



Should the United States Punish China for Aggression Toward India and Hong Kong?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

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Matthew Kroenig: Hi, Emma! I hope you had a good long weekend. Did you venture out of the house and, if so, did you wear a mask?

Emma Ashford: Well, I've been told it isn't manly to wear a mask, but luckily that doesn't seem to be a problem for me. I got a cute pink one with spots just in case there was any doubt. But even a cute mask won't help you escape politics these days. We've had the U.S. president slamming his rival Joe Biden for his choice to wear a mask at Memorial Day services. Are the benefits of masks really so hard to grasp?

MK: I never deluded myself into thinking foreign policy was going to be the biggest issue this election year, but I never expected facewear to be a central political divide. It was good, however, to see both candidates out paying their respects on Memorial Day. Biden had been in hiding for so long. Do you think he should be out and about challenging the president more visibly as some of his supporters advocate?

Emma Ashford is a research fellow at the Cato Institute.

Matthew Kroenig is deputy director of the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center. They debate foreign policy and the 2020 election.

EA: Well, he hardly needs to weigh in. The ad that the Biden campaign put out over the weekend really said it all: the president golfing on the day we passed 100,000 dead Americans due to the coronavirus. It's worse than incompetence. As the mask issue shows, the president is actively politicizing issues that could save lives. After all, as global observers, you and I both know that masks are one reason why outbreaks in Asia have been less severe.

MK: It is amazing how much the norms around this have shifted. A few weeks ago, we were told not to wear masks unless we are sick, and now I feel like a pariah on the occasion or two I forgot mine at home. The White House did have a busy week before Memorial Day, however, releasing a [new China strategy](#). Did you get a chance to read it?

EA: I skimmed it, which is about as much time as I can devote to anything these days! It's a strange document, like an updated National Security Strategy, but just for China. It's not unheard of for the White House to release this kind of document, but I've never seen one that's so explicitly hostile to just one country. I got the distinct impression reading it that the administration didn't want to put out a whole new NSS but wanted to try to reconcile its actions on China in the last year with its less hostile approach from late 2017.

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It talks about screening Chinese students who want to study in the United States for "malign intent," commits to maintaining tariffs on Chinese goods, and focuses on "pushing back on Beijing's hegemonic assertions."

Is it really sensible to be putting out this kind of diatribe in the current circumstances?

MK: The NSS and National Defense Strategy were statements of priority, not real strategies. This is a more fully formed strategy with two major elements. The first is strengthening the resilience of the United States and its allies to deal with the challenges China presents. This includes, for example, increased FBI efforts to identify and prosecute economic espionage and upgrading defense capabilities to deal with China's military threat. The second is imposing costs to compel China to cease threatening behavior, such as tariffs in response to unfair trade practices.

I guess my major criticism is that it was still somewhat vague on the ultimate goal of the competition. It says, "Our approach is not premised on determining a particular end state for China." The document left me thinking that this competition could go on for eternity and the strategy could still be considered a success.

EA: Now that's an interesting question: What exactly are the United States and China competing over? It seems like every strategy document for the last four years has emphasized the "era of great-power competition" without ever defining what that means.

So what is "great-power competition"? Is it simply a return to a multipolar world? Is it the embrace of a new Cold War-style conflict with China? Is it an attempt to build spheres of influence? Do you have a take?

MK: Defining goals is hard, and from my discussions it is clear that many senior U.S. officials do not have a clear objective in mind—and those who do disagree with each other. It is much easier to agree on certain actions (we should protect our intellectual property from China, for example) than it is to agree on an ultimate objective.

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President Xi Jinping has cracked down on dissent at home and launched China on a much more confrontational path internationally.

So, in the short-to-medium term, the United States needs to work with allies and like-minded countries to defend itself from these threats and impose meaningful costs on the Chinese Communist Party government everywhere it violates international standards. If successful over the long run, this approach could convince a future generation of Chinese leaders to go in a different direction. It is not about appealing to the better angels of their nature but about showing them that directly challenging the United States and its allies is simply too costly and that Beijing's interests are better served acquiescing to, or playing along within, a rules-based system.

EA: So, basically, the answer is regime change again, Matt? The document explicitly says that "United States policies are not premised on an attempt to change the PRC's domestic governance model." I'm not so sure that's true. I think it clearly was the goal in the 1990s and 2000s, even if it was only to nudge it toward a more Western system. And I think it's a widely held and unspoken goal of many in Washington today to make Beijing more like us politically.

MK: My preferred goal could conceivably be achieved either with a more cooperative CCP or a post-CCP government in China. But I think you are correct that many on the right and the left think this competition can only be resolved to the satisfaction of the United States with the removal of the CCP.

EA: I'd honestly like to reject the competition framework entirely. There are things about China that are problematic and that need to be addressed, from concentration camps in Xinjiang to Chinese hacking of U.S. companies. But I view those as discrete issues, not as part of some larger "competition" the United States can win. And that's my biggest problem with this strategy document. It lumps all those real problems together with the Trump administration's hatred of free trade or its xenophobia about Chinese students to make a big, unwieldy mess of a strategy. Take this week's announcement about the expulsion of Chinese students from U.S. universities: Is it about security or hatred of immigration? It's impossible to tell.

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But in this case, whether the U.S. government can cooperate with Asian states to avoid Chinese territorial expansion is not necessarily linked to whether their technology is a spying threat, or to their human rights violations, or to nuclear testing.

MK: In defense of the competition framework, these different and serious threats are all coming from the same source. So why compartmentalize them, when you can deal directly with the government (and dictator) doing all of these things? We haven't even begun to list the problems posed by China just this week, from threatening India to cracking down on Hong Kong.

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EA: What's going on in Hong Kong should concern us. The Chinese government is imposing a law that effectively strips Hong Kong's citizens of their special status. I remember as a child in the United Kingdom watching the return of Hong Kong to China after 100 years of British control; it was very emotional, and there was a lot of talk about defending Hong Kong's special political status; the treaty clearly specifies that it is to remain self-governed until at least 2047.

The new Chinese law explicitly violates that treaty. Unfortunately, there aren't many good policy options for the United States or the U.K., but there would be more if things like trade hadn't already been weaponized by the Trump administration for no good reason.

Compartmentalization doesn't mean that issues can never be linked, just that the United States (and the U.K.) should recognize that their problems with China are primarily in certain issue areas. Expanding the competition to everything today just cuts off certain options later on. What do you propose on Hong Kong?

MK: Pompeo's announcement on Wednesday that the U.S. government will no longer recognize a special status for Hong Kong is a good start. It is telling of Xi's leadership that he is prioritizing political control over economic growth. He backtracked on promised economic reforms, and now he is killing the goose that laid the golden egg. Already, firms and money are looking to flee Hong Kong to other parts of Asia, including Singapore. And this move by the United States will increase further the economic pain Xi feels from this decision. What is your view?

EA: Actually, I kind of like the idea of revoking Hong Kong's special trade status. If it's no longer independent in any way, why should it get that benefit? And there are other outside-the-box ideas we could embrace: granting Hong Kongers citizenship, for example. That's been debated on and off in the U.K. for years, and though the government has been quiet about it post-Brexit, it just confirmed it'll be expanding visa access and a possible path to full U.K. citizenship for Hong Kong residents. I expect we'll see an exodus of highly educated Hong Kongers over the next few years, and the countries that look most attractive—good governance, easy visa access—will benefit from that inflow of talent.

Or why not recognize Taiwan at the WHO? There are lots of similar ideas. All of them signal displeasure and cost China something, but without ratcheting up military tensions.

MK: All good ideas. Does this mean you have a solution for the China-India border dispute, too? They have long fought over disputed territory high in the Himalayas, including a war in 1962.

Things have been mostly quiet recently, but they heated up earlier this month when Chinese and Indian soldiers got into a fistfight. Now, according to the latest reports, Chinese forces have penetrated several miles across the Line of Actual Control, destroyed Indian fortifications, and dug in. It looks like China is in the process of once again getting away with taking contested territory from neighbors through a *fait accompli*.

EA: What a mess. We've got two nuclear powers in a high-tension border dispute, both blasting domestic propaganda, and no real sign of backing down. This could get out of hand, and Washington is not doing much to help. This is the kind of situation that we'd usually see shuttle diplomacy from high-ranking U.S. officials, and instead, the secretary of state is at home dealing with potential corruption charges, and the president is tweeting conspiracy theories. Or do you think we should be taking sides?

MK: Yes. China is America's foremost rival. And India is a potentially valuable strategic partner. Along with Australia, Japan, and the United States, it is part of the emerging "Quad" framework of leading Asian democracies balancing against China in the Indo-Pacific. I also worry about the precedent of allowing revisionist autocracies like Russia and China to encroach on the territory of their neighbors and get away with it: Georgia, Ukraine, the South China Sea—and now Ladakh in northern India. This list is getting too long, and where does it stop? The United States should lead an international diplomatic response to demand that China withdraw back across to its side of the Line of Actual Control. And it should offer to provide India with diplomatic and military aid

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(such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), at New Delhi's request, to help shore up its position.

EA: Yes, it would be a terrible precedent to simply allow states to invade others and change borders or governments by force. Thank goodness the United States has never done anything like that! It would really undermine the Liberal International Order.

U.S. hypocrisy aside, I think the bigger question that emerges is whether India is truly a U.S. partner. Washington has been courting Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a while and even redefined the Pacific as the Indo-Pacific to work with India against China. But India is historically unwilling to align with any great power—even with its tensions with China, I doubt it'd be willing to work too closely with the United States. This seems like another situation where the putative ally gets far more from their relationship with the United States than Washington gets from it.

MK: The United States and India share the same rival—and the enemy of your enemy makes a good friend. Washington has been hoping that India would become a closer partner for years, and, while it has been slow, there has been good recent progress. Supporting India in this case is the principled move under international law, but it could also help strengthen the relationship with India and deter future Chinese aggression.

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Of course, there are still things U.S. officials don't like, such as India buying military hardware from Russia. Speaking of Russia, we haven't even mentioned the Open Skies Treaty, which the U.S. government is withdrawing from.

EA: Indeed, the world is more complex than a U.S.-China competition. There aren't just two sides. India buys weapons from Russia and from the United States. Russia and China have been moving closer together, but they still have border disputes.

Open Skies, however, is a much easier problem. Joe Cirincione, the head of the Ploughshares Fund, once wrote an [article](#) entitled "John Bolton is a serial arms control killer." Now that the former national security advisor is busy trying to sneak his tell-all book past government pre-publication review, I think we could broaden that honor to include the whole Trump administration. Like every previous case, killing Open Skies doesn't really improve anything.

MK: Arms control is a means, not an end. I am in favor when it advances U.S. national security, but this treaty no longer did that. Russia was using Open Skies flights to map U.S. critical infrastructure in order to plan attacks. And the United States has other means, more effective than airplanes, for collecting intelligence.

It would have been better if the U.S. government had made this a coordinated announcement in lockstep with European allies (as it did when it pulled out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty), but it was time to withdraw.

EA: Isn't there a debate about whether Open Skies yielded the Russians any intelligence advantage? After all, they have satellites, too.

MK: U.S. satellites are more sophisticated, so Russia was gaining an asymmetric advantage. Russian collection needs met through Open Skies flights freed up their satellites to do other things.

Speaking of being freed up to do other things, I think we are unfortunately out of time.

EA: Good. I have to go resolve a border dispute between my kids. I wouldn't want it to turn nuclear.

Emma Ashford is a research fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy at the Cato Institute. Twitter: [@EmmaMAshford](#)

Matthew Kroenig is deputy director of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council and a professor in the Department of Government and the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Twitter: [@kroenig](#)