The Ibn Khaldûn Trap and Great Power Competition with China

Carla Norrlöf

To cite this article: Carla Norrlöf (2021) The Ibn Khaldûn Trap and Great Power Competition with China, The Washington Quarterly, 44:1, 7-28, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2021.1893022

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1893022

Published online: 23 Mar 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The return of great power rivalry has been the defining feature of the 21st century. Since the beginning of the new millennium, China and Russia have openly defied the United States and upset the stability of the liberal international order. Both China and Russia share physical and material attributes possessed by the United States that are traditionally required for great power status: land mass, a sea portal, a large population, and technology to field and develop a competitive military capability. Most scholars and policymakers agree that China presents the largest challenge to US interests and the US-led liberal international order. Economic and military growth in China has been astounding, surpassing Russian expansion. China’s outward extension is not primarily resource-based as is Russia’s but multidimensional, posing a structural challenge to US military and economic dominance.

Much ink has been spilled over the nature of US-China rivalry and whether the two great powers are destined for war. Structural factors figure prominently when predicting US-China relations. A famous deadly Greek trap describes how the fear of a hegemonic power sparks catastrophic war with a rising power. In the History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides writes, “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.” Thucydides’ statement has been widely adopted as a metaphor for the dangers associated with great-power transition. Both A.F.K. Organski’s power transition theory and Robert Gilpin’s realism see great-power wars as
most likely to occur when a rising challenger is about to surpass a declining hegemonic power. Today, the Thucydides Trap is highly relevant insofar as we have a clear incumbent power, the United States, and according to many measures of great powerhood, a clear rising power—China—with military, manufacturing, and commercial, and corporate power.

However, the analogy mismatches international hierarchy and regime type. In classical times, the incumbent land power, Sparta, was the authoritarian power who feared the rise of the democratic maritime power, Athens. This incongruity is not even the biggest problem with the analogy. In order for the Thucydides Trap to apply, China would have to significantly narrow the power gap with the United States. While China has caught up with the United States in important respects, it has not caught up with the United States in terms of the logic and networks that inform dominance in the key economic and security areas required for power transition. Apart from the obvious inhibiting factors of nuclear weapons and economic interdependence, the United States and China are nowhere close to the power parity likely to spark a major power war between them. The Thucydides Trap is a powerful analogy for bellicose dynamics between a hegemonic power and a rising power, but in the near term, war between the United States and China for the reasons proposed in the Thucydidean analogy is highly unlikely.

In the present context, a more powerful metaphor for US-China great power rivalry is Ibn Khaldûn’s emphasis on tribalism. Dynastic cycles within the US political system could very well threaten continuity in US foreign policy despite Donald J. Trump’s loss in the 2020 presidential elections. It is worth noting that a tribal nationalist cycle also applies to China. As Stephen Walt notes, “Nationalism is central to Chinese President Xi Jinping’s ambitious efforts to make China a world leader.” However, while the struggle for power within China is too opaque to analyze within these pages, competition within the United States between a diffuse American “we” and a well-defined “them” can be traced back to influential Republicans in the 1950s, more than half a century before the hard rupture in 2016. The consequence of internal dynastic cycles for American power and great power rivalry with China are significant.

Analogies never form a straight line between two situations, especially not when making inter-temporal comparisons. They can nevertheless evoke a predicament to strive for or to avoid at all cost. In this case, Ibn Khaldûn’s theory of
The rise and fall of socially cohesive tribes points to dangers in America’s social divisions and the instability created when competing with other great powers. The trap consists of allowing essentialist enemy logic to shape America’s domestic and foreign policy with the quest for zero-sum gains replacing efforts to capture mutually beneficial outcomes.

Three risks with consequences for great power competition are involved. First, identity-based tribes in pursuit of White isolationism at home sow social divisions undermining the core foundations of American power. Second, the natural companion to identity-based tribes is foreign isolationism abroad, a policy detrimental to great power competition. Third, dynastic cycles between warring tribes create discontinuity and incoherence in terms of how to best manage external competitors. To break the trap, the Biden-Harris team will need to support a full reckoning with America’s discriminatory past and present.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief account of the trap, as envisaged by Ibn Khaldûn. Second, I examine the evolution of America’s postwar foreign policy consensus to domestic and foreign isolationism. In this section, I also detail the rise and fall of the isolationist “us” versus “them” tribe. Third, and finally, I outline what is required for the new leader, President Biden, to escape the trap.

**The Ibn Khaldûn Trap**

According to philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldûn, tribal networks support each other and rise to power under a dominant leader. After the leader consolidates power, loyalty eventually recedes as members fight over the spoils of conquest, leaving room for another, more unified network to dethrone the hitherto dominant group. This process repeats in endless dynastic power cycles. While the US predicament may not be as dire, Ibn Khaldûn’s perspective offers valuable insights on America’s current situation.

Central to Ibn Khaldûn’s theory of dynastic change is the concept of Asabiyyah—a strong “we” feeling, *esprit de corps*, or shared identity. A tribe held together by Asabiyyah initially conquers a polity but eventually succumbs to the weakening effect of profligacy and declining solidarity. This loss of Asabiyyah makes the tribe easy prey for a more socially cohesive one, not yet enslaved by extravagance. Scholars of Arab literature and Islam, as well as geographers and anthropologists, have seen benevolent leadership as integral to Ibn Khaldûn’s Asabiyyah. A leader is critical to the success of the ascendant group, which will fail to “form a harmonious whole except when arranged hierarchically with an undisputed leader at the top.” Searching for belonging and purpose, individuals show loyalty and deference to their leader, strengthening the social
glue holding the group together. As crucial as the leader is for the group’s cohesion and ascent, however, he ultimately sows the seeds for its demise. The leader propels dynastic decline by undermining “the solidarity of his own supporters as he seeks to assert his royal dominance.”

In the West, Ibn Khaldûn’s cyclical theory has been interpreted as pertaining only to tribal societies based on “blood ties,” creating an ethnicity-based “us” versus “them,” sorted into “in” and “out” groups. It is unclear, however, whether such ties were essential to his theory. For Ibn Khaldûn, collaboration and solidarity underpin social cohesion to a greater extent than blood ties.

In the United States today, kinship ties often take the form of political identity. While political identities can be rooted in racial identities, they need not be. Political scientists have shown that party polarization is just as strong as polarization based on race and that cross-party discrimination is greater than race-based discrimination. Whatever the basis for strong partisan identities—race, class, ideology, etc.—they pose significant problems due to their ability to divide societies even when strong substantive polarization on policy issues does not exist. Extreme polarization creates life and death incentives to seize power and implement preferred policies, since compromise is not an option. As a result, the opposition also works hard to oust the incumbent without seeking middle ground. Ever more partisan, US elections have become group competitions in a struggle to preserve partisan identity. The foreign policy consequences of increased polarization have been dramatic, moving social and cultural value conflicts beyond traditional liberal-conservative divisions.

Racial polarization at home is not required for foreign isolationism, and racial polarization at home can coexist with foreign internationalism. Distrust and contempt of foreigners abroad is, however, facilitated by distrust and contempt of those perceived as foreigners at home. Once an embattled White “us” has mobilized against foreign-looking enemies domestically, the step to mobilize against foreigners abroad is not far. A racially differentiated hierarchy is established where skin tone determines threat perception, possibly explaining the Trump administration’s relative lenience with Russia as compared with China. Clearly, China poses a greater threat to US dominance than does Russia, but the Trump administration’s silence on Russia’s efforts to subvert vital US interests is inexplicable in strongman terms alone, given both President Putin’s and President Xi Jinping’s authoritarianism. The rise of Trump’s Asabiyyah implies an external enemy, particularly a Chinese enemy.
Between 1945 and 2017, one bipartisan foreign policy dynasty ruled the United States, which is why the foreign policy establishment was in uproar when Donald J. Trump won the presidency and rolled out his America First policy. Presidents from Harry S. Truman to Barack Obama may not have formed a dynasty in the traditional sense by passing on power through ancestral lines—indeed, the United States was borne out of opposition to hereditary succession. Yet, they inherited the same ideas about the US role in the world as well as how best to maintain it. When possible, they did so through international economic and socio-cultural engagement—and, when necessary, through military force.

In the immediate postwar era, geopolitical containment of the Soviet Union and its Communist ideology was the social glue around which the foreign policy establishment coalesced. US grand strategy offered a liberal alternative to Communism and a liberal international order (LIO) that every president supported up until 2017. The chief goal of the LIO was to promote stable and peaceful interstate relations, open economic relations, and individual freedoms, all in a rules-based system backed by US military power and alliances. For the latter half of the 20th and the early 21st century, this order was secure and underpinned by unwaivered American power. Indeed, the United States was so inexorably linked to liberal international order that, when journalist Fareed Zakaria worried about the rise of illiberal democracies 20 years ago, he counted on the United States to enforce liberal rules against illiberal challengers. The same was true 10 years later, when military historian Azar Gat warned about the return of authoritarian great powers. Even Zakaria’s later book, ominously titled The Post-American World, foresees incremental adjustments to a liberal order braced by the United States. Democracy was part of the social glue that held the post-WWII US dynasty together.

Differences between Democrats and Republicans had surfaced before, particularly on issues such as the size of government and socio-cultural values. Yet there had been remarkable agreement on key foreign policy issues. To the extent that differences existed, for example on questions like the Iraq war, they were not strictly partisan. The general contours of US foreign policy—the desirability of acquiring and preserving US primacy as well as US foreign engagement, including US commercial and financial interdependence and the utility of US alliances—enjoyed broad support.

For the first time in post-1945 US history, this bipartisan consensus around the US role in the LIO was overturned in 2016, sending shock waves through the US foreign policy elite, liberal Americans, and the world.
Modern Tribes in the Making: “Us versus Them” at Home and Abroad

The forces that undermined this *modus vivendi* in 2016 had been germinating behind the scenes for some time. After the Cold War, academics began to question whether US military power and alliance commitments were indispensable for global peace and stability.¹⁹ These voices amplified after the second Iraq War beginning in 2003 and began to coalesce after the 2008 financial crisis.²⁰ President Obama’s reluctance to intervene militarily in Syria to keep the peace and stabilize the Middle East was an instance of his “strategic restraint” in open derision of the “Washington playbook” and the foreign policy establishment’s knee-jerk militarized responses.²¹ After Donald J. Trump won the 2016 presidential primaries, academic retrenchment proponents launched a frontal attack on the organizing principle of US foreign policy: America’s liberal hegemony. As the foremost critics of liberal hegemony John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt explain, President Trump’s success was the triumph of nationalism over liberalism.²²

Walt’s initial reflections about the potency of nationalism as a basis for statehood seemed to preclude the extent of nationalist sentiment fomenting in the United States, “Because American national identity tends to emphasize the civic dimension (based on supposedly universal principles such as individual liberty) and tends to downplay the historic and cultural elements (though they clearly exist²³), US leaders routinely underestimate the power of local affinities and the strength of cultural, tribal, or territorial loyalties.”²⁴ As the great powers adapted to new geopolitical realities, Walt saw both the United States and China succumbing to nationalist pressure. “U.S. President Donald Trump rode nationalist nostalgia for an imagined past (‘Make America Great Again’) to the White House in 2016, and it formed the basis for the protectionist and anti-immigrant policies that kept his political base loyal.”²⁵ In other words, the group supporting Trump was an *Asabiyyah* forming around a nationalist identity of what it means to be American.

The success of such a group (or tribe) depends on the formation of an “us versus them” mentality that leaders such as Trump aim to foster. Contrary to the idea of the United States as a melting pot, a hard conservative right has narrowly defined “us” as an ethnically homogenous people of European descent who extol higher moral rectitude and freedom from state tyranny. As a result, “them” is synonymous with those whose ethnic heritage lies outside Europe assumed to
favor an expansive state to protect them from the negative consequences of their lesser moral standing.

The “us” feeling to which President Trump harks back did not appear out of thin air. The origins of his “America First” slogan lie with the America First Committee (AFC), established all the way back in 1940 to oppose US entry into WWII.26 Charges of anti-Semitism and even pro-Nazism dogged several AFC members, notably Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh.27 Before WWII, Franklin Roosevelt struggled to explain why the United States had a stake in protecting Europe to prevent Hitler and Mussolini’s fascist advances. In his address to the University of Virginia in June 1940, he tried to persuade the American people that “military and naval victory for the gods of force and hate would endanger the institutions of democracy in the western world.”28 But the isolationist mood dissipated after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and Hitler declared war on the United States in December 1941.

Even though presidential and widespread bipartisan support for an internationalist agenda persisted until 2017 when Donald J. Trump became president of the United States, isolationist politicians resurfaced with regular intervals every decade after World War II. For example, Republican Senator Robert Taft notably pushed for US isolationism vis-à-vis the world. He opposed the internationalist policies of President Truman and President Eisenhower and fought hard to isolate the United States from wars in Europe and Asia while opposing NATO.

The hardening of the right coalesced with segregationist William F. Buckley’s founding of the National Review in 1955. The magazine became the intellectual mouthpiece of right-wing conservatism. Buckley met and became friends with Ronald Reagan in the early 1960s, and Reagan would later attest to his admiration for the magazine that Buckley had started. Reagan may not have been a White nationalist, but he certainly stoked racially based social divisions and would go on to become a symbol and mouthpiece for conservative identity in the United States. Despite spearheading an exceptionally internationalist agenda, he contributed to sowing the seeds for a more radical mutation of racial conservatism.

Far-right conservatism was emboldened by the “flower power” progressive movements of the 1960s, pushing back against Lyndon Johnson’s civil right reforms and visions of a Great Society aspiring to eradicate poverty and racial injustice. One of the National Review’s defining articles was a collection of Barry Goldwater’s speeches prepared as a manifesto against the welfare state: “The Conscience of a Conservative,” which came out in 1964.29 The same year, Goldwater gained Ronald Reagan’s support as the Republican nominee for president of the United States. Although Goldwater’s presidential candidacy was unsuccessful, he managed to clinch a number of Senate races and galvanized
the Republican party to drift right. One of his hallmarks was “to go hunting where the ducks are,” the infamous Southern strategy that stirred racial fear in order to sway White voters over to the Republican party. An important part of Goldwater’s legacy was opposition to civil rights based on the right of states to determine their own policies. On the international scene, the principle of state’s rights within America translates into the right of sovereign states to determine their own fate unconstrained by international institutions. In his book, Why the Right Went Wrong, E.J. Dionne identifies the Tea Party as the true heir of Goldwater’s brand of conservative thinking.

The next big nationalist kick came when the Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern challenged Nixon in the 1972 general elections. By this time, the Republican party’s southern strategy had started swaying southern Democrats. In 1968, Nixon watched as the independent segregationist George Wallace from Alabama pulled Democratic voters from the party’s presidential nominee Hubert Humphrey, who supported a civil rights agenda. By 1972, Nixon was actively working the electoral advances that Wallace had made with his “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” campaign with the aim of attracting those voters from the Democratic party.

In this domestic political climate, the Democratic party’s presidential nominee McGovern was not left much wiggle room. He and his predecessors supported civil rights; the opposing Republican party did not, and neither did Wallace’s supporters within the Democratic party. Internationally, McGovern pleaded, “Come home, America.” However, he later explained that he said this “not because I had ceased to be an internationalist” but to avert “a disastrous folly” in Vietnam at a time when the United States was “never more isolated from the international community.” He went on to equate US involvement in Vietnam to US involvement in Iraq in 2003.

Within the span of another 20 years, and after Reagan’s two terms in the 1980s, a new isolationist turn was in the making as Patrick J. Buchanan championed “America First.” Seeking the Republican presidential nomination in 1992 against incumbent president George H.W. Bush, Buchanan asked very similar questions to the ones posed by President Trump on the subject of alliances: “Should the United States be required to carry indefinitely the full burden of defending rich and prosperous allies who take America’s generosity for granted as they invade our markets?” Buchanan also disparaged Bush’s views on international order, stating, “He believes in some pax universalis … He would put America’s wealth and power at the service of some vague new world order.” He then went on to pit Bush’s globalist views against his own isolationist views: “We believe in the old republic. We will put America first.”
Neither Taft, McGovern, nor Buchanan merged White isolationism at home with US isolationism abroad—but the Tea Party of 2009 did. The Tea Party was an informal conservative group within the Republican party that was active in the decade spanning 2009 and 2019. Its members united to oppose President Obama’s policies, particularly healthcare, but also the ballooning debt and deficit following the 2007–08 financial crisis. In analyzing the party’s foreign policy significance, American academic Walter Russell Mead distinguishes between two traditions: one held by Ron Paul, the other by Sarah Palin. Although they both reject the liberal international order, Ron Paul’s foreign policy championed an isolationist policy with significant retrenchment, while Sarah Palin was on record for supporting US primacy and democracy promotion. This dichotomy is less rigid than first meets the eye. Palin’s views were not always clear—and when they were, she flip-flopped between hawkishness and isolationism.

Tea Party supporters also pedaled the birther lie that President Obama was born outside of the United States, claiming the incumbent President Obama was born in Kenya, in an attempt to disqualify him to serve as president of the United States. After Barack Obama clinched the Democratic nomination in the summer of 2008, National Review writer Jim Geraghty asked him to release his birth certificate. The birther conspiracy theory was advanced by Republicans outside the Tea Party, most notably by Donald J. Trump, but also indirectly by Mitt Romney. At a campaign rally during his 2012 presidential bid, Romney surfed on this racist sentiment, stating, “No one’s ever asked to see my birth certificate; they know that this is the place that we were born and raised.”

Whereas previous isolationists never reached the highest office in the land, Donald J. Trump’s ascent to power was a direct product of two impulses within the Republican party as it evolved during and after the Cold War: White isolationism, both at home and abroad. Trump was the first to explicitly link White isolationism domestically with foreign isolationism. His rhetoric and policies crystallized the sentiment that White Americans were aggrieved by foreign-looking Americans at home and that Americans tout court were being taken advantage of by foreigners abroad. He exhumed and empowered a White nationalist tribe, legitimized their beleaguered sense, and thereby fueled their social identity and purpose. Rallying behind Trump, his loyal base received a free pass to mobilize against a foreign “them” within America in order to protect their European Judeo-Christian heritage.
This defense against enemy lines had a broader international component around which discontented Americans could unite even if they themselves were not hardcore White nationalists. Free-loading foreigners was a logical extension of the distrust and contempt for foreign-looking people within the United States. The pessimistic outlook on international cooperation due to zero-sum thinking was a direct consequence of this “us” versus “them” mentality. Its adherents abhor constraints on US sovereignty, international institutions, and open borders for goods, services, and people as well as the entangling effect of US alliances.

Sadly, however, disengaging from the world and seeking relative advantage instead of exploiting comparative advantages ensnares the United States in a trap. Dire consequences follow with social unrest and the hollowing of American civic culture, leaving the very institutions upon which American power and credibility rest in disarray. By unraveling America’s international engagement, the Trump administration abandoned the winning internationalist formula underpinning America’s status as first among great powers.

The Fall of a Tribe: Donald Trump and Asabiyyah

Social glue and deference are two central features of Ibn Khaldûn’s theory of dynastic decline

Donald Trump’s rise to office exemplifies how two central features of Ibn Khaldûn’s theory facilitate dynastic decline: social glue and deference. Both these elements were integral to his rise to power but eventually corruption, debauchery and in-fighting untangled the “dynasty,” pushing factions within it to new extremes. Instability at home and policies abroad that failed to serve US interests caused a legitimacy deficit while risking a spiral of decline.

Social Glue
First, social cohesion based on racial animus was a defining element of Trump’s campaign and presidential term. Previous presidents cast a wider social net—for the most part, they refrained from making public racist statements. Instead, they used coded language, or “dog whistles,” to signal anti-Blackness to target audiences. Other onlookers did not always see the prejudice in these speeches. If they did, the statements were sufficiently innocuous for them to ignore. Ronald Reagan’s plea for social welfare cuts by evoking the “welfare queen,” referencing how Black women cheated the system, is a classic example. The efficacy
of these hidden messages lies in their ability to make racist imagery stick while maintaining plausible deniability for intended racism. The recently released Nixon-Reagan tapes, however, clearly show that Nixon and Reagan harbored racist attitudes.43

Presidential prejudice is clearly not new. What was new was the Trump administration’s unapologetic assertions and policies. While alienating some Republicans, this strategy was acceptable to a sufficient number of Republicans and flipped some Democrats. The glue holding together the Trump coalition is an identity-based “Jacksonian revolt” to protect White identity from other identity-based coalitions encroaching on their economic, social, and cultural rights.44 From the start, Trump gained support from the predominantly White nationalist alt-right and evangelical Christians, who are more likely to deny racial discrimination than any other religious group.45

Examples of Donald Trump’s racism, both during his campaign and as president of the United States, abound. Tough immigration policies against countries with predominantly dark-skinned populations became a centerpiece of his campaign and incumbency. Even before his official announcement to run for president, Trump took to Twitter in 2014 to launch the idea of a US-Mexico border wall, tweeting “SECURE THE BORDER! BUILD A WALL!”46 When announcing his candidacy in June 2015, he called Mexicans rapists and thugs.47 In February 2016, he waited until he received massive public rebuke before disavowing support from David Duke and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).48

Once elected, President Trump quickly moved to put in place harsh immigration policies, including an executive order to construct a wall on the Mexican border. Meanwhile, his soft approach to White supremacy continued, and in August 2017, he insisted on moral equivalence in reference to the leftist protesters who opposed the White nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.49 In September 2017, he called on the National Football League (NFL) to fire quarterback Colin Kaepernick and others who took a knee while peacefully protesting oppression and police brutality against people of color.50 In January 2018, he opposed immigration from El Salvador, Honduras, and African countries, describing them as “shithole countries.”51 Echoing the birther conspiracy theory in July 2019, he told four newly-elected female congresswomen to go back where they came from, even though the majority were born in the United States. As soon as Kamala Harris made the 2020 presidential ticket, birtherism made yet another reappearance. Law professor John Eastman raised doubts about whether Harris was a “natural born” US citizen and therefore whether she was eligible to serve as vice president.52 Trump quickly seized the opportunity to sow uncertainty as to whether Harris was indeed entitled to the position, even as constitutional law experts dismissed the claim.53 Yet more than any single event, the watershed moment came in May 2020 when a police officer killed George...
Floyd in plain sight. The ensuing police brutality—including use of National Guard forces to suppress the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests—during the country’s racial awakening epitomized the administration’s racialized identity politics.

**Defere**ence
Second, rallying around “White America,” the President’s supporters are known for being fiercely loyal and for forming a cohesive identity-based group despite their socio-economic disparities. Before coming to Washington, Trump made it clear how much he valued loyalty. “I value loyalty above everything else—more than brains, more than drive, and more than energy.” Right after his inauguration, he told James Comey, then-director of the FBI, “I need loyalty, I expect loyalty.” Trump’s base has been loyal, and he surrounded himself with loyal appointees and advisors, some of whom are family members. Throughout the first two years of his term, President Trump was remarkably successful in securing the party loyalty he sought.

**Dynastic Decline**
This initial cohesion that began with the Tea Party and rallied under Trump eventually gave way to decadence and bitter feuds. The in-fighting ended in a number of erstwhile supporters resigning. Some of them quit voluntarily, others were terminated. Scandal and debauchery began to mark the presidency. His confidante counsellor, Hope Hicks, resigned in March 2018 after her former boyfriend and previous campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, allegedly leaked domestic violence allegations against her then-boyfriend, former White House staff secretary Robert Porter. According to an undisclosed source, “This had been planned and choreographed and coordinated and known long in advance by a group of people who were trying to play political games.” The turnover within Trump’s inner circle was unprecedented. Examples of people who once worked for the presidency, but ceased to do so well before the end of his term, included Steven Bannon, Michael Flynn (US National Security Advisor), H. R. McMaster (US National Security Advisor), Rex Tillerson (US Secretary of State), James N. Mattis (US Secretary of Defense), Nikki Haley (US Ambassador to the UN), John R. Bolton (US National Security Advisor), Geoffrey Berman (US Attorney for the Southern District of New York) and others such as his personal lawyer Michael Dean Cohen. While some departing officers such as his counselor Kellyanne Conway expressed fealty until the bitter end, most left with acrimony.

The tumultuous ousting and decline of deference were a sign of declining cohesion for all but a radicalized core. This development came to a head with
the storming of Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021 in defiance of President Biden’s electoral victory. Seeking to reverse a “stolen” election, then-President Trump incited a motley crew of White nationalists and other mobsters to besiege the Hill. We still do not know the full extent of the ties between Trump and the insurrectionists, but disturbing details have emerged. Trump participated in, and pro-Trump dark money groups sponsored, the “March to Save America” rally where the former president urged the crowd “…to walk down to the Capitol, and we’re going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we’re probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them.” The riots turned deadly, claiming five people’s lives. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio Cortez narrowly escaped planned assassinations, with DC Mayor Muriel E. Bowser targeted as well.

Former President Trump was impeached a second time—this time for his role in the insurrection—and had a fallout with key GOP supporters including former Vice President Mike Pence and Senator Mitch McConnell. The private sector has also jumped ship, including the National Association of Manufacturers who asked for Trump’s removal from office. Even Viking-clad QAnon Shaman agreed to testify against Trump at his impeachment trial. Fierce Trump supporters, White nationalist “Proud Boys” derided the former president for his weakness after he condemned the violence wreaked by rioters in the chambers of the US government. The jarring onslaught on America’s democracy marks a predictable progression from slip sliding with facts, flouting constraints on the executive, and denying First Amendment rights for peaceful assembly and retribution toward political rivals, leaving the United States vulnerable to the specter of civil war.

**The New Tribe’s Great Power Competition**

President Trump’s rise to office was born out of a need to preserve White isolationism at home and isolationism abroad. Within this group, opposition to previous policies was fierce despite President Obama’s care in forging broad coalitions and his “commitment to non-race-specific policies.”

The US-China relationship is the primary example and casualty of the trap. The Trump administration labeled China a “strategic competitor” in its National Defense Strategy. Citing both economic and security concerns, the summary document accuses China of “using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea.” Yet pursuing confrontational hard politics without the promise of positive sum outcomes did not produce the desired economic or security results in the great power rivalry with...
China, and it posed exceedingly high long-term risks facilitating the decline of the United States and the relative rise of China and others.

On the economic front, Trump’s trade wars have failed to close the bilateral trade deficit with China, create a manufacturing boom, or incentivize China to change its WTO-inconsistent trade policies on subsidies, intellectual property, and forced technology transfers. The Trump administration’s commercial wrangling is unique from previous administrations’ commercial vigilance because Trump rejected the bipartisan consensus favoring economic engagement with China. The tech war has become a high-profile dimension of these ongoing trade wars. According to the Trump administration, they began as a way to preserve US economic and security interests, in the words of one representative from the Commerce Department “to ensure the Export Administration Regulation protects U.S. national security, economic security, and foreign policy interests.”

Perhaps the most prominent example of how security concerns now inform economic policy is the attempted ban on Chinese companies TikTok and WeChat in the United States, citing cyber security threats. In reality, the measures are less about containing cyber-security threats than about containing threats to the US economy. However, according to the expert community, cyber-security threats exist regardless of the nationality of the company collecting and storing the data. Managing such threats therefore requires strict and enforceable domestic data protection rules not banning foreign companies. The ban is more likely in place to deter Chinese technology firms from investing in the United States. And it could be meant to provoke a Chinese reaction and thereby show US companies the political risks of doing business in China. Either way, this coercive approach to global economic interdependence tried to force a decoupling from China.

The strategy entails significant economic and security risks. As argued by Shannon K. O’Neil, Vice President of the Council of Foreign Relations, economically, “dismantling international supply chains will make US businesses less competitive and will blunt their global technological edge.” Consistent with the Trump administration’s America First doctrine, curtailing open economic exchange is designed to promote American production. But if economic interdependence unravels, the United States is likely to become less prosperous and less secure. Foregoing the gains from open exchange, which has supported US economic primacy, will hurt the United States—though not necessarily because China chooses to retaliate against the United States. Indeed, no obvious ways exist for China to do so without hurting itself. Despite being an emerging tech giant and the second largest foreign holder of US debt, a real asymmetry exists between China and the United States. Chinese tech companies and devices continue to rely on US-made semiconductor chips and operating systems.
Unloading a portion of China’s $1 trillion plus dollar-denominated US public debt will rattle markets if sales are substantial enough to affect the dollar exchange rate. China could make sure to sell enough of its holdings to make the dollar tumble, but not without being subject to the vagaries of dollar depreciation itself. While China holds a relatively large portion of the foreign share of America’s public debt, 15 percent, it owns less than 5 percent of America’s total debt. So, while the United States would certainly feel the heat from a dollar slide, its dollar hegemony is unlikely to be at risk.\textsuperscript{71}

The obvious move by China is therefore meant to advance its alternatives in stealth, divesting itself from dependence on US technology and unloading dollar holdings very gradually as it invests in existing currency alternatives or create a yuan alternative. While such schemes are currently a long way away, they could gather to threaten US hegemony by facilitating broader US relative decline.

A hardnosed isolationist approach to China also presents security risks, since it would make the international economy less sensitive to insecurity, which in turn would make war less costly in economic terms, removing a major constraint on war, including great-power war between the United States and China. US incentives to protect the international economy militarily in order to reap economic dividends would diminish under such a scenario, even as US incentives to protect itself from great-power attack intensify, accelerating an isolationist spiral of US decline.

On the non-economic dimension of the security ledger, China has been jockeying for power in Asia. China’s expansion persists in the South China Sea, freedom of navigation exercises continue, and in June 2020, a Chinese border dispute erupted with India.\textsuperscript{72} While the administration has ramped up its naval dispatch to the South China Sea, no sustained attempt has been made to build the international coalition that China views as required to stop its maritime expansion.\textsuperscript{73} The obvious danger here would have been a deadly collision between President Trump and President Xi Jinping’s strongman rule, with both placing a higher premium on cults of personality than on mutual cooperation.

Four years of President Trump’s policies have led to a wider US reckoning. His proposed policies and demeanor have emboldened an anti-racist counter-movement—“a revolution against racism.”\textsuperscript{74} However, while a liberal backlash against the Trump administration has long been in the making, the emphasis on racial equality is unlikely to have been as pointed without the wake-up call that George Floyd’s murder inspired. The alternative to the White nationalist tribe has been a liberal tribe, comprising the conservative, moderate, and left-leaning wing of the Democratic party. Making some strides toward greater inclusion and diversity, they have been branded the party of liberal identity politics. Less radical than often portrayed, “Never Trump” Republican conservatives
will likely take cover under the Democratic tent if their own party continues its reactionary descent.

If race becomes a major future flashpoint, these cycles are likely to continue, with power oscillating between “in” and “out” groups, producing sharp swings in US foreign policy. To break the trap is to coalesce around a common civic identity disassociated from essentialist categories in order to reconcile the contradiction between American liberal ideals and the reality of racial discrimination at the heart of the “American Dilemma.” Escaping the Khaldunian destiny requires a nationwide awakening and reckoning to expose the fundamental tension between discrimination and the American creed.

**Escaping the trap requires exposing the fundamental tension between discrimination and the American creed**

**A New Leader: Can Biden Break the Trap?**

Like administrations before the Trump era, the Biden administration embraces American engagement in a liberal international order. In a conscious effort to heal the divisions fanned by the Trump presidency, the campaign slogan of the Biden-Harris campaign was “a presidency for all Americans.” Former Vice President in the Obama administration Joe Biden announced his campaign in April 2019 and chose California Governor Kamala Harris as his running mate in August 2019. For conservative Americans who support the “us versus them” tradition outlined above, the choice of Harris, an African American and Asian woman as vice president is in and of itself an affront—possibly even more alienating than the symbolism attached to the first Black man ascending to the office of the presidency.

Many of Biden’s other nominations reflect the diversity of America and can also be expected to raise ire from right-wing Republicans. While the non-White appointments by former presidents Clinton and Obama surpassed Biden’s non-White appointments as of mid-January 2021, tallying the numbers masks the importance of the current administration’s efforts to give non-Whites access to key positions previously out of reach. For example, four African-Americans were nominated to serve in cabinet positions—including for Secretary of Defense (Lloyd Austin), Council of Economic Advisers (Cecilia Rouse)—as well as two Hispanics such as for Secretary of Homeland Security (Alejandro Mayorkas), two Asian Americans including for USTR (Katherine Tai), and a Native American for Secretary of the Interior (Deb Haaland).
Making good on the election promise to “appoint the most diverse team in American history,” the ethnic diversity in key cabinet positions is performative and sends a strong signal about the value the administration attaches to diversity. The incoming administration’s real challenge, however, will be to move beyond cosmetic diversity to tackle “discrimination in lending, employment, education, criminal justice, or any of the myriad systems that treat people of color unfairly” says the author and commentator Solomon Jones.77

Framing foreign-looking people within the United States, as well as countries interacting with the United States, as enemies holds American domestic and foreign policy hostage to zero-sum logic, foregoing solutions to advance mutual prosperity. Driven by internal social division, Ibn Khaldûn’s theory of the rise and fall of identity-based tribes offers dire warnings of US domestic challenges and threats to US democracy, continuity in US foreign policy, and instability when competing with other great powers.

Undermining the very foundations of American power—the stability and example of US political institutions, US soft power, and deep economic engagement—a United States embroiled in the Khaldûn trap risks ceding ground to China, America’s first rival. If the United States succumbs to this trap, China can exploit the uncertainty behind US economic and security ties. Powered forward by decades-long economic expansion, commercial networks, dual-use technology, artificial intelligence, naval power, and strategic missile force, China has already become more emboldened. Through the Belt and Road Initiative and European investments targeting strategic acquisitions and R&D, China is using its economic clout for further expansion. Security-wise, it is questioning lines of demarcation in the South China Sea and along the Indian border while pursuing a naval, air, and arms race with the United States. America’s internal divisions and the past four years mauling strategic allies and economic partners could set the United States on a path of terminal decline, unless the Biden-Harris team forges a national coalition to break the cycle of warring dynasties.

Notes


27. Calamur, “A Short History of ‘America First.’”


44. Mead, “The Jacksonian Revolt.”


67. Wolff, “So What Does Trump Have Against Tiktok?”


