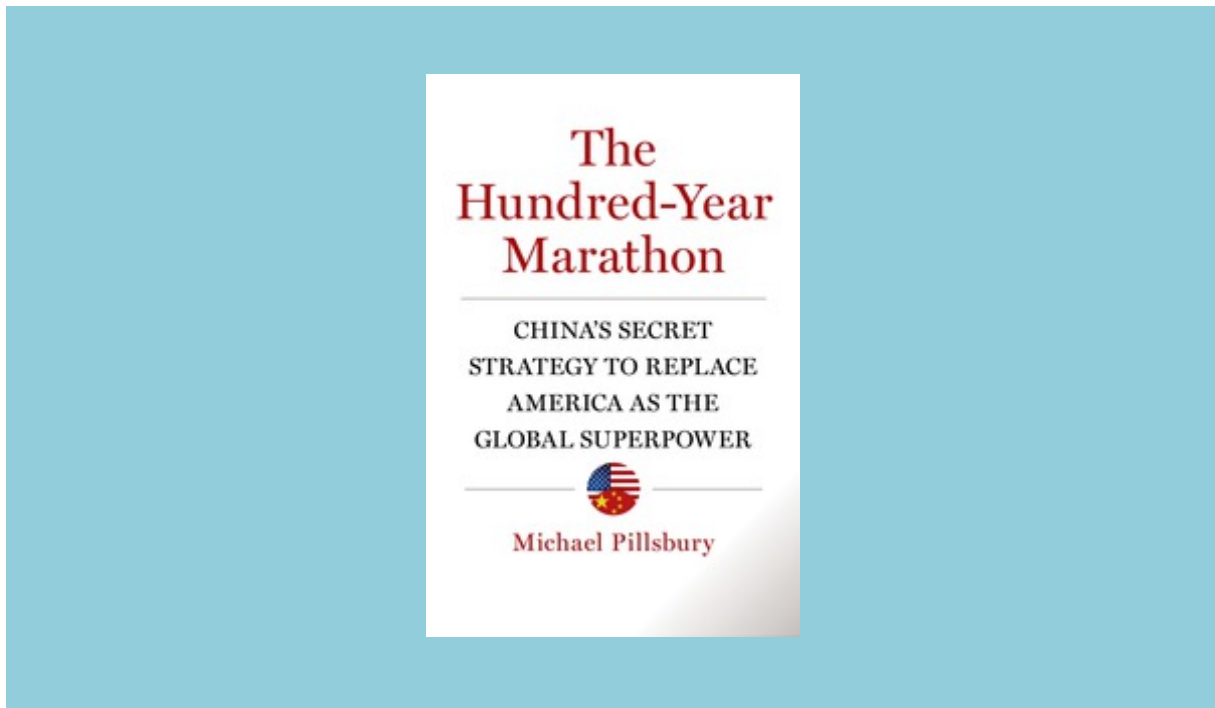


Book Review: *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, by Michael Pillsbury (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2015)

- By Rosita Dellios



Strategy is a broad term used to denote a plan developed for attaining a particular goal. Although the word comes from the Greek, *strategia*, referring to the art of the general, strategy has entered the language of many fields of endeavour, including business and sport. When applied to affairs of the state, the term 'grand strategy' often emerges. This is when all the instruments of power are brought to bear to achieve national security goals. These instruments can be economic, political, military and more. It would be difficult to keep these efforts a secret, let alone a century-long one, and yet this is the premise of a book published this year with the title of *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*.

The author, Michael Pillsbury, cannot easily be dismissed as yet another anti-China conspiracy theorist that cannot be taken seriously. Far from it, his impressive background includes Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Chinese Strategy at the Hudson Institute, US defence policy adviser, and former US government official who worked in a number of capacities, including for the CIA. For this reason his 'secret strategy' thesis is

doubly dangerous: it is inflammatory in its lack of objectivity, reminiscent of Cold War propaganda, and it is performed by a respected ‘expert’ who would normally rate as credible.

The test of the book’s credibility as Pillsbury launches on a singular idea, captured in the subtitle – ‘China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower’ – comes under the guise of letting the documents speak for themselves. As he says in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*:¹ ‘There is very little opinion by me.’

Yet this is an opinionated book, relentless in its pursuit of uncovering the contours of China’s long-term strategy – the ‘Hundred-Year Marathon’ starting in 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party proclaimed the new China – to become greater than the United States as a geopolitical power in 2049. While critics might argue that this is likely to happen much sooner, rendering the book’s message ‘old news’, Pillsbury informs the reader that it is an ‘intellectual trap’ to believe this. Two reasons he posits are that China lacks global power projection (as if explicit military bases abroad are the only method) and the RMB is ‘hardly poised to replace the dollar as the global reserve currency’ (p. 232) – though events could be overtaking this view with the RMB now recognised as ‘the second most used trade financing currency and ninth most used currency for payments globally’.²

Pillsbury agrees with David Shambaugh that China is a ‘partial power’³ and not with Martin Jacques that China is poised to ‘rule the world’.⁴ The convenience of thinking in this way, even if such ‘certainties’ are debatable, is that it gives the United States time to counter Chinese strategy. The methods to do so are listed as 12 steps in the final chapter. Unfortunately for the United States, they do not represent fresh thinking but more a Cold War strategy. Indeed, the author begins this chapter with a reminder that the United States ‘won the Cold War’ and that it could do so again to defeat or restrain ‘China’s outsize ambitions’ (p. 214).

That such concerns are parochially American with a CIA perceptual filter are not as disconcerting (they are all too commonly expressed) as the way in which Pillsbury, who should know better with his sinological expertise, has turned culture on its head. He has done this by looking at only one strand and one meaning in an otherwise rich and diverse Chinese tradition. Pillsbury employs the device of using the bloodthirsty Warring States Period (475-221 BCE) as his yardstick for measuring Chinese strategic intentions today. Within this ancient context, he positions the United States as the hegemon and China as a weaker state seeking to dislodge the hegemon or ‘ba’. He attributes this thinking to the China’s ‘hawks’ who, in Pillsbury’s view, have taken over Beijing’s agenda for devising the nation’s ‘grand

¹ Howard W. French, ‘Panda Hugger Turned Slugger’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 February 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-the-hundred-year-marathon-by-michael-pillsbury-1424996150> (accessed 17.3.15).

² Ansuya Harjani, ‘Yuan to supersede dollar as top reserve currency: Survey’, *CNBC*, 26 February 2014, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/101450365> (accessed 18.3.15).

³ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, 2nd edn, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

strategy'. This explains one of his recommended strategies to counter 'China's outside ambitions'. It is Step 12 – 'monitor and influence the debates between China's hawks and reformers' (p. 227).

Strategic culture, informed as it is by a number of factors including geographic considerations, historical accounts, key texts, myths and symbols, may reasonably be expected to act as an influence on strategic thinking over generations. However, it needs to be seen as one of a number of variables that impact on decision-makers and planners. Moreover, strategic culture is neither unitary nor unchanging. Sub-strategic cultures can emerge as dominant in accordance with the demands of the times and the prevailing ideology. Examples include the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) which elevated the Confucian school as its own official ideology but also maintained a Legalist tradition in its centralised system; and the period of the Three Kingdoms and the Northern and Southern Dynasties (220-589 CE) when Buddhism made inroads into a less constrained cultural space.

Indeed, the Warring States period itself, for all its instability and insecurities, was so removed from the constraints of the old order that it represented a testing ground for many philosophical ideas, termed the 'Hundred Schools of Thought'. There is an understandable demand for winning formulas and advice in troubled times. Not all the 'schools' survived the competition but the few that did – Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, and Legalism (Buddhism was to come later) – informed the theory of the military classics which, in turn, shaped Chinese strategic thought to this day. Therefore, a more nuanced and wider vision of China's traditional influences is needed to appreciate the strategic options and their interaction for Chinese planning in the current era.

Eclecticism is evident not only in Pillsbury's treatment and interpretation of traditional sources of Chinese strategic culture. Contemporary Chinese art is also selectively mobilised for its shock value. The book opens with a description of Chinese artist Cai Guo Qiang blowing up of a Christmas tree as performance art in Washington. Pillsbury then takes this symbolism as Beijing's plan to overtake the USA as Number One. Lest the reader resists such a ploy, the author assures us that he is well situated to make such judgements: 'I have arguably had more access to China's military and intelligence establishment than any other Westerner' (p. 14). Irrespective of whether this is true, Pillsbury himself must be aware that for every *yin* there is a *yang*: the artist of the blown-up Christmas tree was also responsible, as Pillsbury himself admits, for the 'awe-inspiring fireworks display during the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics' (p. 1). The so-called Chinese understanding of Darwinian thought, 'the weak are devouring the strong', which the book associates with the Chinese Communist Party's (sub) strategic culture – 'the idea of struggle for survival in a harshly competitive world' (p. 19) is one perspective. There is also another element that derives not from Darwin but from Daoism: it states that the 'the soft can control the hard, the weak can control the strong'. Affirming that the soft is 'virtue', an ancient text from the *Seven Military Classics* adds that a proper mixture of all four (soft, hard, weak, strong) is

needed.⁵ As one Chinese general – and a reputedly hawkish one at that – said at a security seminar I attended in Beijing: ‘The strong need the weak’.

Michael Pillsbury would do well to expand his repertoire when writing about China. In the end, *The Hundred-Year Marathon* is as much about Michael Pillsbury as it is about Chinese strategy. The much accomplished Pillsbury has reached that stage in life when he should be publishing his memoirs. History would benefit from the reflections of a career as a US government China expert. This would mean he could work to his strengths by relating his own experiences and it would represent time and effort better spent than propagating one side of the Chinese story.

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⁵ Ralph D. Sawyer with Mei-Chün Sawyer (trans. and commentary), *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), p. 292.

⁶ Rosita Dellios and R. James Ferguson, *China's Quest for Global Order: From Peaceful Rise to Harmonious World* (Lexington Books, Lanham Md, 2013).