PODCAST

Ep. 16: Oriana Skylar Mastro on China's Challenge to the U.S.

An expert on China's military and security policy looks ahead in 2025 to uncertain U.S.-China relations under Trump, and the risk of a war over Taiwan.

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MILITARY POLITICS

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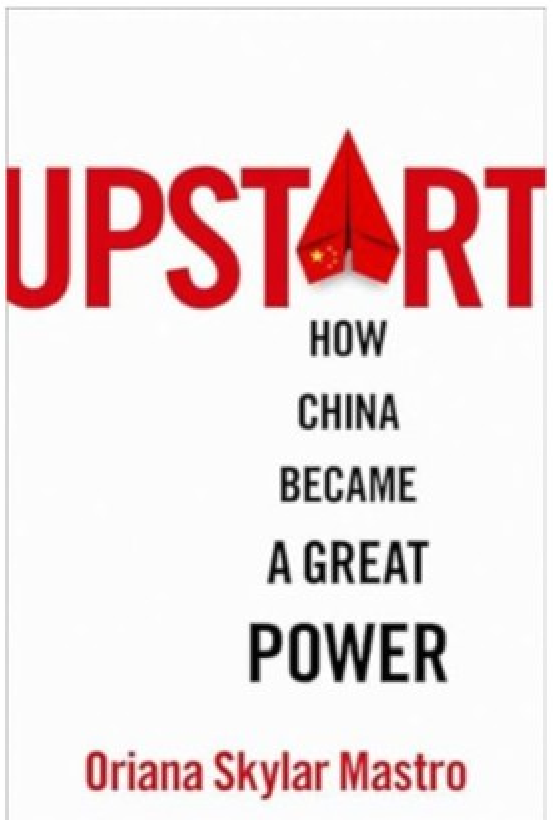
As 2025 gets into gear, all eyes are on the year ahead, with a degree of trepidation (or excitement, depending on whom you ask) for the early impacts of the incoming Trump administration on U.S.-China relations, and global politics at large. From the Ukraine war to possibility of conflict across the Taiwan Strait, not to mention economic and diplomatic conflict across the Pacific, it's a fresh era of uncertainty.



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To unpack these risks, our guest this month is the academic and author Oriana Skylar Mastro, whose research focuses on Chinese military policy and Asia-Pacific security. She is Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Her most recent book, *Upstart: How China Became a Great Power* (Oxford University Press, 2024), tells the story of China's rise and it's military modernization, as well as the challenge that presents to the U.S. She talked about China's switch from emulation to entrepreneurship; her thoughts on relations with China under Trump; and why she thinks war over Taiwan is unlikely in the next four years. We hope you enjoy our conversation.

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Guest

Oriana Skylar Mastro is Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Her research focus is Chinese military policy, Asia-Pacific security, war termination and coercive diplomacy. She is the author of *The Costs of Conversation* (2019) and *Upstart* (2024).

> China is a threat and a challenge to the United States on one hand. On the other, everything they're doing and everything they want makes perfect sense.
>
> — *Oriana Skylar Mastro*

Transcript

ALEC ASH: Oriana, let's start with the question posed in your subtitle, "how China became a great power," because, of course, China already was a great power, indeed the strongest power in the world for many centuries, long before western nations took up that mantle, so I guess what we talk about when we say "China's rise" is really the story of the last 30, 40 years, how it went from a pretty weak economy and military, crippled by Mao-era policies and in the wake of western imperialism, to the powerhouse that it is today. Indeed you write "30 years ago the idea that China could challenge the United States was unfathomable." So can you give us a quick overview of what your thesis is here and just how this happened?

ORIANA SKYLAR MASTRO: Of course. Well, thank you for having me. I think the real inspiration for this book was to look at how China builds power. So there's a lot of people out there that are asking, "what does China want? What are they going to try to achieve where they get more power?" And those are important questions, but we sometimes forget that it's not a given that China would be so powerful and that China is somewhat unique. The rise of great powers is a rare event in international politics. So this book asks how did China manage to build so much political, military, and economic power since the mid-1990s? And the answer is the upstart approach. And the upstart approach combines three different components, or what I call "the three E's": emulation, exploitation, and entrepreneurship.

So emulation is just a fancy way of saying they do what the United States does. And I would argue that whether it's academics or policymakers, most people assume that China will act the way the United States does. And this colors all sorts of policy debates, whether it's about China's nuclear buildup or whether or not China will have overseas bases, or where the future of the Chinese economy is going. There's an assumption that for China to be successful, they have to act like the United States. Now, what this book is trying to say is, that's actually not true. Uh, a lot of people often ask me, "Oriana," like, you know, any great power strategist would be like, "I understand great powers, I study Russia, that means I understand what China's gonna do. Why would China act any differently than other countries?" And so this book is that answer. It's saying that there are a lot of reasons why it does not make sense for China to act like the United States. And so the first E is that emulation. That's when China takes the U. S. strategy and they apply it the exact same way. And the book goes through certain limited conditions under which that makes sense. In particular, it's reassuring to the United States. The United States says to China, "listen, if you act like us, if you join international institutions, if you engage in free trade, we will be reassured." So China's like, "okay, cool, you know, I can build power and have a positive response from the United States." But that's actually a very small subsection of Chinese strategy.

The second component is exploitation. That's when they take the U. S. strategy, but they apply it in areas that the United States is not present, or the United States has vulnerabilities, there's gaps in some sort of case. And then the last one is really how China's managed to build power: it's being entrepreneurial. New strategies, new approaches that the United States does not do, that the United States hasn't done, and I would argue, generally speaking, this is how rising powers become great powers, when they do different things. So, this book is about China, but just as an example, you know, the United States during its rise, it's not for lack of ambition that the United States didn't build a colonial empire like Great Britain. We didn't emulate Great Britain directly. We did new things. We built international institutions, uh, we promoted free trade. We had overseas basing instead of occupying countries. And this is what led, in many cases, the United States to achieve great power status and then also to maintain it. So what I'm arguing is that China has different competitive advantages. The international system is different in 1995 than it was during the U.S. rise. So it makes sense that China would also do new and different things than what the United States has done in the past.

And what metrics are you looking at in these considerations? I mean, one thing that sets your book apart is that in your research, you draw from the business strategy world, as well as international relations. But you're a specialist in the military. Can you talk us through what your sources were, how essential business economic considerations, like internationalizing through *renminbi*, which you talk about, are in a field that often gets, uh, dominated by sort of IR and security issues?

Well, I think the first thing is that business literature, looking at a different school of thought, because as I mentioned, the rise and fall of great powers is a rare event, but the start and end of companies, of big companies, happens all the time, right? Hundreds and hundreds a year. So while we have limited cases to understand competition, there's a really developed literature on competition in business and management. And so, when I found that literature and reading it, it actually really made sense to me, in understanding China's approach. Because if you told a head of a company, for example, if you said, okay, to become a great company, you should produce the exact same thing in the exact same way as an already established company with greater resources and greater market share, no one in the business world would think that's a good idea. Yet the assumption in political science, that stems back to a very famous political scientist named Kenneth Waltz, is that to become a great power, you emulate the successes of great power. So, we assume it makes sense to do exactly the same thing. And so that literature really is what inspired that upstart approach that I talk about of the not only emulation, but the exploitation, entrepreneurship.

Now, the book, what it does is it goes through 22 different case studies. And you alluded to some of the economic realm, like the internationalization of the *renminbi*, which is an area China's trying to emulate sort of competition with the United States. And in the economic realm, you also have their industrial policy, which is an entrepreneurial approach, the "Belt and Road Initiative," which is an entrepreneurial approach to, you know, foreign aid. It's not really foreign development assistance in the same way that the U. S. is, but it also is these cases in the political realm, things like, trying to emulate mediation diplomacy, that China does sort of embrace this idea of being a mediator in the international system, or joining international institutions. And there's a number of appendices, and data sets for the book to show, for example, China's attempts at, gaining leadership roles in international institutions. Or in the case of foreign policy, they are not emulating the U. S. approach to training foreign militaries, for example. Instead, they're training police forces of other countries. So this is very entrepreneurial. They've recognized it doesn't make sense to be the "external security partner of choice." If people can, they're going to be trained by the U. S. military, but what does China have a competitive advantage in but internal control, right? They invest more in that than they do in their military. And so, you know, I have data sets about how they've actually trained the police forces of the majority of countries in the world. So one of the sources is sort of just putting together that data to provide more accurate picture of how China is building power. Because one of the problems with assuming that China does what the United States does is that we only look at the things the United States does. So we've missed, for example, I would argue that whole policing aspect of their foreign influence.

And then a second component is looking through the logic. In the book, I talk about when they choose emulation, when they choose exploitation, when they choose entrepreneurship, and it has to do with a host of factors. They're assessing how is the United States going to respond to this? Where are our competitive advantages? Are there gaps that we could exploit? And all of that is based on, you know, thousands of Chinese sources, authoritative sources, semi-authoritative media, and sort of debates between scholars, in which they discuss things like, does it make sense for us to have alliances? Does it make sense for us to try to have nuclear parity with the United States? Or should we do something else? And then it kind of goes through that logic to say, yes, the logic of why they chose entrepreneurship and not exploitation or emulation on exploitation fits with the theory.

Now, it's not a book about just China always making the right decisions. Uh, sometimes they decide things that go against what makes sense according to the theory. And so then what's interesting is then they have sort of suboptimal outcomes. So in each of these cases, political, economic, and military power, there are times where they chose emulation where it didn't make any sense and they saw suboptimal results. So soft power is one that I argue that they've been trying to compete with the United States on and they failed, or aircraft carriers in the military realm, or as you alluded to, the internationalization of the *renminbi* hasn't been particularly, successful either.

How are they doing on soft power? I can't remember the last Chinese film which really made it in America.

I, well, I mean, or anywhere, right? I mean, I always say my Chinese would probably be a lot better if I could manage to sit through any Chinese films. And it's shocking to me because there's like an archetype to follow, right? Like this is something really easy to copy a lot easier than, you know, any sort of military system, but they just can't get it together.

And they invest, you know, eight times more than we do in things like public diplomacy. I mean, they're trying their best to improve that image. There's some cases of "successes" when it makes sense for it to be top down, government controlled. Like the Olympics, like planning the Olympics, for example, but for the most part, it doesn't make sense for them to try to compete with the United States in soft power. People always ask me then why do they do it. Honestly, a lot of times the suboptimal decisions come from desire for prestige. In this case, it's also, I just think it hurts their feelings that people don't like their stuff and they just can't get over it. And so they keep on pouring more money into it to try to make it work.

Let's talk about how China is building partnerships abroad, especially with global South nations in terms of economic investment, diplomacy, media investment and so on. There was a fascinating graph in your book of total number of China's strategic partnerships, which just skyrocketed in the early 2000s from close to zero to over a hundred a decade later. And you also talk about how China sells arms to poor countries like Bangladesh, which gets 80% of its arms imports from China. To what extent do all of these efforts form a partnership of allies or even a block that rivals the traditional Western bloc and outperforms them in courting these nations?

So let me just say two things I think are really important points. The first is that in this business literature, the reason to be entrepreneurial, the reason to do things differently, there's a lot of research that shows when people or countries do things differently, it takes you longer to recognize what they're doing, and you underestimate its effectiveness. So in this case, I hear all the time, for example, China is reaching out to the developing world. Oh, like, you know, this can't possibly work, right? The developing world knows that the United States is a better partner than China is, they can't possibly want to work with China. And honestly, I think we underestimate the impact that China is having on the developing world, and Xi Jinping is very focused on being the leader of the developing world, and that a lot of the Chinese messaging that maybe we find heavy handed in the West, the sort of anti-imperial, anti-Cold War, hegemonic type of rhetoric, does resonate, and the U.S. position that everyone recognizes we're a better partner, it's like, well, you know, we have a difficult history, especially with the developing world during the cold war that all countries assume that we are a better partner than China. So you actually have to put the work in. And so, you know, there's a whole chapter at the end about recommendations, but I think we underestimate the effectiveness of China's approaches, at our own peril.

And the second thing, when you talked about the strategic partnerships, like, are these alliances, do they have the same impact? I do often worry that when we look at power, right, a lot of, standard political scientists, they say, "well, you know, we're more powerful, we have more alliances," or "we have so many military bases, we have 120 military bases around the world, and China has none." That is kind of like a taxi company looking at Uber and saying, well, I own more cars. Like, that is true, but is that the standard of power? The United States, we need alliances because we want to project power globally. China has no ambition to project military power globally, so they don't need bases in other countries. And so they don't need those alliances. And that's how they also do it at a really cost-effective manner. No judgment on this, but just a fact, you know, I've read some estimates that say the war in Afghanistan cost the equivalent of 10 Belt and Road initiatives. So outside of Asia, China's plan is to rely mainly on political and economic tools to convince countries to accommodate their preferences, not military tools. And that's one reason that they've been able to become very powerful without spending the same amount of money that the United States has on the overseas presence.

Your book reminded me of Susan Shirk's great book from 2023, *Overreach*, which had a similarly, punchy one word title and an overlapping thesis, of China may be overextending itself, pushing past the framework of non-intervention and peaceful rise. But, Shirk also identified the U.S.' overreaction to that as an equal factor in deteriorating relations between the two nations. Which do you think is more important, the overreach or the overreaction?

So my opinion on this is kind of both. The first is that I don't really buy the overreach argument for two reasons. I mean, first, I think it does go along with some of the U. S. logic of "Oh, everyone hates what China's doing. You know, everyone understands China's a bully," which is overly simplified. The second thing is from the Chinese perspective, certain goals that they want to achieve, in particular, territorial control of the East China Sea, South China Sea, Taiwan, you know, what I would ask Susan, I have asked Susan, like, "is there any way for them to achieve these goals without being aggressive?" And I think the answer is no, right? Like, so the problem is not so much, what they want to achieve, how they want to achieve it. They have to be aggressive to get this territorial control. So under that context, is it really overreach or is it just a strategic direction? So on one hand, I wouldn't necessarily say that China, did engage in overreach. I think it makes strategic sense, the level of aggression that they've actually, you know, been pursuing in the region, so maybe that's kind of unpopular, but on the other hand, I don't think it's a U.S. overreaction. The United States is reacting, I would argue, quite late, and in a quite limited manner to what has been a very clear Chinese plan to control the Indo-Pacific, which is the most important economic, political, and military region of the world. And so on one hand, I wouldn't say China's overreaching, and I would also say that the United States is not overreacting. If anything, we've underreacted over the past couple decades, and that's what has led to the problems that we currently have in the region.

Okay. So. We're recording this right on the eve of 2025, a year which looks set to be a pretty, I would say, unstable year for the world and, uh, with Trump in the White House for the next four years do seem likely to fulfill that apocryphal Chinese idiom of "interesting times." So, how do the geopolitical challenges and opportunities of this particular juncture of history factor in for China's wider plans as you see them going forwards?

Well, there's always a difference between reality and perception. And one of the reasons I think it's very useful to still have regional specialists, like China specialists like myself, that speak Chinese and go to China, is, a lot of times people make arguments about China, about what China should do, or you know, "well it makes sense if China did this," and it's like, well that's not how they see it. I've never, you know, the arguments about peaking China, for example, I'm like, well, but there's no one in China that thinks that they have peaked. Maybe they would act that way if they thought that, but, and maybe you think they think they should have peaked, but they have, they don't, right, they have a different perception of those things.

So the first thing I would say about these, "interesting times" that I find very problematic that the Chinese colleagues that I interact with, the Chinese writings I read is that they are drawing a clear line between the internal turmoil in the United States, we will say, and, you know, how powerful the United States will be on the international system. What I like to remind my Chinese colleagues, for the sake of deterrence, for the sake of accuracy, we have way too rosy a picture of the past. When the United States was fighting in World War II, when we were competing in the Cold War, it's not like everything was rosy at home. So I don't argue with them that "actually, things are not bad in the United States," right? "You're overestimating the degree of turmoil." What I'm trying to tell people is, that is the nature of the United States. We've always had domestic problems, and that has not gotten in the way of our ability to compete internationally. And so my hope is that it will not now, that even though we're divided as a nation in a lot of ways, basically the United States, the foundations of competition are still there and will continue to compete.

Now, the question with the sort of Republican Party, generally speaking, and Trump in particular, is what is their desire to compete? The biggest threat would be kind of them pulling out, pulling away from the international system in some ways. And this is very unpredictable because there are kind of two strains in the Republican Party. There are two strains of, people who support Trump, and on one hand, it's like, you know, China's eating our breakfast, we have to do everything we can to undermine their power and improve, the U. S. position. And on the other hand, there's like, we want to get out of the world and not be involved. And it's hard to say at this stage which side is going to win.

Because when I see certain political appointments, I see those that are very much for maintaining U. S. dominance in the international system, and then other political appointments, it seems like, they just want to retrench at home, so I think that's going to be the big question. Of course, you know, they're going to be less friendly with allies and partners than the Biden administration was. That's going to be a problem because the United States does rely on allies and partners to project power around the world. I try to tell people or remind people who might be more influential in this next administration that no matter how you feel about the allies and partners, our bases and stuff around the world are not just about them. It's not about protecting Japan or protecting Korea. That's part of it, but part of it is also about that military presence that allows the United States to, protect U.S. interests in the region. This is also about us and things that we want. Um, so it is a bit too early to tell, but I think it could really go either way at this stage. It could be a Trump administration that's extremely aggressive on the international stage, or one that pulls back and really then gives China that gap that I talk about in the book that they can exploit and build power because they don't have to compete anymore directly with the United States.

Yes, and I think the key question there for that latter possibility is, who do we think really will be setting China policy under Trump? Will it be someone like Mike Waltz, the incoming national security advisor, and his deputy Alex Wong, and other people in the administration, or will it ultimately be Trump himself who might be, more, vulnerable to flattery or might want to make a deal with Xi, giving up some element of, U.S. intervention for some sort of a win that he can give to the American people in terms of the trade war.

Well, I would say, I mean, one thing we have to remember is this isn't our first rodeo, right? It's the second time around, it's everyone's second time around with Trump. So sometimes the things that worked the first time are not going to work the second time. And at least when I talked to my Chinese colleagues, one thing that they point out that's very interesting when it comes to winning Trump over, we're like, ah, maybe the Chinese are going to roll out the red carpet. And then Trump's going to be like, "whatever you want, China, I don't care as long as you make me look good." At least what they say is they felt like they did that the first time around. And then with the tariffs and export controls, that Xi Jinping felt like it made him personally look bad. And so that it's too risky to try that the second time around. Like, even if they think it might work, because it made Xi look bad personally, that they're not going to try it a second time.

And so I think that's interesting, that maybe that means that even China's approach to Trump, the second time around is going to be quite different. My own personal prediction is that the Chinese are not going to try to go for some big win or change or reset in U. S. policy. I think they're just going to try to keep their heads down for four years and hope that Trump doesn't do something horrendous to undermine their interests.

And as you said, there are two egos in the room. Another key relationship here is Xi and Putin, at talks in Moscow in 2023, Xi told Putin "right now there are changes the likes of which we haven't seen for a hundred years and we are the ones driving these changes together." I don't know about you, but that makes me a little bit nervous, especially when he's saying it to Putin, who's driving these changes through military aggression. What changes do you think that Xi is talking about?

And to what extent do you think he feels the era of Western global leadership is over and maybe even the era of working, with America is over when he has other friends.

Yeah. So this is one of the big differences in the future versus the past 30 years. So the book is about, you know, how China has built power over the past 30 years. And I think it does provide a lot of insights of what we are going to see in the future. For example, if the logic of why China did things differently from the United States is they didn't have the power to compete directly, then maybe as they become more powerful, we will see them move more towards emulation.

But if the logic is like "what the United States does is stupid and we don't want to emulate it," then we can predict that even as they become more powerful, they will not emulate the U. S. approach. So. The reasons they don't do things or do do things is important. And in the past, one of the main factors that determined how they built power was a consideration of how the United States would respond. And in particular, whether the United States would see certain types of emulation as threatening to U. S. interests, and then we would respond in kind of a hostile manner. Now, for the next 30 years, I think that ship has sailed. The Chinese assessment is basically, now they are dealing with a hostile United States. And so what that means is I think that consideration of how will this make the United States feel is much less powerful now than it was the past 30 years. When I go to China, it used to be the case that people would sit around and be like, "Oh, U.S.-China relations are not in a good place.

How do we get them back to the way they were before? where can we find areas to cooperate?" For the past couple years, I go to China and the view is like, "U. S.-China relations aren't good and, we don't need you." So I don't think there's as much of a desire to, reset or get back. I think the Chinese basically think this is the way of the world and this is the new strategic environment in which they're, operating. Now the Chinese, with the Russians, and I'll say, I'm in the middle of writing my next book, which is about China-Russia, military alignment, and then, also, I had this piece in *Foreign Affairs* and, I think a recent issue about China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, this sort of autocratic quad, type of situation is, is China's really trying to have its cake and eat it too, right? They don't see benefit in traditional alliances in which they're really committed to the defense of other countries, or so committed that they have to pay any cost for the policies of other countries. They really haven't had to pay a cost for the misbehavior of North Korea or the Russians, right? We don't blame China for those things, even though I argue that we should, even if it's not China's fault, to convince China to stop being so close to these countries.

But they get to basically have positive relations with European countries who are their number one trading partners and support Putin and Russia. And so part of the entrepreneurial approach is really being able To maintain positive-ish relations with U.S. allies and partners, as you also build alternative power bases, somewhere else. And so that is, you know, been China's approach for a long time, I think it will continue to be so in the future.

You use the term "coercive diplomacy" a fair amount, which as I see it, means deterrence, effectively: clear red lines and indeed threats as well as reassurance. What is the coercive diplomacy you'd like to see the U. S. and other nations, providing for China. And, and what's the coercive diplomacy you see that China is giving these other nations, conversely?

So first, let me be clear. I mean, coercion, deterrence is a type of coercion. You are correct. But China sees deterrence very differently than the United States. And there's a key component to how China sees deterrence. That's different that I think is important to point out and that a lot of Chinese doctrinal writings about deterrence is they say they want to convince countries to give up the will to resist their aggression. I mean, they wouldn't call it their aggression, but it's very different. What China wants is to be able to be aggressive and have other countries not respond to it. That's not really how the United States sees deterrence, right? Deterrence is about kind of maintaining the current status quo and stability and peace. It's not like we want to change the status quo and we don't want anyone to do anything about it. Um, so even though in the Chinese language and kind of mindset, they would say, oh, it's very defensive because we just want other countries, to accommodate our preferences and not to respond when we're misbehaving. That's not really how I would say Western thought is on deterrence.

Now when you're in the realm of coercion. I mean, this is a I think a really important point because the Chinese do rely a lot on coercion when it comes to those territorial claims with other regional claimants, but we, I don't want to understate how much they rely on positive inducements when it comes to the rest of the world. It's not like China is just running around the world, bullying everyone. there are countries that are still signing up to BRI that still want to be partners with China because there are positive externalities from doing so. So it's partially that coercive aspect, and that's where the military is really shining right now, and that's the Chinese military.

They're being so active when you see, for example, all the military operations around Taiwan. You know, I've talked to the PLA officers directly about this, and they'll be very clear the reason for this increased presence. It's to show the people of Taiwan, the government of Taiwan, that they do not have any hope of defense, so they should just give up now. The Chinese always tell me, "Oh, you know, Oriana, we want to unify with Taiwan without a war." A lot of people who criticize my work on the possibility of a hot war over Taiwan would say, China prefers to do this peacefully. And I don't find that particularly insightful. The idea that a country wants to get what they want to get at minimal cost. Yeah, yeah, of course, sure. China wants to do this without a war. The question is, do you think that the people of Taiwan are going to completely capitulate to communist rule without any use of force? And my answer is no. And then the second question is, do you think China is willing to maintain the status quo forever, or are they more likely to use force to try to change the status quo? And at least when I asked the Chinese directly, how long can you wait? Can you wait 50 years, 40 years, 30 years? They tell me absolutely not. They say they're not going to wait that long. And that's what leads to some of my concerns.

So it depends. Like in the South China Sea they can rely mainly on just coercive diplomacy, shows a force to basically have de facto control over the waterways. But for me on Taiwan, I think, it can't be coercive diplomacy alone. It has to be a hot war. They need boots on the ground, on the island, in my mind, before the people of Taiwan are willing to completely give up. it really depends on the issue area of how direct that use of force has to be for the Chinese to achieve their goals.

Let's just fully tackle this question then, uh, and not beat around the bush. How, how likely do you think a hot war is between China and the U.S. and other powers? Obviously, this is speculation, we're not asking for Nostradamus style prediction. You've already said you're worried about the prospect, and that Taiwan is a key flashpoint, for it. But how likely do you think this is in the next, say, four years, five years or until the end of Xi's term in 2027, which is a point that a lot of analysts say is a possibility for it. And who would win?

So there's really very, very, very little possibility before 2027. Uh, for me, 2027 is not a deadline, it's a no-earlier-than date. Xi Jinping has said he wants the military to be ready by then. And, for a number of reasons, China's concept of war control, their military doctrine, they like victory to be assured before they move. We're talking about a situation under which they initiate the war, there's no reason to initiate before they're ready, I'm not really worried about a pre-2027 type of conflict. I think, generally speaking, Trump has delayed the timeline because- and I'll lay out some of the logic- but the only scenario that's really problematic is the short war. A lot of other academics, when they write about this, they're like, "Oh, you know, China doesn't want to fight a world war with the United States, and then, U.S. allies and partners will stop trading with China and that will be devastating to the economy." And I mean, all of it is true. China, will not fight this war over Taiwan if they think it's going to be that style of war. That is way too costly for China, not only the war itself, but the aftermath of the war after they fought with the United States, I don't see any scenario in which we have a relationship with China moving forward. But that's not the scenario that people are worried about. It's kind of this straw man, which people are like, "oh yeah, China doesn't want to fight world war three." I'm not worried about that. We are adequately deterring that. What I'm worried about is the two and a half to three week campaign China's planning in which, they do a *fait accompli* before the United States military can get there and they have to engage with the United States. And I think, unless the United States changes its force posture so that we can respond immediately to a use of force, that becomes very tempting, right? If you say to Xi Jinping, listen, you can do this amphibious assault, and as long as the government of Taiwan capitulates in less than 30 days, it's a win. And then what is the scenario under which the whole world stops trading with China if the war is two and a half weeks long and there's no ongoing repression campaign on the island of Taiwan. At least when I talk to leaders around the world in Japan, Europe, they're like, "no, of course, there should be some token sanctions," but we're not talking about a level of devastation that would be necessary to deter them.

So for those reasons, if by 2027, the PLA says to Xi, we are ready to do this amphibious assault, and of course it's not easy. No one says it's easy, but people are always like, well, what about Normandy? Normandy was hard. Like imagine Normandy, if we first took out all of the German defenses with precision guided munitions before we tried to land, that's what we're talking about. The Chinese are going to attack the defenses of Taiwan first before they try to land. If the PLA says to Xi, "listen, we can do this before the United States, even if the United States wants to intervene, they won't be able to, in time." I worry that's very tempting for China, and that's why I put the probability sort of post-27, it's more likely than not.

Now the caveat is Trump, because all the logic behind the *fait accompli*, Is about a rational president, right? Let's just say China does this quickly in three weeks. The government of Taiwan capitulates. There's no war happening. Is a U. S. president going to launch an attack on China? I would argue no, that seems crazy, but the Chinese find Trump to be really unpredictable. Like who knows what he would do? It would make no sense. United States, we have assets right there in Japan. We could deploy them immediately. We don't have enough. So they would all be killed. So let's just say China tries to attack Taiwan, we immediately respond, but that would lead to, the United States losing the majority of their advanced aircraft, thousands of Americans being killed. Is the U. S. president going to order that attack? Logically, we say no. What is Trump going to do? Who knows? So all of that is to say that fait accompli is only attractive to the Chinese if they feel like a U.S. president is going to react logically. And so I think it buys us four years. I think the Chinese are not even going to consider initiating. Any sort of use of force against Taiwan, as long as president Trump is in office.

The only caveat to that is President Trump could do something really stupid that would precipitate the war. I do think there are some red lines with China, things like, the United States puts a military base on the island of Taiwan, we support Taiwan independence, we extend the nuclear umbrella to Taiwan, anything like that, which- people say Trump doesn't care about Taiwan, but, his first administration was extremely provocative on some of those things, right? First time we have U. S. military personnel in uniform on the island of Taiwan, legislation passed to support high level visits, so you just don't know. So there's always the possibility that the United States crosses some red line and China feels like, okay, it's not great, but we have to go. But generally speaking, the scenario that I worry the most about is China initiating this war and trying to achieve a *fait accompli*. And I'm less worried about that the four years of a Trump administration than I would be otherwise.

So your previous book from 2019, *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime*, this examines the question of how to avoid war through diplomacy and the difficulties of that, using case studies from the Vietnam War to the Korean War and the Sino-Indian War. What were your key findings there, and how do these historical case studies cross-pollinate your thinking on, these issues today?

So this book is about sort of diplomacy in wartime and how difficult it is to get countries to talk to each other and that this is an additional obstacle. It's not the case that it's the same thinking or logic of a willingness to talk through, and a willingness to negotiate an end to the war. Those are two separate things. 85% of wars nowadays end by negotiated settlement and any war between the United States and China would end by negotiated settlement. No country is strong enough to really completely destroy the other side and then impose some sort of agreement, so there's going to be some sort of negotiated settlement.

The book is about how wars actually are prolonged because you have this additional obstacle of countries that are unwilling to even get to the table. We see this in Ukraine, for example. If we can't even get countries to the table, then there's no possibility of a negotiated settlement. The concern is, we recognize a lot of times that war impacts diplomacy. I'm negotiating with you some sort of deal. And so I do a big campaign to try to give myself leverage at the negotiating table. But the book is about how the negotiating table impacts military operations. And I'm willing to talk to you. What does that, does that hurt the morale of my troops? Does that make it, do I encourage you to fight harder or longer because you think I'm on my last legs because I'm willing to talk. So it's about how states are really concerned that their willingness to negotiate during wars demonstrates weaknesses and then leads to a military situation that is less favorable than it would be otherwise.

And so what does this mean about something like Taiwan? A very unpopular view, my own view, is that Let's just say this war happens over Taiwan, everything goes well for the United States, the United States is winning. What I tell U. S. leaders is the best you can hope for is a return to the status quo before the war. There's no scenario under which even if the United States is winning, we say, okay, war termination, we are willing to negotiate, but we need an independent Taiwan. China can lose a war over Taiwan, but they can't lose Taiwan.

If our precondition for negotiations is something like "okay, you have to agree that Taiwan's going to be independent" I think that's the scenario in which china considers escalating the level of violence in the war to levels like nuclear war that the United States, I don't think has a resolve to fight so the best thing we can do is basically go back to the way things were, which solves nothing because it just means that war could happen again and again, and that's also why especially civil wars, you'll see the reoccurrence. How many times does this restart in the modern era, that's a big problem of reoccurring complex, but I don't see any possibility, even if things go well, that this issue would be "resolved forever," largely because of the difficulties in negotiation.

How does Ukraine factor into this, in this coming year and years ahead? if there is a, some form of negotiated settlement in Ukraine, which it seems that Trump is gunning for, which will probably end in territorial concessions to Russia, would that embolden China to move on Taiwan as some analysts have argued?

I don't think so. I don't think what's happening in Ukraine really impacts Chinese thinking on a lot of things. You know, I try to tell us military strategists, do we sit around and worry that we would lose a war because Russia is not performing well? But in a lot of cases, our military is more similar to the Russian military than they are to the Chinese military.

And the conflict, being a land-based conflict, really has very little to do with the air and sea conflict that would happen over Taiwan. I don't worry that it encourages the Chinese. I also don't think it really discourages the Chinese. It's kind of like, useful information that is somewhat irrelevant to them. But the overarching message, I think, is really important because what Ukraine hopefully has done for us is remind people that leaders often choose power over prosperity.

In the book, in *Upstart,* I talk a lot about how the need to maintain Communist Party control will shape the strategy that they pursue. We might look at something and say, "hey, you might be better at innovation if you're more laissez faire about certain things," but the Chinese are like, "okay, that's great. But if it undermines Communist Party control, the answer is no." They're trying to have an innovative society in the context of maintaining party control. So people, when it comes to Taiwan, when it comes to anything, people are often like, "well, you know, this would be better for Chinese prosperity." But it's like Xi Jinping has been very clear, and I think China has been very clear, that of course he cares about prosperity. I'm not saying he doesn't care at all about the economy, but the economy is there to enable these strategic goals, and there's a balance there and countries time immemorial have chosen power over prosperity. War is destructive by its very nature and yet countries choose it. So when Putin invaded Ukraine, the fact that everyone was so surprised, and I see that kind of logic of like, "why would China, I mean, who cares about Taiwan? Why would China do this?" Because Taiwan is the most important issue for them and communist party legitimacy is based on it. And you know, why have money if it, if it means that you can't get the real things that you want. I worry that people can be naive about that. And think, oh, well, you know, can't we just all live in peace and harmony and prosperity? I could tell you how I wish the world was, or I can tell you how it is. And so I'm hoping at least that what Ukraine has done is change some people's minds about the possibility, open our minds to the possibility that China has to use force to achieve some of its goals. And under certain scenarios, it's going to be willing to do so.

Okay. Uh, last question. It could be difficult to talk about these big topics of national security competition and war, let alone write a book about it without risking the pitfall of "yellow peril" or "10 foot tall syndrome," which I think other authors have fallen into. How did you try to avoid that, I suppose, creating fear, unnecessary fear around China, outside of the clear headed view of risks and how important Do you think it is to avoid that? Because sometimes I feel at risk of evincing the naivety that you want about that I feel all of the warnings can sort of create the conditions we're seeking to avoid, pushing China away from the negotiating table and almost making it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Well, I think generally speaking, if a person has a view, that then you can predict their opinion about every issue, China-North Korea, China's nuclear buildup, China's economy, like that's kind of not to be trusted. And again, this is why I think area specialists are very important. You know, great power strategists might be like, we predicted there would be tension and it's like, okay, I feel that's kind of like a psychic who's like, oh, there's going to be some event in your future, you know, it's like, yeah, you're right, but you really have to get the details right.

And at least in this book, what I think that comes out clearly and what I hope, you know, comes out clearly in a lot of my work, is there's some things I'm very worried about and there's some things I'm not, and those are very equally controversial.

So in this book, for example, I am not worried about Chinese nuclear buildup at all. And I think the sort of U. S. debate about the threat of the buildup of Chinese nuclear weapons completely sort of misunderstands the dynamics of why China feels like it needs more nuclear weapons, which makes perfect sense, given advancements in missile defense and sort of the aggressive nuclear doctrine that the United States has, I'm not worried about Chinese overseas basing, and so for me, I think strategic empathy is very important. I'm not saying that China's does everything right. Like I said, there's a lot of cases in the book at which I'm like, they got this wrong. I'm not saying everything is a threat. You know, I had work on North Korea, in which I often argued that it was stupid that the United States wanted to deter Chinese intervention in Korea contingencies. Of course, we're going to have to give up some influence on the peninsula. but their plan is to seize, North Korea nuclear weapons, which means they're not going to be used. So isn't it worth it to let the Chinese sort of do that for us? Generally speaking, again, it's kind of like if someone's view is China's a danger everywhere, or China's involvement everywhere is a problem, I just tend to be very skeptical. And that's why I always say I have something for everybody to hate, because it's true. Like sometimes Republicans hate what I say, sometimes Democrats, but as long as the research, and this is I think the role of academia in a lot of ways and hopefully if we do policy relevant research right is, I don't have an opinion about something until I do the research.

Sometimes it means I'm concerned about it, and sometimes it means I'm not concerned about it. Like, China and the autocratic quad, I am not concerned about it. China does not want a bloc like that. They do not want to be the leader of a bloc like that. But I am concerned about China and Russia, not because I think they're forming an alliance because they're not, but because actually indirect support during conflict can be enough to protect them against coercive measures from the United States.

That nuance is hard in politics. You know, I have senators and congressmen ask me all the time "okay, Oriana, that's all very complicated. You gave me like 15 caveats, but I just want to tell the American people this one thing." And I'm like, well, that's, I don't know what to tell you. China, is a threat and a challenge to the United States on one hand. On the other, everything they're doing and everything they want makes perfect sense. I don't think that there's some sort of evil country or whatever. It's just what they want and what they need to be safe and secure from their mindset makes sense if you're Chinese. I just happen not to be Chinese, and I care more about American interests than I care about Chinese interests. But there's nothing about that that is surprising to me, that's shocking to me, that when I interact with my Chinese colleagues and they're like, "Oh, we want the U. S. military out of Asia." I'm like, of course, like, why would you want to be surrounded by the U.S. Military? China wants to be able to do what it wants to do without having to worry about the U. S. response. That makes perfect sense. The United States wants to be able to do what it wants to do without having China undermine its interests, right? And so my job and my career is to understand China to help the United States better position itself.

But to have that strategic empathy is extremely important and not sort of like you said, engage in threat-mongering about the other side. But at the same time being very realistic about, yes, China is creating significant problems and undermining in some cases, U.S. interests. and the United States needs to respond to prevent that from happening.

Right, so it's about separating out the issues and being clear in the way that we talk and write about China and to China, that we are separating these different concerns without lumping them together.

Right, or thinking that our strategic objectives are somehow morally okay, but China's aren't. You know, we want to have that same degree, you know, maybe we do it differently and we have different views of how to do it. but it makes perfect sense what their strategic objectives are.

Right, just acknowledging our own perspectives. Well, I very much hope that in China, there is a Western books podcast, talking about the same things from their perspective. But for our purposes, thank you very much, Oriana, for coming on the China Books podcast.

Yeah, thank you for having me. ∎