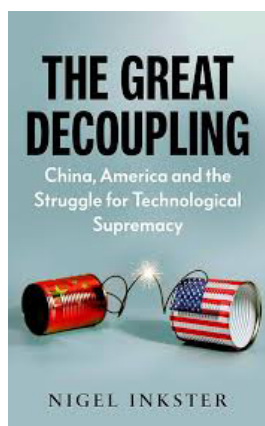


The Great Decoupling: China, America and the Struggle for Technological Supremacy

Bhaso Ndzendze 

University of Johannesburg
bndzendze@uj.ac.za



Title: *The Great Decoupling: China, America and the Struggle for Technological Supremacy*

Author: Nigel Inkster

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In 12 substantive chapters, the author provides a comprehensive diagnosis of the state of play of the relationship between China and the US, up to the Trump–Xi period. The book’s thesis is that the two countries, the largest in the world across a number of measures (most importantly economic and military) are headed for an inevitable divergence, fuelled by misunderstanding, misalignment, and competing ambitions. This, of course, is nothing new and has been the subject of many academic and journalistic commentaries. But where Inkster stands out is in his focus on technology, an artefact important to every civilisation, and one which becomes a motivation and a weapon for integration or divergence. The book’s title gives a clue as to which camp Inkster falls within. This is no mere new cold war, he argues (though much of his argument fits squarely with much of that burgeoning and increasingly attention-worthy literature). That analogy misses a lot that is different in the US–PRC formation compared to its US–USSR example. It is more akin to the UK–German pre–WWI and US–Japan pre–Pearl Harbour situations; add to that the fuel of the narrative of the century of humiliation, authoritarian rule, and ingenuity and you have a highly motivated government and society in China.

The book’s first four chapters are historical. They present, respectively, China’s millennia-long tradition of scientific inquiry and innovation; the beginnings of its interaction with the West; China’s entry into the digital arena; and the rise of Xi Jinping to become president (along with being head of the Communist Party of China [CPC] and the Central Military Commission). It is in that triple capacity that Xi has forged or shaped the work of two highly productive leadership small groups (LSGs) with implications for China’s digital ambitions. The first is the National Security Council, which brought out the 2014 National Security Law, and the second is the LSG on Cyber Security and Information. The last was in response to the previously fragmented and piecemeal approach towards the Internet in China. In 2014, Xi reportedly observed that national security depended on cyber security (Inkster, 2020: 80). China has indeed been vulnerable: it ranked 27th in the ITU’s cybersecurity

index (behind the likes of Croatia and Turkey). This chapter also presents a useful who's who in the Chinese technology elite circle: ideologues, visionaries, and policymakers. Inkster also provides a brief but useful comparison of the EU's GDPR and the Chinese law. He observes that they are largely similar, especially in the management of data flows but differ in one key respect: the Chinese state reserves itself the right to access personal data that affects "national security, the national economy, and the people's livelihood." A major weakness for China is its dependency on foreign (particularly US) technologies; even among government departments, there continues to be use of Microsoft Windows, despite the country trying, to no avail, to switch to a domestic operating system, resulting in Beijing making a plea to Microsoft to extend support for Windows XP in 2013. (The fact that many had pirated it meant that they could not benefit from the security upgrades).

Chapter five turns to the Chinese techno-security state, particularly the social credit system, and chapter six looks at the intelligence services, noting the breadth of the domestic and global reach enjoyed by the government. The chapter highlights the obfuscated role of the intelligence community in decision- and policy-making (Inkster, 2020: 125). Chapter seven turns to the international arena, which China supposedly wants to shape through institutions and initiatives such as the Shanghai Security Cooperation (SCO), military modernisation, assertiveness on territorial disputes, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Increasingly, the chapter shows, glimpses of what a China-dominated order looks like are starting to appear; and they look like a world in which the country cannot be criticised even by foreigners, as evidenced by the NBA players in 2019 when they tweeted in favour of the Hong Kong protesters. Chapter eight looks at China's attempts at using digital technologies to project its power. China has sought to shape the agenda of the ITU and its WCIT. In 2019 Huawei presented the idea of a New Internet Protocol – a feat it could attempt because its voice has grown louder, and was leaning in on global institutions at a time when the US was effectively 'defunding' them and retreating. Importantly, also, the Chinese tech giant appeared to be on the frontier due to its discovery of 5G.

Chapter nine looks at the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) modernisation efforts, particularly through artificial intelligence (AI), with the US Department of Defense (DoD) doing the same. This will sustain the US-China rivalry, to global implications (Inkster, 2020: 191). Chapter ten looks at the idea of China as a hi-tech superpower. The chapter runs through a number of ideas already presented in the previous three chapters and pulls a bit further on the military applications of AI and how they are conceptualised in Chinese strategy documents.

Chapter eleven focuses on US-China relations. The relationship has a number of complicating factors; different cultures, political systems, unconformable histories, and different visions of the future. Matters came to a head during the Trump presidency. Despite or because of its anti-China rhetoric, different departments pursued a disjointed strategy because they were under the impression that it was "open season on China" (Inkster, 2020: 232). Yet despite this, US FDI in China grew by 1.5% as American companies diverted their operations to China in order to produce for the Chinese market and avoid the retaliatory tariffs. COVID-19 presented a point of no return; it produced anti-China sentiment in the US, while government blame within China gave the CCP motive to deflect attention outward. As a consequence, "the USA and China now seem to be on an irreversible track towards divergence and decoupling" (Inkster, 2020: 239).

Chapter twelve (what may be considered the book's main chapter) essentially asserts the thesis that we are in the early stages of a second cold war: "China's emergence as a powerful modern state with a different ideology and values and a long-term strategy pursued through a centralised, state-driven all-of-nation approach has raised serious questions about how fit for purpose the Western liberal democratic order is in the twenty-first century" (Inkster, 2020: 245).

The book has a number of excellent qualities. Yet its lack of a scientific methodology means that its claims are untestable. In this way, then, it can be said that the book lives up to its subtitle ('China, America and the Struggle for Technological Supremacy') more than the main title ('The Great Decoupling'). As the author writes "It is hard to predict exactly how a technology decoupling might play out, not least because the relevant technologies do not evolve in a predictably linear fashion" (Inkster, 2020: 251). The book is comprehensive; it is very well-researched and accessibly written. It is when attempting to predict the future that it naturally stands on shaky ground. To its great credit, it provides much context for any future predictive work.