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Going Around Trump and Xi to Save U.S.-China Relations

Individual Chinese are eager to learn and much more open to America than you'd think.

Doug Bandow

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For the seventh time now, I am spending a week in July at a Chinese university with several other Americans to speak about economics to Chinese students. And every visit, I learn more about the growing communist giant across the Pacific.

However, these experiences have gotten more difficult as Washington and Beijing clash over issues large and small. More important, though, has been the internal crackdown in the People's Republic of China. My first trip to the PRC was in 1992: it was a vastly different country, one finally exiting the Maoist era's intermittent lunacy. In the succeeding years, there was increasing liberalization—most obviously in economic policy, but also in terms of personal autonomy.

The Tiananmen Square massacre likely closed off any prospect of serious regime reform, but political controls remained loose at the edges. Academic exchanges flourished, freedom-minded NGOs operated, and the Great Firewall was penetrated. Independent-minded Chinese journalists, though unable to challenge the Communist Party's monopoly of power, had space to expose government misdeeds. These all fueled hopes that economic reform and market transformation would encourage a freer Chinese society.

Alas, President Xi Jinping seems to have killed that possibility, at least for the present.

Academic exchanges have become more difficult; NGOs have been shut down, churches destroyed. Human rights lawyers have been arrested, internet controls tightened, and a totalitarian "social credit" system developed. Foreign policy, too, has become more aggressive: pressure on both Taiwan and Hong Kong has increased, and, perhaps most notably, Uighurs have been incarcerated en masse.

These and other related changes have significantly accelerated a decline in Sino-American governmental relations.

This increasingly restrictive political climate has also created greater uncertainty in nonpolitical relationships. A couple months ago, I arrived in China for a conference scheduled for the next day only to be told that I (and other foreign invitees) could not participate. The local party had

decreed that they required Beijing's approval if we were to attend. I had spoken at the same event two years before and wouldn't have said anything particularly controversial. But no matter: this was an old requirement, I was told, which until recently hadn't been enforced

Americans involved in politically sensitive research—regarding Tibet or Xinjiang, for instance—have long risked being denied entry into the PRC. But recently the U.S. and China have engaged in a new variant of "visa wars," with Washington the aggressor, revoking permission for Chinese university professors and others to visit America. Beijing has retaliated against those with connections to the Trump administration.

Even more informal personal contact is subject to greater scrutiny. Though I had done so in the past, a company that prepares Chinese students for overseas study was hesitant to have me speak (about education, not politics) at their events this year. University students admitted that they believed some subjects, such as Donald Trump, to be too sensitive to ask about. This in contrast to a few years ago, when I was questioned about Tiananmen Square and internet censorship in Chinese economics classes (which I tried to answer with appropriate political sensitivity).

Washington is uncertain as to how it should respond to the increasing challenges posed by Beijing. China is not an enemy and should not be treated as such, but the Trump administration's trade war and other economic restrictions continue to weaken what was traditionally the foundation for our bilateral relationship: economic partnership. With the usual corporate defenders of bilateral ties essentially silent, the China-U.S. relationship has become much more uncertain.

Moreover, the U.S. still fails to distinguish between vital and peripheral interests. When Washington officials talk national security, they're really interested in influence. Underlying American policy is a determination to remain dominant in the region, which China views as its geopolitical sphere. U.S. interests there are real, too, but comparatively modest, while those of the PRC are fundamental, even existential. Washington's current aggressive policy, if unchanged, may well make conflict inevitable.

Both governments should do much better at facilitating contact between private citizens. It's especially important when inter-government relations are tense and unproductive.

Despite the sometimes disconcerting stares that still greet Westerners, most Chinese are friendly. Many have relatives in the U.S. and have traveled to America—or hope to do so. A taxi driver struck up a conversation with one of our number who knew Chinese. The cabbie had two children in Georgia. After discovering that one my colleagues was from the same state, he didn't want to charge us for the ride.

Chinese academics and officials with whom I speak readily separate the actions of Americans' government and Americans themselves. Students exhibit an even greater fascination with the U.S. They like its culture and sports. They favor English-language T-shirts. They don't like government restrictions on their personal autonomy. But they tend to be strong patriots and nationalists. Most important, they are Chinese, not American wannabes, no matter how much they like U.S. values and practices.

Yet both governments have been interfering with private contacts. For instance, the U.S. is concerned that Chinese scholars are working with their government's intelligence services. Such suspicion seems inevitable for anyone who calls the mainland home, family members being vulnerable to government retaliation. Not many are willing to tell a dictatorship no. While thoughtful controls over foreigners' access to security-related information is necessary, American policymakers should not isolate the U.S. from those who know and like this country. Rather, Washington should to use them in its own "intelligence work," learning as much from them as possible.

Indeed, private trips can act as informal, quasi-track II events. That is, governments can effectively exchange policy and political ideas through private actors. The lack of official accountability allows for greater creativity and experimentation. Ideas can be mooted and discussed without being officially offered. Given the growing bitterness of the public debate in both nations, keeping private diplomatic channels open supplements American foreign policy. The result, hopefully, will be to maximize the number of considered ideas while prodding governments to think more creatively.

Returning again and again to the same university to teach economics seminars has created enduring friendships. Obviously, these relationships are unlikely to transform political ties between the two capitals. But nevertheless, on both sides, at least a few more can count as friends those from other nations. The more this phenomenon spreads, the more difficult it becomes for governments to demonize others to justify hostility, conflict, and war.

Such contacts, multiplied nationwide, can also help create an easier familiarity with the other side. That can mean understanding better how the other parties think and behave, a greater willingness to talk with foreign counterparts, and increased trust in the intentions and proposals advanced. Obviously, my spending a week annually with one university has little chance of transforming the bilateral relationship, but the aggregate impact of a multitude of individual relationships could make a real impact.

Reaching students may be even more important in the long-term. As collegians enter the workforce, they will begin to change their nation. It would be best if they appreciated the values of liberty and understand how designing policies that protect them can be practical solutions. Indeed, most already object to internet censorship and other restrictions, though few can be expected to challenge their government. The best outcome in the PRC is likely the gradual transformation of the regime through an internal process led by just such young people. Reinforcing their natural inclinations would be a positive investment for the future, even if the impact would be uncertain and indirect.

But the contacts do not go only one way. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that foreign students now attend this and other Chinese universities. The enrollment of the school that hosted the economics seminar is not huge, and there are no Americans, at least none who attended the classes. However, a number of countries are represented: Japan, Taiwan, Russia, Poland, Belarus, and the Czech Republic. These students will affect their domestic counterparts, who will be China's leaders in the future.

Although the dealings between the American and Chinese governments sometimes leave me pessimistic, the attitudes of younger Chinese give me a glimmer of hope. The students are interested and want to learn. They value freedom in their own lives. They are fascinated by the outside world. They desire to make their nation a better place. And they are willing, even eager, to engage Americans.

China will be one of America's biggest foreign policy challenges for years to come. But Washington can do much by encouraging private, personal contacts. The U.S. will need every advantage that it can get to deal with the PRC in coming years.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.