing "the greatest strength of the Chinese system is the Confucian reverence for education". These kinds of cultural explanations, while broadly accepted, are largely nonsensical. It was only a few decades ago that scholars cited China's Confucian tradition as the obstacle that would preclude Chinese societies from economic growth.

Relying on such reductive cultural explanations to explain complex phenomenon is intellectually lazy and harmful. Kristof is obviously right that the U.S. would do well to stress education more as a political and cultural value, but there are better ways to make that point. Moreover, writing about China's education system without mentioning issues regarding freedom of expression, speech and scholarship paints a picture of China that ignores some of the serious problems encountering China's education system and society more broadly. A similar intellectual laziness is seen in Kristof's column from a few weeks ago admonishing all of us to learn Chinese. In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I speak pretty good Chinese and have always enjoyed studying the language, so have some sense of its value. China is becoming more important, but learning Chinese should probably be a lower priority for Americans than, for example, focusing more on the sciences in the schools. There is no foreign language that is as important to native English speakers as learning English is to non-native English speakers. For Kristof to not recognize this is bizarre for such a sophisticated and well-traveled man.

Understanding the changing role of the U.S. in the world is absolutely central for crafting American policy in the 21st century, but having a realistic understanding of other powers which include their strengths and their weaknesses is equally important. The notion that the Chinese ascendancy is inevitable and due to some kind of cultural superiority creates more heat than light and leads to bad policy and potentially irrational prejudices. China is a complex country which, like the U.S., has a distinct combination of strengths and weaknesses. We need to understand it that way.