

Red Star Over the Caribbean

A tale of great power competition

by Maj Geoffrey Irving

Maj Lin Biao looked out from his beachside barracks at the azure waters shimmering under the Caribbean sun. A gentle breeze caught the cigarette smoke off his exhale and wafted it downwind. It slowly dissolved into the ocean. He noted that the air here had a different quality as he breathed in during breaks from the burning cigarette. It was lighter and somehow happier than the air that he grew up breathing in Hubei or the heavy air that he had become accustomed to at the bases he inhabited throughout his career. It seemed lighthearted and almost incompatible with the weight of his dark camouflaged uniform—a uniform crisply pressed and adorned with devices that noted his worldwide service. This island air reminded him of being at sea as if he were looking out from the deck of a massive unsinkable carrier.

Maj Lin heard the door of the room next to him open and looked over while taking another drag on his Zhonghua.

Capt Lu, bleary-eyed and disheveled, popped out of the door and squinted against the sun before making eye contact with him.

“Hey Sir, what time did we have to be at class?”

Chris Lu was a doughy officer, of middling height and effusive wit who had a punctuality problem, and often forgot necessary readings and assignments, but earned the adoration of the class with an easy demeanor. Lu was an American exchange student and was purported to be the best the American Marine Corps had to offer. Maj Lin often thought that it was a poor reflection

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on the state of the American military, but maybe an appropriate one.

“We should leave now, Chris.” Maj Lin chided, exhaling his cigarette and watching the smoke snake out onto the horizon again.

“OK, wait a second. I’ll be right out.” Capt Lu popped back inside without closing the door. Maj Lin could hear Lu rustling around to get dressed and plugged in before stumbling out the door in a minimally acceptable state of dress.

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“Let’s go, slowpoke,” Maj Lin said as he started striding away from the barracks toward the university building down the street. Capt Lu walked a pace behind him, taking on the unfocused stare of someone scrolling through morning updates on their lens.

The duo could not look less alike. Maj Lin was a tall, wiry man with a long face and an impassive mask that rarely

broke. His dark eyebrows dominated his face and projected a stern demeanor. He walked, even on a beautiful Caribbean morning like this, with a brisk pace that eschewed ancillary movement. At his side, Capt Lu was more of an ambler, with wide hips, and a stride that rolled from one foot to the next as if strutting to a beat.

They passed a circular driveway with three flag poles waving in the center. The five-star red flag occupied the middle, proudly standing taller than the subservient two of stars and stripes. All three fluttered and gleamed in the sun, reflecting red, white, blue, and yellow. A sign on the lawn read: People’s Liberation Army National Defence University Satellite Campus: Guantanamo Bay.

The door slid open to admit the pair, and an automated message on Maj Lin’s lens welcomed him to the facility.

“Welcome, Maj Lin Biao. Your Advanced Command College class: ‘Contemporary History of Great Power Transition’ with Professor Qi Fabao begins in 2 mins 31 secs. Please make your way to room 101. Remember to provide your biometrics before entering. Thank you for your cooperation.” The floating message on his lens dissolved once he finished reading.

“Right on time, huh? Couldn’t have planned it better if we tried, sir.” Capt Lu grinned, as Maj Lin opened the lecture hall door. Lu pressed a thumb against a raised biometric reader and quickly entered the hall. Maj Lin did the same.

The lecture hall was alive with the sound of conversation as students, clothed in a panoply of military uniforms, chatted in the enduring tradition

of military BS-ing. Every foreign officer was paired with a People's Liberation Army officer one grade their senior and freely chatted across language barriers, assisted by simultaneous translation bone-conduction bands pressed behind each ear.

At 0900, an elderly man who had been chatting with a group of serious-looking PLA officers at the front of the lecture hall started to climb up to the stage. He was dressed in a grey suit that was only a shade darker than his full shock of brilliantly white, combed hair. He had an august demeanor and exuded that type of calming and commanding aura that emanates from a being supremely confident in their own existence and expertise. Rumor had it that when he was a regimental commander, Professor Qi had stopped a charging battalion of Indian soldiers in their tracks with his outstretched hands and commanding presence alone. The crowd hushed and turned to sit straight in their seats as he took the stage.

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen, let's begin. Most of our class to date has focused on modern Chinese history and China's rise to power. Today we're going to change focus. Today's lecture will cover American 21st-century history and how it created the need for a powerful China. As always, I ask that you stay focused on me and my screen rather than your own."

"I have some slides to direct myself but will mostly use a traditional lecturing method." Professor Qi smiled softly and paused, touching his right index finger and thumb together. The wall behind him came to life with a simple timeline set against a white background. The left side of the timeline started in 1989 and ran right across the wall to 2050—present day. Below the timeline, a block of text read "DIMEFIL." Professor Qi began his lecture:

"In 1989, America was presented with an opportunity unlike any other in human history. Its main counterweight in the globe—the Soviet Union, crumbled and succumbed to reactionary and counter-revolutionary internal forces. The Soviet Union dropped the mantle of the global communist revolution and entered a period of weak-

ness that created a power vacuum for America to fill. At once, America was the sole great power in the world and the world watched to see what America would make of the opportunity."

"Stepping into that vacuum, America's leadership did not have a clear goal, or the ability to make a consistent long-term plan for capitalizing on global hegemony. The American people, without a clear and understandable 'enemy' to focus on inevitably turned inward and focused on a frenzy of consumerism and consumption. As we know, at the end of the 20th century, China understood the need to keep a low profile while it established the governmental structure, economic strength, and international legitimacy that would allow us to strive for achievement and leadership once matured."

America ultimately burned whatever was left of its international credibility and claim to international leadership in the years following its disastrous departure from Afghanistan.

Professor Qi continued, as the "D" and the "M" of the "DIMEFIL" grew and pulsed on screen.

"With no enemy to galvanize public support, American leadership created one. After the terrorist attacks of 2001, President Bush created an enemy in Iraq. At that time, leaders from across America's military institutions understood China's potential. These leaders saw Iraq as a distraction. Senior leaders resigned in protest of the Iraq invasion. But the American government proceeded nonetheless, and China watched and waited."

"Every estimate showed that economic growth, population size, natural resource density, and regional position would make China America's next competitor. However, America's foolhardy and easily distracted democracy was not able to maintain a consistent policy. America shifted its focus to two irrelevant conflicts in the Middle East for the next two decades, and China watched and waited."

"Countries at peace often reap something called a 'peace dividend.' The peace dividend is the cost savings of not being at war, which can be better applied toward domestic programs or infrastructure that promotes future economic growth. This dividend lets a nation at peace strengthen itself through productive economic and financial power. America's need for instant gratification and the lack of long-term planning meant that it squandered its peace dividend over the course of twenty years in Iraq and Afghanistan. Years that it could have spent educating its population, investing in emerging technologies, or updating its infrastructure got shoved into the gas-guzzling engine of the military-industrial complex. America ultimately burned

whatever was left of its international credibility and claim to international leadership in the years following its disastrous departure from Afghanistan. Instead, China reaped America's peace dividend."

"After the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, the American military machine, lumbering as it was, attempted to contain China. However, as I've said before, the American governmental system wasn't built for that type of long-term strategic planning. The case for maintaining defense spending in peacetime was a fool's errand in a political system that was increasingly focused domestically. This was a fool's errand that had been repeated throughout American history—its repetition so entrenched that American post-conflict demobilization seems like a deep American tradition."

"America decommissioned its army after the Revolutionary War only to be caught unprepared during the War of 1812, it decommissioned its military

after World War I only to be caught unprepared for World War II, it decommissioned its military after World War II only to be caught unprepared for Korea, and then did the same post-Korea, only to be caught unprepared for Vietnam. Senior military leaders had repeatedly tried to break this cycle but could not overcome the American population's need to immediately see the fruits of government spending. Thus, faced with a growing financial crisis in the late 2020s and political and public sentiment that soured to the military, America again decommissioned its military, leaving a new vacuum on the world stage."

As Professor Qi paused, the "D" and "M" shrunk to their original size, to be replaced by the "E" and the "F" of DIMEFIL.

"America saw itself as a beacon of capitalist democracy to the world. For much of the early 21st century, it was able to uphold the façade of the 'American Dream.' However, as the greed of unchecked capitalism chewed away at the roots of democracy, America could no longer maintain that façade."

"In 2025, the Federal Reserve ran out of options to keep the economy growing at a pace investors demanded. The Fed finally announced that it would remove the crutches of cheap credit and quantitative easing and pulled the plug on the ever-growing market. Widespread civil unrest stemming from racial tensions and economic inequality exacerbated the crisis. Social media magnified the troubles, and domestic radical disinformation campaigns created pockets of the nation that believed they were supporting their government by undermining it. Americans didn't trust their government, didn't trust their neighbors, and didn't trust education. They didn't know what to believe and reverted to whatever narrative aligned with their deepest prejudices—whatever narrative went down easiest. With that, the strength of America's central institutions diminished and lost the capacity to make or execute meaningful policy. America was rudderless."

"When the booming economy of the 20s came crashing down, the population demanded federal spending to

fix it. But, being unable to borrow more on America's tarnished credit rating, Congress was forced to default, take austerity measures and cut spending. With no wars to fight, the Department of Defense was an easy target for cuts."

"In 2029, there was a notable absence of military veterans on the Congressional committee that ultimately led to the consolidation of the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. A number of technology-focused consultants and business leaders who prided themselves on eliminating redundancies looked at the operational overlaps between DOD and DHS and quickly recommended consolidation. Congress-

Americans did not see the need to intervene in regional conflicts ...

sional inquiries into the necessity for eighteen different intelligence agencies only lent weight to the argument that consolidation would capture huge cost savings without impacting operational capacity."

Professor Qi paused and touched his index finger and thumb together again. The screen behind him went black.

"As you might know, I conducted a joint humanitarian operation with America's Marine Corps in Africa in 2022. During that experience, I made a number of close friends in that organization and followed it closely throughout the rest of my career. I'm going to take some time to explain how the American Marine Corps, as a culture and organization, lost its purpose throughout this period as an analogy for America's decline as a whole."

"In the flurry of reorganization and consolidation of the early 2030s, the spotlight didn't find the Marine Corps. Rather, the Marine Corps brought the spotlight onto itself. The Marines captured national headlines after a complete breakdown of good order and discipline in California's 1st Marine Division in November 2031.

On 10 November 2031, approximately 20 Marines engaged in a violent shootout at the San Diego Courthouse in Vista, CA in an attempt to free one of their friends from jail. Seven police officers and sheriff's deputies were killed and scores more injured as the rogue Marines attempted to seize the county courthouse. The Marines had been stoked into violence by a radical online group, of which they were all members. Only weeks later, with the nation still reeling from the violence, a journalist uncovered that the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps was an active member of the same radical group. The public and political furor started a feeding frenzy that quickly undercut the Marine Corps' reputation. Losing all political and popular support, it was easy to propose that the Army absorb the Marines as designated littoral units. The Army was happy to oblige.

"It was just as well. The Marine Corps had seen its relevancy wane over the past decade as the demand for their product decreased while the supply of 'forces-in-readiness' increased. In the austerity measures of the late 2020s, the State Department drastically reduced its foreign service staff. With a smaller footprint, the State Department was able to take responsibility for its own security at the few sites it kept open. The Marine Corps dropped the embassy security mission."

"Additionally, Americans did not see the need to intervene in regional conflicts, and relegated defense responsibilities to regional defense partnerships. To meet decreased demand, the Army and Special Operations Command increased their capacity to provide regional ready reaction forces and argued that the interoperability of Army reaction forces with follow-on Army ground forces streamlined operational planning. The Marine Corps increasingly looked irrelevant and redundant. The Marine Corps as a coequal Service branch of America's military died in 2031, and it, unfortunately, deserved that death.

Professor Qi snapped his fingers together dramatically, and the screen behind him came to life again, zooming into the timeline at the year 2031 and

showing a graph with a blue line following a negative slope labeled “USD” intersecting with a red line following a positive slope labeled “e-CNY.” He continued his lecture.

“In the financial turmoil of the early 2030s, China stepped into the international power vacuum on the back of its widely-adopted digital currency, the digital renminbi, or ‘e-CNY.’ Investors did not trust America’s equity market, its volatile fiat currency, or its central bank and looked to the Chinese digital currency as an alternative for seamless payments across international borders. Even American consumers happily held their assets in e-CNY and were able to use the currency for same-day delivery of any imaginable SKU through JD.com or Amazon automated international delivery services.”

“Through the strength of the e-CNY, President Xi brokered the peaceful reunification of China—a just territorial merger that America supported in return for a line of credit to fulfill central bank obligations to bloated federal entitlements. With its domestic borders secured, and the promise of the Communist revolution finally fulfilled, China proudly became a beacon of hope and prosperity for the world to mimic. America’s population was all too willing to cede responsibility on the international scene, as a growing majority sought to create an America in Canada’s model—disengaged from international relations and reliant upon a benevolent partner for guaranteed defense.

“In the late 2030s, America abandoned its longstanding adherence to the Monroe doctrine and invited Chinese and international interventions to alleviate poverty and suffering in South America and the Caribbean. As partners, China and America agreed to open joint bases at many of the sites of America’s previous imperialist adventures. The People’s Liberation Army improved these installations and removed much of the shameful history associated with places like the very base we’re on today. Through partnerships with America in the Western Hemisphere, with Russia in the European Theatre, with Iran and Egypt on the

African continent, and through stabilization of the global economy with the digital Renminbi, China picked up the pieces of *Pax Americana’s* failure and created a prosperous *Pax Sinica*.

Professor Qi stopped and walked over to the podium to take a drink of water. The wall behind him transitioned to a graphic of the globe painted red with China’s partners, including the United States.

Maj Lin looked over at Capt Lu a few seats over from him. Maj Lin had lived most of this history and had witnessed firsthand the ugliness on the ground that was not reflected in Professor Qi’s flowery class. He knew that this narrative was the party line—the story that had been written by the victors. However, he wondered if a Marine officer would see through that narrative or would easily consume this CCP information like every other compliant American raised at the teat of social media.

Capt Lu sat slouched in her seat looking up with apathetic eyes at the slowly spinning globe adorned with red and yellow.

She raised her hand.

“Yes, Capt Lu?” Professor Qi pointed at the young Officer and placed the glass of water down.

Capt Lu shuffled up out of her seat and cleared her throat.

“Hey Professor Qi, are you going to be sending these slides out after class?”



MARINE CORPS MUSTANG ASSOCIATION

What is a Mustang?

A Mustang is an individual who graduated from either MCRD San Diego or MCRD Parris Island who, at some point in their career, becomes a Commissioned Officer or Warrant Officer in the Marine Corps, or one of the other recognized branches of the U.S. Armed Forces.

To learn more about the Mustang Association and to join, visit www.MarineCorpsMustang.org or, call (703) 349-0873.