中国已经登顶了吗?

帕拉格·卡纳 著 吴万伟 译

中国研究了每个大国的崛起，但它是否漏掉了大国衰落那一课呢?

新加坡---2006 年 11 月，中国公众全神贯注地观看 12 集纪录片《大国崛起》。这是由一帮可敬的中国历史学家参与制作的节目，每集都揭示了世界上包括英国、日本、俄罗斯和美国在内的大国登上全球影响力顶峰的崛起之路。当时，无论在国内还是国外，中国都被视为亚洲的核心力量和未来的超级大国，但不是主要的地缘政治故事---尤其在美国还处于充分的“超级强国”模式，深深卷入对伊拉克和阿富汗的无限占领。中国人更有理由坐下来认真研究一番那些国家是如何强大，并在全球施展其影响力的。

《大国崛起》实现了它的核心目标：现在轮到中国崛起并登上历史上超级大国的顶峰之路了，这个观念被社会化和合法化了。中国显然听从了纪录片的教训，这再合适不过：实践进口替代战略、强制技术转让、积蓄大量外汇储备、囤积稀有金属、部署商业舰队、大肆放贷、在遥远的地方进行基础设施建设、建立强大的军队、保护供应链安全，在殖民地或附属国收买精英等。如果世界历史是《风险：统治世界的游戏》，每个世纪都要轮流坐庄，由大国轮流统治世界的话，现在这个刻度表终于朝着中国倾斜了。

或许并非如此。如果历史真的能够重复，我们自己都可能对预测感到吃惊。不过，这次可能有所不同。我们已经积累了太多历史经验来预防性地改变历史的可能走向。据说西方人崇尚线性思维，而东方人喜欢循环思维。虽然两者似乎都没有抓住事物的复杂性，其中每一次的力量碰撞，每个作用和反作用都能产生分形分叉的结果，它们再通过体系不断循环并向外逐渐延伸。如果中国不是充满信心地重复过去的辉煌而是错误地重蹈现在的困境，会发生什么情况呢？

遗憾的是，中央电视台并没有拍摄《大国崛起》的续集来描述各个帝国的衰落：导致帝国腐败、颠覆和功亏一篑的意识形态顽固性和战略错误。不过，即便没有关于帝国大肆扩张和傲慢自大的正式课程，中国电视台仍然极为详尽地逐一记录密集传播美国过去 20 年中在国际上的胡作非为和国内的衰败。但是，如果相信自己不会犯错误，中国的衰落可能在其崛起还没有完成时候就已经开始了。美国已经在快速从其超级强国的顶峰地位滑落下来，而中国可能永远也达不到那样的巅峰状态。

如果相信自己不会犯错误，中国的衰落可能在其崛起还没有完成时候就已经开始了。

当这个国家还在积蓄力量不断壮大之时，就谈及“中国峰值”似乎有些太早了。中国的经济增长已经放缓，但在新冠病毒疫情开始之后，中国成为唯一经济仍然在增长的国家。中国是在快速老龄化，但它拥有的年轻人仍然比整个欧洲都多，而机器人能够为自己和世界生产更多商品。其国内债务像坐了火箭似地向上攀升，但它仍然拥有巨额外汇储备，正在开设资本账户并部署全球性的数字加密货币。我们使用“峰值”类似于“石油峰值”或“美国峰值”：指的是相对值而不是绝对值。“石油峰值”理论的支持者错过了庞大的额外全球储蓄这个现实和其他的和可再生能源崛起的现实。因为我们已经达到了石油需求的峰值，供应已经变得没有相关性了。

同样，虽然有外交政策错误，无论 2020 年 11 月美国大选的结果如果，美国将仍然是世界上头号强国，而且会持续到未来很长一段时间。其经济依然庞大，它仍然控制着世界上唯一可靠的储蓄货币。其军事实力可投射到全球任何一个角落，可支持其全世界的盟国，北美是唯一真正没有冲突的大洲。随着石油的兴起，世人对美国领袖的需要达到顶峰。国家选择自己的服务提供者，在买家和卖主的全球市场上获得军事援助、金融、技术和其他福利。

最近之前，大部分美国人认为，全世界都渴望像美国人一样生活。到了现在，他们可能知道真相如何了。最近一些年，鉴于中国的内部活力和外部积极性，通过一带一路倡议在全球开始新一波的基础设施，中国人一直在告诉自己类似的话。但是，就像美国通过劝诱盟国倾向于接受违背自身利益的政策，任意性地强行制裁伊朗和北朝鲜等被国际社会遗弃的国家，阻碍有意义的进步而挥霍滥用自己的特权地位一样，中国也已经很快越过了界限，从获得他国兄弟般的善意转向人家持续不断的怀疑。

从喜马拉雅山到南中国海，中国咄咄逼人地夺取微小领土的努力已经确保三十多亿亚洲人可能再也不相信它了。阿拉伯人、非洲人和拉美人正在修改其接纳中国债务和项目的程度。而欧盟已经刚刚宣称中国是“系统性的对手”。中国一直忙于赢得个别战斗的胜利，却没有认识到它可能正在失掉整场战争。

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美国和中国都已经过高估计了自己的技术优势。美国将发明和革新混淆起来，忽略了技术传播有多么快，而且被竞争的政府和企业多么迅速地修改和适应海外市场。因特网和基因排序是美国最先开发的，但日本、中国和其他国家已经为本国公民提供最快的宽带和基因疗法了。5G 和量子计算也是同样的情况。

中国也错误地把市场优势当作垄断。但是，华为被多国协同驱逐出关键的基础设施网络市场---诸如弹性供应链倡议之类努力来刺激日本、澳大利亚、印度和其他国家在半导体、医药、稀土矿产和汽车零部件等的产业潜能---所有这些都展现出其支配性优势能多么快地被消耗掉。当美国支持的印度公司提供的人工智能服务是第三方提供的大数据分析、机器学习和其他统计工具给客户，无需大规模的自我导航投资，也没有附加条件时，为什么要和获取你数据的中国公司合作？历史上最不可避免的力量不是帝国的循环而是技术分散。

同样道理，当今世界的主要特征更多是地缘政治的无序状态而不是集中。欧洲已经作为金融、外交、和管理权威的独立一极而出现。远非沮丧地接受在美国和中国两极的“新冷战”中低人一等的地位，欧盟越来越明显地要按照自己的方式与俄罗斯和伊朗打交道。“欧盟-亚洲联结倡议”是比美国想出的任何东西更合理得多的欧亚接触途径，欧洲与亚洲的贸易和投资纽带很快可能比美国纽带多一倍。

在亚洲内部的互动也很快达让中国版的美国“单极时刻”走到终点。日本已经开启了战略复兴，印度充满信心地回避中国在喜玛拉雅多个剧场的运作；就算新明朝的“珠宝舰队”大军也根本无法控制印度洋。与美国和澳大利亚一起，这些印太国家已经组成战略“四国联盟”来为中国的弱小邻国提供支持，以抗衡中国的扩张。今天的弱国渴望主权和自我实现，但不是新商业附属国地位，强大的生命线已经出现来确保他们仍然在从前的道路上而非屈服于后者。

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无序状态是复杂体系的内在特征：权力冷酷无情地分散。我们从来没有像现在这样有全球性的权力分配：21 世纪是人类历史上第一次存在每个洲或地区都代表自己权力的独立一极。这种复杂的全球体系比任何单一权力都更巨大：在其关系网络中，任何一个国家都不能将意志强加于人而不引发其他国家组成联盟与其抗衡。权力总存在边界，但无序状态可能没有尽头。

人口学特征和心理变化也是显著的变量，推动我们走向未来的非循环切线。自从 1945 年以来，全球人口已经增长了三倍，联合国承认的国家数量达到 193 个，将近翻了两番。大量人口生活在后殖民主义国家，他们对殖民主义和冷战都有不愉快的记忆。他们不希望历史重演，也不会允许历史重演。本来可能需要几十年或者几个世纪才能形成的反中国的反冲作用在过去 3 年时间里竟然变成了现实。2020 年将提供一个无情冲击，让人从 2010 年的“中国梦”中醒来。

所有这些都暗示当今的传统智慧———美国利用这个智慧恢复其霸主地位或中国取而代之，而世界其他地方被迫在中美新冷战中选边站———代表了想象力的显著缺乏。不过，我们最近的思想缺陷可能具有教育意义，教给我们世界政治新动态变化的教训。更加古老的和越来越过时的学术传统从简单性中寻找安慰，将理论的吝啬和蹩脚伪装成严谨性。

不仅西方学者受其历史模式的诱惑，具有讽刺意味的是，中国学者也是如此。毕竟，如果从北京的视角来看，如果不像西方当局那样告诉你现在轮到你们统治世界了，会怎么样呢？媒体一直在迫不及待地拥抱“修昔底德陷阱”，似乎美国哈佛大学肯尼迪学院贝尔福科学与国际事务中心的主任格雷厄姆·艾利森（Graham Allison）的伟大著作《注定走向战争：中美能摆脱修昔底德陷阱》的副标题中并没有问号。

21 世纪是人类历史上第一次在每个洲或地区都有代表自己权力的独立一极。

但是，实际上已经公开透露的，体现了快速反馈就天然地存在于复杂的全球体系中：夸张地渲染中国威胁已经激发出针对那种威胁的回应，引起地缘政治沿着新的矢量移动。有关全球人口，类似的现象已经在出现：世界人口达到 150 亿，将世界陷入马尔萨斯式无政府状态的恐惧求助于广泛的措施来控制人口的疯狂增长。现有的估计暗示全世界的人口将在 2050 年达到 100 亿人。

人们忍不住想反对陷入这种宿命论。它已经被(市场消化了信息而)给出相应价格。就像克里斯托弗·诺兰（Christopher Nolan）的科幻电影《信条》和亚历克斯·加兰（Alex Garland）的稍微更容易理解的微小系列《开拓者》（Devs），确认自由意志是戏剧顶峰的元素，但更多是我们无法逃避的主要情节的干扰（想象在《开拓者》中最后的电梯场景或者猫和老鼠，或肯尼思·布拉纳（Kenneth Branagh）扮演的俄国军火商安德烈（Andrei）和《信条》中约翰·大卫·华盛顿（John David Washington）扮演的主角。）至少在科幻小说中，未来与现在交流，提供了依据其信息行动的显著刺激。在现实生活中，我们维持一种控制的幻觉，将最糟糕场景放置在我们思想的某个角落。

新冠疫情已经是悲惨的提醒，它让我们意识到这个错误的心理状态。当灾难降临的时候，世界上的所有先见之明都没有多大意义。虽然科学家警告过病毒在全球传播的指数级增长速度，民兵组织占领帝国大厦要求终止封城隔离措施，他们从来就没有真正严肃地对待这些警告。因为没有对过去疫情的机构性记忆，西方社会大部分人没有能吸取 1918 年西班牙流感的简单教训：居家隔离和戴口罩。同样，过渡期诚信项目(Transition Integrity Project)模拟了美国大选结果引发争议的场景，以便采取步骤预防可能出现的分崩离析，但意识形态分歧和我们没有能力采取集体行动都只能确保那些场景无论如何都可能出现。

灾难性战争的地缘政治循环难道不会同样出现吗？我们或许宣称拥有先见之明来建议中国接受现实，美国在挑起战争之前忽略的现实，战争可能类似地削弱其好不容易赢得的崛起进程。但是，如果中国实际上想要这些战争作为其宏伟计划的组成部分呢？其实，另一个担忧来自现在：特朗普政府显著提升美国与台湾外交和军事纽带的做法——加上限制台湾半导体制造公司向中国大陆出售半导体产品的制裁措施———被认为是拆解盟国向中国大陆提供产品的供应链，但这些措施可能加快中国推进其武统台湾的规划，实际占领这些关键零部件生产基地。本来旨在打残中国高科技产业的战略反过来可能提升了它的产业能力，推动中国在战场上占据支配地位的能力。

本来可能需要几十年或者几个世纪才能形成的反中国的反冲作用在过去 3 年的时间里就变成了现实。

虽然如此，即使中国预先考虑到未来行动的两个步骤，它是否考虑未来的三步或四步呢？我感到有些怀疑。中国虽然机敏灵巧，但并非无所不知无所不能。它可能通过更加“和平的崛起”扭转现在／未来的抗拒／反冲来适应自己的野心，但习近平主席的民族主义劫持了这个国家。这是历史上的绝妙情节难以逃避的枢纽？或许。但是，中国不是第一个将发展势头当成永久特征的国家。民族主义和必胜主义都预示着冲突的极大可能性———其后续影响未必对中国有利。

现在需要来自未来的更多声音。如果没有了《信条》中的“时间钳形攻势”，我们肯定不断遭遇场景并延伸出道路来避免最坏结果的出现。在 1983 年的热门电影《战争游戏》中，战争操作计划响应系统(WOPR)模拟循环了每一次可能的核战争场景，并意识到它们最终都导致僵局，发出的感慨非常有名，“一场怪异的游戏：唯一的赢家就是不开启战争。”如果历史是事先已经编程完毕的算法，我们唯一的希望是维持自我管理自生系统的集体意志。我们与祖先有危险数量的共同性：骄傲、恐惧和贪婪。但真正重要的是其他一些东西：威慑、主权、共同的气候威胁等等。现在到了吹出不同哨音的时候。

作者简介：

帕拉格·卡纳（Parag Khanna），以数据和场景为基础的战略顾问公司“未来地图”创始人和经理合伙人，最新著作是《未来在亚洲：２１世纪的商业、冲突和文化》（2019）。本文的英文原稿发表在“Noemamag”杂志上。

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Has China Peaked Already?

China has studied every great power's rise — but did it miss the class about decline?

Shanghai. (Ashley Guo for Noema Magazine)
By Parag Khanna October 13, 2020

Parag Khanna is the founder and managing partner of FutureMap, a data and scenario-based strategic advisory firm. His latest book is "The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict and Culture in the 21st Century."

SINGAPORE — In November 2006, the Chinese public was held rapt by a 12-part documentary series titled "The Rise of the Great Powers." Curated by a team of respected Chinese historians, each episode revealed the pathways major empires took to reach the zenith of their global influence, including the United Kingdom, Japan, Russia and the United States. At the time, China was viewed — both at home and abroad — as Asia's central force and a future superpower, but not the main geopolitical story — especially as the U.S. was in full "hyper-power" mode, deep into its indefinite occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. This was all the more reason for the Chinese to sit back and cautiously study how nations could become so powerful as to extend their might all across the planet.

"The Rise of the Great Powers" achieved its central objective: to socialize and legitimize the notion that it was China's turn to rise into the pantheon of history's superpowers. And China has clearly followed the documentary's lessons to a tee: practice import substitution, force technology transfer, amass currency reserves, hoard precious metals, deploy merchant fleets, lend prodigiously, install infrastructure far and wide, build a powerful military, protect your supply chains, buy off elites in colonies and client states, and so forth. If world history were a game of Risk, then every century, the board is reset and another player gets its turn to rule the world. The scale is finally weighted in China's favor.

Or maybe not. If history really did repeat itself, we'd marvel at our own predictability. But this time could also be very different. We have amassed enough history to preventively alter the course history seems to be taking us on. It is said that Westerners reason in linear terms and Easterners in circular concepts. Neither though seems to grasp complexity, in which every collision of forces, every action and reaction, produces fractal outcomes that recirculate and ripple through the system. What if, rather than confidently repeating the past, China is mistakenly repeating the present?

CCTV unfortunately never produced a sequel on imperial decline: the ideological rigidity and strategic blunders that corrupted, subverted and undermined the success of empires. But even without a formal curriculum on imperial overstretch and hubris, Chinese TV has beamed home blow by blow America's past two decades

of international flailing and domestic decay. Yet convinced it can do no wrong, China's decline may have begun before its rise is complete. America has quickly fallen from its hyper-power apex. China may well never reach it.

"Convinced it can do no wrong, China's decline may have begun before its rise is complete."

It seems premature to speak of "peak China" when the country is still going from strength to strength. Growth has slowed, but in the wake of COVID-19, it is the only economy growing at all. It is rapidly aging, but still has more youth than Europe has people, while robots churn out enough goods for itself and the world. Its domestic debt has skyrocketed, but it still has enormous reserves, is opening its capital account and deploying a global cryptocurrency. But the sense in which to use "peak" is akin to "peak oil" or "peak America": relative, not absolute. Proponents of "peak oil" missed the reality of vast additional global reserves as well as the phenomenal rise of alternative and renewable energy. Because we have reached peak oil demand, supply has become irrelevant.

Similarly, despite foreign policy blunders and irrespective of the November 2020 election, America will remain the world's preeminent power long into the future. Its economy is gargantuan, and it controls the world's only reliable reserve currency. Its military has global reach and can reinforce allies across the globe, and North America is the only truly conflict-free continent. Yet as with oil, the demand for American leadership has peaked. Countries choose their service providers for military assistance, financing, technology and other utilities from a global marketplace of suitors and vendors.

Until recently, most Americans thought the world wanted to be like them. By now, they probably know better. In recent years, the Chinese have been telling themselves similar things, given the country's internal dynamism and external activism in building a new layer of global infrastructure through its Belt and Road Initiative. But much as America has abused its privileged status by cajoling allies toward policies counter to their own interests and imposing wanton sanctions that inhibit meaningful progress in rehabilitating pariah states such as Iran and North Korea, China has very quickly crossed the line from receiving fraternal goodwill to permanent suspicion.

From the Himalayas to the South China Sea, its aggressive pursuit of micro-territories has ensured that more than three billion Asians may never trust it again. Arabs, Africans and Latin Americans are trimming their exposure to Chinese debt and projects. For its part, the European Union has just declared China a "systemic rival." China has been so busy winning battles that it doesn't realize it may already have lost the war.

“Countries choose their service providers for military assistance, financing, technology and other utilities from a global marketplace of suitors and vendors.”

Both America and China have also overestimated their technological superiority. The U.S. has conflated invention with innovation, overlooking how rapidly technologies spread and are adapted to foreign markets by rival governments and their firms. The Internet and gene sequencing were pioneered in the U.S., but Japan, China and others have delivered the fastest bandwidth and gene therapies to their citizens. The same goes for 5G and quantum computing.

China too has mistaken market prowess for monopoly. But the coordinated ejection of Huawei from critical infrastructure networks — and efforts such as the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative to boost the industrial capacity of countries such as Japan, Australia, India and others in semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, rare earth minerals and automobile parts — demonstrate how quickly dominance can be eroded. Why go with Chinese companies that harvest your data when U.S.-backed Indian firms offer AI-as-a-service is a third-party provision of big data analysis, machine learning and other statistical tools to clients without the need for large self-directed investment., with no strings attached? The most inevitable force in history is not imperial cycles but technological diffusion.

In the same vein, today’s world is far more characterized by geopolitical entropy than concentration. Europe has emerged as an independent pole of financial, diplomatic and regulatory authority. Far from despondently accepting junior status in a U.S.-China bipolar “new Cold War,” it is increasingly going its own way in dealing with Russia and Iran. The “EU-Asia Connectivity Initiative” is a far more sensible approach to Eurasian engagement than anything the U.S. has come up with, and European trade and investment ties with Asia could soon be double America’s.

Dynamics within Asia itself are also hastily bringing an end to China’s version of America’s “unipolar moment.” Japan has mounted a strategic revival, and India is confidently parrying Chinese maneuvers in multiple Himalayan theaters; even a neo-Ming armada of “treasure fleets” will never control the Indian Ocean. Together with the U.S. and Australia, these Indo-Pacific powers have formed a strategic “Quad” to fortify the defenses of China’s weaker neighbors to limit Chinese expansionism. Today’s weak states aspire to sovereignty and self-actualization, not neo-mercantile subservience, and strong lifelines have emerged to ensure they remain on the former path rather than succumbing to the latter.

“Today’s world is far more characterized by geopolitical entropy than concentration.”

Entropy is inherent in complex systems: Power inexorably diffuses. Never before have we had such a global distribution of power: The 21st century is the first time in

human history that every continent or region represents independent poles of power in their own right. This complex global system is far greater than any single power: Within its webs of relationships, no power can impose itself on the world without counter-coalitions forming. There are limits to power, but no end to entropy.

Demographics and psychology are also significant variables nudging us toward a non-cyclical tangent for the future. Since 1945, the global population has more than tripled and the number of states recognized by the U.N. has nearly quadrupled to 193. The vast majority of the human population lives in post-colonial countries with unhappy memories of both colonialism and the Cold War; they do not wish for history to repeat itself — and will not let it. The backlash against China that has materialized in just the past three years would have taken decades, centuries ago. The 2020s will provide a rude awakening from the "Chinese Dream" of the 2010s.

All of this suggests that today's conventional wisdom — by which either the U.S. restores its primacy or China displaces it while the rest of the world is forced to choose sides in a new Cold War — represents a fairly spectacular failure of imagination. Nonetheless, our recent intellectual shortcomings can be instructive in teaching lessons in the emerging dynamics of world politics. An older and increasingly out-of-date scholarly tradition takes comfort in simplicity, with theoretical parsimony masquerading as rigor.

Not only have Western academics been seduced by their historical models but ironically, so too were the Chinese. After all, from Beijing's perspective, what is not to like about Western authorities telling you it is your turn to rule the world? The media has been all too eager to embrace the "Thucydides Trap," as if Graham Allison's great book "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?" did not contain a question mark in the subtitle.

"The 21st century is the first time in human history that every continent or region represents independent poles of power in their own right."

What has actually transpired, however, embodies the rapid feedback loops inherent in a complex global system: Hyping the China threat has inspired myriad responses to that threat, shifting geopolitics along new vectors. A similar phenomenon has been underway with respect to the global population: Fears that the world population would reach fifteen billion and plunge the world into Malthusian anarchy evoked widespread measures to control rampant population growth. Current estimates suggest the human population will reach about 10 billion people in 2050.

There is a tempting objection to this drift from fatalism: It's all priced in already. Like Christopher Nolan's film "Tenet" or Alex Garland's slightly more comprehensible miniseries "Devs," asserting free will is an element of the dramatic apotheosis, but merely a distraction from the master plot we cannot escape (think of the final

elevator scene in “Devs” or the cat-and-mouse between Kenneth Branagh’s Andrei and John David Washington’s Protagonist in “Tenet”). In sci-fi at least, the future communicates with the present, providing a stark incentive to act on its message. In real life, we maintain the illusion of control and consign the worst-case scenario to a corner of our mind.

The pandemic has been a tragic reminder of this default mental state: All the foresight in the world meant very little when it struck. While scientists warned of its exponential global spread, militias occupied state capitol buildings demanding an end to lockdowns they never took seriously in the first place. With no institutional memory of past pandemics, most Western societies failed to heed the simple lesson of the 1918 Spanish flu: Stay at home and wear a mask. Similarly, the Transition Integrity Project ran scenarios of disputed U.S. election outcomes so that steps could be taken to prevent chaos, but ideological division and our incapacity for collective action all but ensure that one of those scenarios will come to pass anyway.

Isn’t it just the same with geopolitical cycles of cataclysmic wars? We may claim to have the foresight to advise China to accept realities America ignored prior to provoking wars that will similarly erode its hard-won ascent — but what if China actually wants these wars as part of its master plan? Indeed, another worrying example from the present: The Trump administration’s overt upgrading of diplomatic and military ties with Taiwan — combined with sanctions banning the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company from selling semiconductors to China — are meant to disentangle allied countries’ supply chains from the Chinese mainland, yet they could very well be accelerating China’s plans to invade Taiwan and physically capture the production of these critical components. A strategy designed to cripple China’s high-tech industries would perversely enhance them, boosting China’s ability to dominate the battlespace.

“The backlash against China that has materialized in just the past three years would have taken decades, centuries ago.”

Still, even if China has thought two steps ahead, has it thought three or four? I have my doubts. China is nimble but not omniscient. It could have averted the present (and future) pushback to its ambitions through a more “peaceful rise,” but President Xi Jinping’s nationalism hijacked the country instead. An inescapable pivot in history’s master plot? Perhaps. But China would not be the first power to confuse its momentum for longevity. Both nationalism and triumphalism indicate a high likelihood of conflict — but not that its aftermath will necessarily favor China.

The present needs more voices from the future. Absent the “temporal pincer movements” of “Tenet,” we must constantly run scenarios and derive pathways to avoid the worst outcomes. In the 1983 hit film WarGames, the War Operation Plan Response simulator cycles through every possible nuclear war scenario and upon realizing they all end in stalemate, famously utters: “A strange game.: the only

winning move is not to play." If history is a pre-programmed algorithm, our only hope is a collective will to maintain a self-regulating autopoiesis. We have a dangerous amount still in common with our forefathers: pride, fear and greed. But what is different should matter more: deterrence, sovereignty, a common climate threat and more. It's time to whistle a different tune.

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