

The China Challenge: What's a Real Liberal to Do?

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Decade ago, Xi Jinping took over as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and president of China. He won his third term as CCP head at the recent 20th national congress, superseding rules imposed after the death of founding dictator Mao Zedong to prevent future one-man rule.

Although Xi did not directly threaten America, he insisted that Beijing would not yield to foreign pressure. Observed Xi, in words clearly directed at Washington: “Confronted with drastic changes in the international landscape, especially external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade and exert maximum pressure on China, we have put our national interests first, focused on internal political concerns, and maintained firm strategic resolve.”

Does this put the US at risk?

Xi is a real communist, though more Leninist than Marxist. He proudly declared: “Over the past decade, we have stayed committed to Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of Three Represents, and the Scientific Outlook on Development, and we have fully implemented the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as well as the Party’s basic line and basic policy.”

Unsurprisingly, the People’s Republic of China rejects Western liberal principles. The more critical question, however, is: does the PRC pose a serious, even existential threat to the US? The rise of China challenges multiple American interests, reflecting the simple fact that Washington was left as a near-global hegemon by the Soviet collapse, and remains the world’s most dominant power. A significant growth in influence of any nation, even friendly, naturally challenges America’s position.

Other states also might face a direct challenge from Beijing (consider the positions of Taiwan and Japan) but geopolitical interests will vary widely depending on location. Much of the Global South, as it is typically called, is likely to feel relatively unaffected, or at least unthreatened, by the same activities. Indeed, for a developing state benefiting from Chinese trade and investment, the PRC’s rise may look quite positive.

Nor do international clashes involving China always involve a battle over liberal values. For instance, liberals, classical ones at least, believe in free trade. Governments, irrespective of their formal ideological complexion, usually not so much. Similarly, a clash between China and

Vietnam over conflicting territorial claims has little to do with freedom or democracy. The larger liberal order, however, is strongest when only changed peacefully, and reflecting a balance of power that inhibits powerful authoritarians, such as Beijing, from acting badly. (Of course, victims of US military action might apply that same argument to America!)

Much that the PRC does should offend anyone with a conscience. Unfortunately, the modern nation state has all too often added a thick layer of human cruelty and injustice. Beijing certainly does. By any measure, China is a cellar-dweller when it comes to human liberty. The PRC sits among the bottom 20 countries and territories of the 210 evaluated by the organization Freedom House.

Many of the most serious tyrannies today have minimal impact on their neighbors, let alone more distant societies. For instance, Eritrea, a truly horrid but little-known totalitarian state, has been called the “North Korea of Africa,” which is not meant as a compliment. But it has little direct impact on the US, or anyone else, for that matter. While the atrocious conduct of the government of Eritrea, and others like it, violates any standard of humane and decent conduct, these countries threaten few but their own people. They have little interest in conquering other nations or revising the international order. Their intent and conduct might be evil, but serious threats to the rest of us they are not.

China matters to the US because it is much more than Eritrea, or even North Korea. While the latter’s Kim Jong-un can wreak harm, he cannot wreck the international order. The PRC can, which is what makes Beijing so special and threatening, including to the US. China’s unique ability, built upon its peoples’ dramatic economic success, is to reach beyond its own borders to impose at least some of its increasingly oppressive strictures upon other states and peoples.

In addressing China Americans should prepare for the worst while hoping for the best. The PRC poses a significant challenge across many issues. Perhaps the sharpest assault on liberal values is the abysmal status of human rights in China. Attacks on human liberty are wholesale, mostly domestic, but increasingly extended to liberal societies.

As economic growth has delivered wealth and reach, the Chinese state has grown ever-more willing to influence other nations and attempt to impose its policies on other societies, such as Chinese students and Uyghur expatriates. Commerce and trade yield another venue of political influence, discouraging many governments from even criticizing Beijing.

Some “threats” look like conventional statism, also present in Western, democratic societies. Trade protectionism and industrial subsidies, for instance. Other issues are elsewhere common criminal acts, but greatly magnified by the PRC, such as IP theft and cyberattacks. More worrisome are Chinese efforts to dominate the economy’s technological heights. Also of concern are military threats, today focused on territorial disputes starting with Taiwan and claimants to various Asia-Pacific islands, as well as the issue of navigational freedom.

In the abstract, none of these issues is unique. Many nations, including, frankly, the US, engage in one or more such activities, receiving little more than an occasional reprimand in return. Many states, including US allies, remain largely unaffected by China’s malign policies. Although the

PRC is directly challenging some individual countries and governments, there is no inherent coincidence of interests between the governments of democratic, liberal-leaning states and the liberal order more broadly. How, then, should liberty-minded peoples, committed to a free society, respond to China?

More than any other nation today, the People's Republic of China, the modern manifestation of various forms of Chinese empire stretching back thousands of years, poses a significant challenge to liberal values and interests. The threat is less militarized than that of the Soviet Union, but potentially more extensive and enduring. What makes China today unique is that it is more than the sum of its individual characteristics. Especially notable is the confluence of these factors:

- A Leninist political regime with survival its highest objective;
- The world's largest population (though soon to fall to second);
- Authoritarian, veering toward totalitarian, rule over 1.4 billion Chinese people;
- Control of the world's largest or second largest (depending on standard used) economy;
- Reliance on means ranging from dubious (mandatory technology sharing) to criminal (cybertheft, espionage) to acquire or steal foreign technology and violate foreign IP;
- Use of growing economic power to advance hostile political and security ends;
- Pressure to control its citizens, Chinese emigres, and even foreign citizens located in other countries;
- Violation of international agreement to impose "one country, one system" on Hong Kong;
- Territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere along its borders (India), backed with military force;
- Threats to conquer ("reunite" with) Taiwan through military means; and
- A military capable of pursuing other, more expansionist policies in Asia and elsewhere.

In normal cases, most of these problems would be limited and resolved by individual nations. However, *laissez faire* is inadequate when confronting a well-armed, hostile Leninist state, with control over nominally private companies and their abundant economic resources. Indeed, despite manifest weaknesses, Beijing could end up relatively stronger in the coming years, as the US faces its own demographic, economic, and fiscal problems. China should be expected to take advantage of whatever opportunities it might gain.

This is not a necessary result, of course, but the liberty-minded should take seriously the potential harm that could be committed by the Chinese state and consider appropriate responses, often coordinated with like-minded governments. Some initiatives might prove necessary—trade restrictions, perhaps, or economic subsidies, police investigations, and military confrontations—that would violate liberal principles and require intrusive government action. In such cases, such

as the Biden administration's draconian restrictions over sale of semiconductor chips to Chinese entities, the trade-offs will be painful.

Indeed, more than anyone else, the liberty-minded realize the risks of turning to interventionist measures so easily abused and manipulated for other purposes. Given the realities of the political process, such policies *inevitably will be* abused and manipulated.

Ultimately, squaring this circle might be the most important responsibility for Americans today, along with preventing a catastrophic war. The US must prevent the CCP-dominated state from gaining critical military or economic advantages. Attempting to unduly impede Beijing's natural development, however, "ruthlessly blocking" its way forward, in Hal Brands' words, risks continuing confrontation. That could result in a costly, fractious Cold War at best, a dangerous, potentially disastrous hot conflict at worst, something far beyond anything seen since World War II, and perhaps not even then.

Americans must defend a free society at home and preserve a liberal peace abroad. They may be the only people able to do both.

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