



Excerpted from  
**Dignity, Technology, and Global Order**  
**New Approaches to Complex Challenges**

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## Introduction

### Towards a New RAND Moment

*We are at a moment of intensifying risk to the global order. The perennial threats to international peace and stability—inequality, economic insecurity, military competition, irredentism, and ideological divisions—are all on the rise. These threats are intertwined with and exacerbated by the profound impacts of emerging and frontier technologies that not only play critical roles in states' security but also have complex, often deleterious, impacts on social equity and equality, human flourishing, and human dignity. Yet governments and the broader policy community have been unable to effectively formulate and implement solutions to these and other critical challenges to global security. New organizational models and mechanisms that can bridge parochial differences and enable creative thinking beyond existing paradigms are needed. This project uses the increasingly antagonistic U.S.-China relationship and the role the two countries play not only as powerful shapers of international relations, but also as influential developers and deployers of emerging technologies, as an entry point to explore new approaches to complex challenges.*

A peaceful and prosperous 21<sup>st</sup> century depends to a great extent on how the United States and China reconcile competing interests and ideologies. As China's political, military, and economic clout has increased, particularly over the last decade, China has begun more actively pushing for a diminution of American power and weakening of the existing liberal order, seeking to reshape global rules in accordance with its domestic interests and institutions. Faced with this "China challenge," the U.S. government has responded reflexively with tactical policy responses aimed at countering Chinese influence and stemming China's rise. As Beijing advances, Washington responds with a counter-policy. The two governments don't seem to have any sort of

common understanding of what a constructive relationship might look like, let alone a roadmap for how they might get there. Without a clear strategic end-goal, this action-reaction cycle makes conflict more likely. Amid growing mistrust between the two sides, flashpoints between the United States and China could become catalysts for global conflagration.

Preventing serious conflict between the two sides, while important, is not sufficient. The degree to which the United States and China cooperate on global challenges will have a major impact on the future of the global order. The world is currently undergoing tremendous social, political, ecological, and technological change. The combined stresses of rising inequality and economic insecurity, exacerbated by rapid technological disruption, have generated social fissures and a broad loss of faith in the existing world order. Illiberal policies and the unanticipated effects of emerging technologies now threaten to fill the void, leaving the global order rudderless, without a clear destination, and buffeted by the tempests of the present.

Yet fixing a strategic destination is not easy. Simply advancing parochial American interests while restricting China's rise is neither feasible nor morally defensible.<sup>1</sup> Even if America's strategy is framed in simplest terms as defending U.S. interests and national security, we still need to answer the critical strategic questions: if we, the citizens of the United States and China, are to live together, how should we do it? What does a workable relationship look like in fifty years? What is a positive and mutually acceptable vision for global order? On which values is it grounded?

Answers to these questions are further complicated by the fact that the international order is not only being reshaped by illiberal forces, but by the unanticipated social, political, and economic effects of emerging technologies. Even a cursory review of the effects of Twitter, fake news, and disinformation campaigns on global politics and freedom of speech serve as demonstration that neither the United States nor other countries are prepared to deal with even elementary technological shifts. We are utterly unprepared for the impacts of synthetic biology, advanced artificial intelligence, quantum computing, the metaverse, ubiquitous data, human-machine interfaces, and other emergent technologies.

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<sup>1</sup> This is primarily a commentary on American strategic perspectives. As such, it does not attempt to address all the ways in which China contributes to and should respond to strategic tensions.

Furthermore, as technology and widespread automation make large numbers of workers superfluous, the impact on democracies will be significant, adding further pressures on domestic and global governance. Socially and politically, we are constantly playing catch-up, and technological developments are going to continue to move faster than humans can adapt and cope. Technologies will be channeled by the prevailing ideologies and values of the time.

The economic and national security implications of these emerging technologies are and will continue to be the key drivers of geopolitical rivalry, both between the United States and China and between other states. As each country strives to secure exclusive national technological advantage, the main drivers of innovation and growth—the free flow of people, goods and services, information, and capital—are being constrained by countries' attempts to achieve techno-sovereignty. Policymakers in each country are scrambling to formulate national strategies for critical, emerging technologies, encroaching further and further into the traditional realm of industry. And while emerging technologies are exacerbating national security tensions and blurring the lines between public and private interests, they are also giving rise to fundamental moral questions about the global order, including questions about how to best address inequality, promote human flourishing, and protect human dignity.

In order to assess how we will deal with China over the next fifty or one hundred years and better anticipate how the new technologies we are developing and deploying will shape our collective future, we need to have a vision for a more inclusive and sustainable world order. What does such a world look like? What are the obstacles to achieving it? What impact would such a vision have on technology trajectories, and vice versa? How does the U.S. relationship with China need to change to accommodate this vision? Can the United States and China find common ground based on shared challenges? And, of critical importance, do we have the intellectual infrastructure to effectively digest and address these questions?

The idea that there are global challenges that require U.S.-China cooperation should not be dismissed as mere rhetoric. A precondition for an effective and resilient global order is agreement on common frameworks and norms for governance. In terms of technology governance, the United States and China are only two players, but due to their outsized impact on emerging technology development and global economic growth, as well as their wide

ideological gap, finding a mutually acceptable framework between them is a crucial first test for broader viability. So, while emerging technologies are among the greatest sources of tension between the United States and China, discussions about how to govern these technologies, at both the global and domestic levels, present critical opportunities to create meaningful dialogue. However, agreement on technology norms first requires some common moral and ethical foundation—a shared conception of what it means to be human in the face of technology. At present, the ideological divide and unwillingness of China to even discuss “universal values” complicates engagement. *Finding this common ground is one of the most critical policy issues of our generation.*

Not only do the United States and China lack a common ethical foundation upon which to build normative frameworks, they lack the institutional mechanisms through which to explore them. Domestic political constraints and what famed Xerox PARC computer scientist Alan Kay termed the “tyranny of the present” undermine governments’ ability to engage in thoughtful, serious dialogue about long-term cooperation and the future of the global order. Instead, everything is framed in terms of zero-sum strategic competition and security threats.

This framing doesn’t just limit the ability to address complex, transnational challenges but it also has consequential spillover effects on broader society. As each country positions the other as the main object of strategic competition, the citizens of the other country are essentially stripped of their independent ontological status. As Yale Law School fellow Dr. Yangyang Cheng wrote in *The Guardian*, the constant drumbeat of the “China threat” leads to forgetting that China is more than a “geopolitical concept”, that “Chinese people are people” too.<sup>2</sup> And recent attempts in American policy circles to disaggregate the Chinese Communist Party and “the Chinese people,” while perhaps well-intentioned, appears more politically expedient than truly humanist.

China, for its part, has a long record of blithely blaming American imperialism and hegemony for a host of domestic and international ills, using accusations of a U.S. “black hand” as a convenient scapegoat. As each country’s political elite uses the other to deflect from the root causes of problems and

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<sup>2</sup> Yangyang Cheng, “The west sees China as a ‘threat’, not as a real place, with real people.” *The Guardian*, October 5, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/05/west-china-threat-real-place-domestic-agendas>.

their own failings, citizens are left with obscured vision of the other's humanity.

Dearth of strategic vision and long-term thinking is not limited to governments. Organizations that comprise the broader policy community, including think tanks and universities, while generally effective at achieving the discrete purposes for which they were designed, operate with funding structures, incentives, and time horizons that are not amenable to addressing complex, multidisciplinary, long-time-horizon, prescriptive policy issues.

The problem is especially acute in think tanks, where the vast majority of China analysts focus on the near-term fluctuations of China policy—such as trade disputes, the Belt and Road Initiative, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, military-civil fusion, espionage, and influence operations, not to mention the vigorous debate about “who got China wrong.” These disagreements and potential flashpoints are important policy issues, but analysis and time horizons are generally more tactical than truly strategic. Without a clear end-goal or vision for the long-term future, these become reactive, narrow responses to a larger strategic problem.

And even those China experts who are thinking more long-term tend to focus primarily on China; they are siloed off from other important trends that are shaping the future, so they still view issues through their own narrow policy lens. In China, these same impediments to strategic thinking are further compounded by the fact that there is virtually no space for open intellectual exploration, collaboration, and truly independent policy analysis.

In order to find more effective organizational approaches to these challenges, there are lessons to be learned by looking at those in other fields where breakthrough innovations were achieved, such as historic organizations like the Advanced Research Projects Agency, Bell Labs, and Xerox PARC, as well as from newer institutions, like Janelia Research Campus—not only from the organizations themselves, but also from the processes that led to their formation.

The Ford Foundation has a deep tradition of supporting such work. In 1948, also a time of geopolitical uncertainty and technological change, the Ford Foundation helped the RAND Corporation spin out of the Douglas Aircraft company with the goal of “furthering and promoting scientific, educational, and charitable purposes for the public welfare and security of the

United States.”<sup>3</sup> Later on that same year, anticipating a large increase in funding following the settlement of Henry and Edsel Ford’s estates, the Ford Foundation trustees asked Rowan Gaither to form a study committee to write a strategic program plan for the Ford Foundation.

According to the report published in 1950, “The mission of the Study Committee was to make recommendations based upon the best available thought concerning the ways in which The Ford Foundation can most effectively and intelligently put its resources to work for human welfare.”<sup>4</sup> The report analyzed issues relating to human welfare and then outlined five program areas that could be pursued in order to advance human welfare. The establishment of Stanford’s Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences was a direct result of the report.

This project is intended to be a first step on the path to a new “RAND Moment,” where an organization is born out of an acute need that is not currently being effectively addressed. This paper lays out the case for a new organizational mechanism, explores a potential framework for a long-term vision and ethical foundation for technology norms and U.S.-China relations, and proposes how such an organization or network could practically advance such work. Key questions addressed include:

- Given that emerging technologies have significant national security implications and serve as accelerants and causes of change, and that China and the United States have divergent ideologies and value systems, how can the two countries (and others) work towards an acceptable long-term future with shared norms for ethical technology development and use?
- As the liberal order shifts and evolves, what principles and underlying beliefs can serve to buttress or improve it? How might the concept of dignity serve as a cross-cultural foundation upon which to engage on ethical uses of technology and inform strengthened principles for global order?

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3 “A Brief History of RAND,” RAND. <https://www.rand.org/about/history/a-brief-history-of-rand.html>

4 H. Rowan Gaither Jr., et al., *Report of the Study for the Ford Foundation on Policy and Program* (Detroit: The Ford Foundation, 1949), 13. Hereafter referred to as the Gaither Commission Report, not to be confused with the 1957 Security Resources Panel report, also known colloquially as the Gaither Report.

- What sorts of new intellectual architectures or mechanisms are capable of addressing this and other complex, long-term issues?

While much of this project is focused on the United States and China—their relationship with each other and the future of the global order—the analysis and diagnostics are oriented toward addressing larger issues of long-term thinking and meaningful, cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue necessary to make progress on complex global challenges. Thus, while progress toward a new vision and mechanism must almost certainly include the United States and China, the aim is to go beyond the bilateral toward broad and diverse international inclusivity.