

The 7 Signals of a Power Shift: How U.S. Backsliding Is Letting China Take the Lead

Seven Hard Signals, One Uncomfortable Truth: How U.S. Backsliding Is Handing China the Century.



Renewable energy image. Photo by Jem Sanchez, via Pexels.

I remember the moment the compass moved.

Not an election night or a summit handshake, but a morning in early spring when a friend in manufacturing—an honest man with calloused hands and a calendar nailed to the wall—forwarded me a spreadsheet that didn't care about anyone's feelings. It was the kind of document that sits quietly until you notice the slope of its lines. Solar capacity, battery output, export destinations, R&D budgets, health cooperation. A dozen columns. One direction.

“Something changed,” he wrote.

He meant the center of gravity. The quiet, grinding math of momentum.

This isn’t a flag-burning lament or a cheer for some new overlord. It’s a field note from a citizen who still believes in work and evidence. The era of automatic American primacy has ended. The era of “we’ll figure it out later” is closing fast. A different engine is pulling the train, and while we argued about whose turn it was to stoke the fire, China laid more track.

I wish I could tell you this was only about ships and missiles. It’s not. This is a story about rules, research, trade, public health, clean energy, the scaffolding of a century. And yes, politics. The current U.S. administration’s choices are accelerating the turn. If you love this country, as I do, read this with both eyes open. We can handle hard truths. We always have.

I’m going to show you seven signals—concrete, measurable—that point to the shift. Then I’ll map where U.S. policy is clearing the lane and what an adult response looks like. No chest thumping. No name-calling. Just the ledger. Let’s go.

Seven Signals That the Center of Gravity Has Moved

Signal #1: The Economic Map—PPP vs. Nominal, and Why it Matters

There are two ways to measure economic size. Nominal GDP is what you read on headlines. Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) is what a dollar (or yuan) can actually buy at home. On PPP terms, China is already larger than the U.S.; on nominal terms, the U.S. still leads. Both metrics matter, but PPP tells you who can build more factories, pay more engineers, and pave more roads inside their own borders for the same money.

According to the IMF’s April 2025 database, China’s GDP at PPP sits around 40.7 trillion international dollars versus the United States at ~30.5 trillion. Nominally, the U.S. remains ahead (about \$30.5T to China’s ~\$19.2T), but PPP is the story of internal

capacity and affordability—the quiet advantage in long projects like rail, semiconductors, or grid-scale storage. (IMF 2025).

What it means in plain English: a nation that can domestically build more for less can outpace rivals in the boring, essential parts of power—ports, research campuses, transformers, and the million screws that hold a future together.

Signal #2: The Clean-Energy Flywheel—China Is Six Years Early, and It Shows

In 2024, China reached its 2030 wind-and-solar target six years ahead of schedule. Think about that: a government goal for 2030, achieved in 2024. That isn't a press release; that's a grid getting rewired in real time. The International Energy Agency (IEA) and independent analysts at Ember confirm the scale: China invested over \$625 billion in clean energy in 2024 and has now built more wind and solar capacity than its coal fleet, with battery storage surging in parallel. That's not symbolism. That's baseload shifting. (IEA 2025; Ember 2025).

EVs tell the same story. The IEA's 2025 Global EV Outlook reports that electric cars were nearly half of all car sales in China in 2024—over 11 million vehicles, more than total global EV sales just two years earlier. When half your domestic car market flips to electric, you don't just change tailpipes; you change supply chains, rare-earth refining, software stacks, charging standards, and export leverage. (IEA 2025).

Manufacturing? BloombergNEF's 2025 supply-chain analysis shows roughly three-quarters of global clean-tech factory investment in 2024 went to mainland China. That concentration—backed by relentless cost curves in solar, batteries, and components—keeps drawing the world's energy transition through Chinese industrial gates. (BloombergNEF 2025).

Now, the nuance that matters: China's coal story is messy. Permits whiplashed—an 83% drop in H1 2024 approvals followed by a rebound in early 2025—and new construction hit a decade high in 2024. It's contradictory, often provincial, and driven by grid-

reliability fears. But even with those coal starts, the 2025 data show the power sector's CO₂ emissions slipping year-on-year for part of the year as clean generation surges. In other words, the flywheel is turning—even if the old engine still coughs. (CREA/GEM 2025; Reuters 2025).

Signal #3: The Patent Footprint—Where Tomorrow's Ideas File Paper Today

Patents aren't everything, but they're the visible tip of an R&D iceberg. China leads the world in PCT (Patent Cooperation Treaty) filings—70,160 applications in 2024 versus 54,087 for the U.S., per WIPO's 2025 Yearly Review. In a decade-long sprint in generative AI patents, China's filings outnumber the U.S. six to one. That does not mean every patent is world-class. It does mean the pipeline is thick, and industry is moving fast. (WIPO 2025; Reuters 2024).

Domestically, China's 2024 R&D spending rose to roughly 3.61 trillion yuan, with intensity near 2.68% of GDP, while the U.S. remains higher in intensity (above 3%) and still leads in absolute GERD (gross domestic R&D expenditure). But momentum matters: OECD and U.S. indicators show China's pace closing gaps as U.S. federal science faces cuts and uncertainty. (NBS China 2025; NSF 2024/2025; OECD 2025).

Signal #4: Trade Gravity—Tariffs, Rewiring, and a New Hub

China remains the world's largest goods exporter, according to WTO statistical tables for 2024. The WTO's 2025 Global Trade Outlook flags the broader swing: services are rising, fragmentation risks are growing, and trade routes are being rewritten by policy. The U.S.–China pipeline is still massive but less central than it once was, and Chinese exports are fanning out across ASEAN and the Global South. (WTO 2025; WTO 2024/2025 tables).

The U.S. is leaning into reciprocal tariffs under the current administration—a legal and political fight that's reshaping flows. The White House's own fact sheet from September

5, 2025, details the executive order to modify the scope of reciprocal tariffs first signaled in April. That isn't a tweet. That's policy. (White House 2025a).

On our side of the ledger, the Bureau of Economic Analysis shows the 2024 U.S. trade deficit widening as imports outpaced exports, and USTR data show a persistent, large goods deficit with China. Tariffs can reduce one stream and redirect another, but the chessboard is global. China leans into RCEP, upgrades ASEAN deals, and applies for CPTPP, presenting itself as the steady multilateralist while Washington muscles with duties. (BEA 2025; USTR 2025; Reuters 2025 ASEAN).

Signal #5: Health Stewardship—Who Do Countries Call?

There's moral leadership, and then there is the mundane leadership of budgets, standards, and data sharing. In January 2025, the U.S. moved to withdraw from the World Health Organization—again—while also initiating exit from the Paris Agreement the very same day. At the same time, the administration proposed deep cuts to CDC funding and broad restructuring across HHS, with states and public health groups warning of service gaps. This is how trust erodes: pull out, cut the funders, then wonder why phones ring elsewhere in a pandemic or an outbreak. (White House 2025b; White House 2025c; STAT 2025).

When the world looks for coordinated epidemiology, vaccine logistics, or cross-border lab work, they follow the money and the consistency. If we exit networks and gut domestic public-health muscles, other hubs become default switchboards—even if they're imperfect.

Signal #6: Climate Governance—From Science to Signals

Two things can be true: the U.S. private sector is still extraordinary at climate tech, and the U.S. federal government is now dismantling key scaffolding of climate science and oversight. In September 2025, the Treasury-led FSOC disbanded its climate risk advisory panels. This summer, EPA proposed to rescind the 2009 Greenhouse Gas Endangerment Finding, a legal foundation for regulating climate pollution. Bloomberg

chronicled the broader campaign: firings, rollbacks, closures across agencies that gather and interpret climate data. NOAA's climate research is on the chopping block. (Reuters 2025a; Federal Register 2025; Bloomberg 2025; Reuters 2025b).

This isn't a niche argument about models. It's about navigation. If you throw out the maps and break the compass, you don't stop the weather—you just stop seeing it coming.

Signal #7: The Club of the Rest—BRICS+ and a Different Stage

Geopolitics abhors a vacuum. As Washington retreats from some multilateral tables or dominates them with tariffs, China leans into alternative fora. BRICS is not a perfect vehicle, but it is bigger than it was yesterday—adding Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the UAE, and in 2025, Indonesia. Finance ministers there now speak with a louder voice about IMF quotas. That matters for development lending and the narratives of legitimacy. (Reuters 2025c; CFR 2025).

2) How U.S. Policy Cleared the Lane

Here's the hard, specific part. The United States did not lose ground because Americans got lazy or because our entrepreneurs forgot how to dream. We are losing ground because our federal policy is—right now—sawing through the beams that made us the place people trusted with hard problems.

Let's name the cuts without theatrics.

Climate & Environmental Science. On Day One, 2025, the administration ordered U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Soon after, the EPA began the process to rescind the Endangerment Finding that underpins regulation of greenhouse gases. The Treasury-led FSOC shuttered climate risk committees designed to help the financial system price climate dangers. Meanwhile, proposals target NOAA's climate research division for elimination or extreme downsizing. When you add these actions together, you don't just mute warnings—you dismantle the nation's ability to measure the storm. (White House 2025c; Federal Register 2025; Reuters 2025a; Reuters 2025b).

Public Health & Global Cooperation. Moving to withdraw from the WHO severs relationships that took decades to build, and proposed CDC cuts—alongside agency reorganizations—signal an inward turn at the very moment pandemics, vector-borne disease, and demographic stress demand more coordination, not less. (White House 2025b; STAT 2025).

Research & Higher Education. Courts have ping-ponged over cuts to university-based science and NSF grants, with legal challenges ongoing. But the direction is plain: ideologically driven cancellations and large-scale grant disruptions that chill labs and scatter teams. You don't turn basic research on and off like a lamp. You lose people, and with them, the muscle memory of discovery. (Reuters 2025d; Guardian 2025).

Trade Posture. The push for reciprocal (baseline) tariffs, announced in April and modified by executive order in September, is intended to flex leverage. It also accelerates the fragmentation of supply chains and pushes third countries deeper into China's economic orbit as Beijing frames itself as the predictable partner. ASEAN upgrades, RCEP's quiet gravitational pull, and BRICS+ give that narrative a stage. (White House 2025a; Reuters 2025 ASEAN).

Messaging vs. Momentum. Here's the cultural piece. When the White House talks down climate science and public-health cooperation, other capitals hear: "America is unsure about reality when it's inconvenient." That's a brutal sentence to write. It's also how trust dies. And power without trust is a room with fewer doors.

Is China flawless? Not close. Coal approvals revived in early 2025 after falling in 2024, and the property sector remains stressed. But China is not trying to be perfect. It is trying to be present—especially in the lanes the U.S. is vacating. (Reuters 2025, coal approvals; UNCTAD 2025 FDI).

3) What Follows: Markets, Allies, and the Human Consequences

This is not a videogame where the “dominant power” gets a crown and everyone else keeps their inventory. Power shifts change prices, standards, and who gets to set the test.

Standards and Specs. The country that builds the most turbines writes the interconnection rules. The one that ships the most EVs shapes charging protocols, battery chemistries, and safety norms. The one that filters more data trains the models that set default “truths” for billions of users.

Supply Chains. When tariffs ricochet, parts find other paths. China’s clean-tech overcapacity is real—but so is its ability to flood markets with low-cost modules and cells, seeding long-term lock-in. Europe is already wrestling with this reality; the U.S. will increasingly face the same, especially if domestic incentives wobble under federal cuts while tariffs distort inputs. (BloombergNEF 2025).

Finance and Development. BRICS+ is still a messy club, but when its finance ministers propose IMF quota reform and the New Development Bank expands its guarantees, project finance in parts of the Global South starts calling different numbers first. That moves contracts, standards, and political loyalties. (Reuters 2025c).

Public Health Readiness. If the U.S. leaves WHO and slashes CDC programs, the next cross-border outbreak tests new fault lines. Data latencies increase. Vaccine allocations get political faster. And trust in U.S. numbers—once the gold standard—softens. (White House 2025b; STAT 2025).

Science Talent Migration. Labs live and die by continuity. Freeze grants, cancel fields, or politicize peer review—and your postdocs don’t wait around. They go where the work keeps the lights on. China, Singapore, South Korea, parts of the EU—these are not science backwaters. They are magnets. (NSF 2025; OECD 2025).

Allies Watching the Clock. Allies adjust to trajectories, not speeches. California may still outstrip Japan in GDP, and American states will continue to innovate like nation-

states. But national policy that mocks science and multilateral health dulls the brand that brought alliances together in the first place. That brand was never just tanks; it was reliability. (Business Insider 2025).

Here's the human part you don't see in charts: students abroad deciding which language to master; a mid-career engineer wondering where to place her decade; a mayor in Africa picking between two grid-battery offers—one priced to move, one lagging in paperwork. Power shifts through these little hinges.

4) A Hard-Nosed American To-Do List (No Illusions, All Spine)

If you're still with me, you don't want slogans. You want tools. Here's a practical, personal, and proven set—changes I believe in because I've watched versions of them work in smaller contexts. This is not about doom. It's about agency.

Stop Breaking the Instruments. Keep NOAA's climate research intact. Keep EPA's Endangerment Finding in place unless replaced by an equally strong statutory framework. Reinstate FSOC climate risk advisory work. You can disagree on pace and policy details without cutting the wires to the weather. Business needs data. Farmers need forecasts. Ports need sea-level baselines. This isn't partisan; it's adult. (Reuters 2025a; Federal Register 2025; Reuters 2025b).

Rejoin and Reinforce WHO and Paris—Then Lead. If you want to shape global protocols in the next outbreak or the next climate-loss finance mechanism, you don't walk out of the room. You chair the meeting. You fund the work. You put your best civil servants in the line of fire and back them when the headlines get ugly. (White House 2025b; White House 2025c).

Stabilize Science. Insulate the NSF, NIH, and mission agencies from culture-war purges. You don't have to like every grant to respect the process. The cost of performative cuts is a lost decade of capability. Federal dollars aren't charity; they're oxygen for the upstream work private capital won't touch. (Reuters 2025d; Guardian 2025; NSF 2025).

Tariff Tactics with Strategy, Not Theater. Use targeted, time-bound tools against specific abuses (forced technology transfer, subsidies that break rules) while deepening friend-shoring with clear criteria. Reciprocal tariffs as a permanent baseline sound tough and often underdeliver—raising costs at home while pushing neutral nations toward China’s marketplaces. Pair enforcement with a credible market-opening agenda for allies and the Global South. (White House 2025a; WTO 2025 Outlook).

Industrial Policy with a Carbon Spine. Keep onshoring in critical nodes (transformers, grid software, electrolyzers, advanced batteries) but measure real outcomes: capacity installed, emissions avoided, export share gained. Resist the sugar rush of headline ribbon-cuttings; build domestic demand via predictable standards—clean procurement, capacity markets for firm zero-carbon power, and transmission reform. That’s how you beat dumping: with scale and certainty.

R&D Moonshots that Hire Plumbers. Fund labs, yes, but wire grants to field deployments—heat pumps in schools, hospital microgrids, decarbonized cement in public works. Tie science to the trades on purpose so communities feel the benefit. The secret weapon against cynicism is a pay stub that arrived because we did the right thing.

Honesty as an Operating System. Say the quiet part out loud: China got here first in some lanes. Then explain the plan to compete—city by city, corridor by corridor. People stomach sacrifice when leaders speak clearly and deliver something real in exchange: jobs that don’t vanish, air that doesn’t choke kids, cheaper power bills, faster buses.

If that sounds idealistic, it’s not. It’s logistics with a spine.

5) The Cost of Pretending—and the Return on Reality

It’s tempting to shrug and say power ebbs and flows. It does. But shrugging isn’t strategy. The cost of pretending is paid in lost decades—of science that could have been ours, of standards that could have been written in English, of trust that could have been renewed instead of withdrawn.

Here's what "reality-first" looks like at ground level:

- **A mayor signs for a Chinese grid battery because delivery is faster and financing is clearer.** U.S. suppliers could compete—if federal data, standards, and incentives were predictable and not subject to partisan whiplash.
- **A university lab shuttered when a tranche of NSF grants vanishes.** Those PhDs don't wait for the weather. They emigrate to labs with continuity.
- **A health department watches a cluster form and realizes the international coordination it needs is now a political football.** Public health is a long fuse; we keep cutting it shorter.

None of this is destiny. It's design. We designed our way into this, and we can design our way out.

The age of automatic deference to American leadership is over. The age of proving it—again, with receipts—has begun.

If you're reading this in your car at lunch or on the couch after a shift, remember: you are not powerless in a story about power. You vote. You call. You show up to a council meeting with a one-page plan and a carpenter's pencil behind your ear. You tell your representatives to fund the mapmakers, keep us in the rooms where the rules are written, and stop rewarding the performance of toughness over the practice of it.

We can be tough the old-fashioned way—by doing the work.

About the Author

Dorian Hartwood writes about the intersections of leadership, mental health, resistance, and the fight for sustainable progress in a regressive world. His work is grounded in grit, clarity, and the kind of honesty that doesn't flinch.

Follow more of his writing at dorianhartwood.com or reach out at write@dorianhartwood.com.

If this piece lit a fire, share it. If it helped, pass it on. Silence is not an option.

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Notes on method, honesty, and hope

I've tried to let the numbers speak and keep my metaphors honest. You can't curse a river into changing direction, and you can't shame a rival off a podium. But you can build better boats. You can train the crew. You can read the weather and decide, deliberately, where to steer.

The era of U.S. domination is over in the sense that no one gets to coast. The era of leadership by competence is back on the table. China has been sprinting while we debate whether the stopwatch is biased. The race isn't over. It simply stopped waiting for us.

Your part in it is smaller than you fear and larger than you think: who you vote for; what you defend at the school board when the science curriculum is on the line; which local contracts you push toward clean energy; how you talk about this with the next generation—without romance, without despair.

Cut the swearing, keep the soul. Use the map. Then prove you're still the kind of country—and the kind of person—who shows up when it counts.

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