



The United States Can't Ditch China Yet

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Beijing no longer has many friends in Washington—for understandable reasons. The entire Chinese government mishandled various stages of the coronavirus outbreak, including hiding the extent of infection and transmissibility to humans, punishing doctors and citizen journalists who sought to report on the looming pandemic, and moving far too slowly on a travel ban from Wuhan, allowing the coronavirus to become a truly global crisis.

Goodwill toward China had been slipping long before the pandemic, sped by President Xi Jinping's worsening domestic human rights record and his more aggressive international approach—especially toward Hong Kong and Taiwan. Peter Navarro, a top Trump aide on trade and the coronavirus, has written several anti-China books, including *The Coming China Wars: Where They Will Be Fought, How They Can Be Won*. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, argued at his confirmation hearing: “I think China is the main challenger to U.S. national security over the next 50, 100 years.” But measures that treat Beijing as an enemy risk triggering the very results they are supposed to prevent: diplomatic discord, economic disruption, and even military conflict.

An authoritarian, aggressive China presents a real challenge to U.S. policy across the board, from security to economics to human rights. But the future is not set. And China does not pose the kind of dire existential threat that one might believe given the increasingly hysterical rhetoric in Washington.

Policymakers should keep a sense of balance. For one, China remains a poor nation. Even with the world's second-largest GDP, or largest based on purchasing power parity (PPP) measurements, China has more than four times as many people to feed, clothe, house, and otherwise provide for than the United States. Meanwhile, the Chinese people's material expectations have grown over time. Meeting them offers the only real legitimacy for the Communist Party, placing Xi's government on shakier ground than might be expected.

China must contend with significant economic, demographic, and political challenges. The country has a legacy of inefficient and indebted state enterprises, banks overburdened with bad debts, ghost cities, and property bubbles—plus political interference. The impact of the one-child policy survives despite its formal repeal, while a rapidly aging society will likely grow old before it grows rich, with potentially debilitating consequences.

China also remains well behind the United States militarily. Some estimates of military outlays, based on the PPP standard, have Beijing much closer to Washington than commonly thought. But the United States possesses a massive force built up over time. The question is not whether the United States can be defended—it can, quite easily—but whether China can defend itself. Of the two countries, China is at much greater risk of its homeland becoming a potential battleground.

The United States has a multitude of allies and global military relationships, while China has virtually none. Despite the Trump administration's many missteps, Washington retains unrivaled influence around the world. The ties may have frayed of late, but decades of cooperation, including in war, remain important. Beijing, for its part, has a cold friendship with Moscow, uneven ties with Pyongyang and Islamabad, a tenuous partnership with Tehran, and sometimes unpleasant debt relationships elsewhere in the developing world. China's multilateral clout is largely limited to economics.

A dictatorship cannot sustain itself without a complete control over information, but the Xi regime's best efforts at mind control have failed—as its response to the coronavirus has laid bare. The death of Li Wenliang, who was one of eight Wuhan physicians punished for alerting colleagues about the new coronavirus, created a tsunami of popular anger. Wuhan residents also expressed their disgust at party officials for claiming success and demanding praise for the Communist Party. Anger continues to simmer on social media despite constant censorship of forbidden opinions and increasing punishment for expressing them.

For all his power, Xi Jinping is as likely to be an aberration as a transformational force. He challenged figures and factions important in the past; he made significant enemies, abandoning past forbearance against the country's so-called elite tigers, including politburo members; he knows there will be a price on his head if he ever yields his office. Reportedly, there was widespread disquiet when Xi eliminated presidential term limits in 2018. Repression has hidden but not eliminated opposition, and it certainly hasn't quieted public furor. Just as demands for reform emerged after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, so too may they reemerge in the coming years.

None of these facts diminishes the challenge China may eventually pose to the United States and the international order. China has come through thousands of years of civilization with a dramatic transformation in the last five decades. It would be foolish to underestimate its future potential. But that future may be further away than many in Washington today imagine.

In the meantime, the United States would be wise to engage China without fear or frenzy. Washington can address Beijing's malign intentions without turning it into an enemy. U.S. leaders must address specific challenges while promoting cooperation and engagement when possible. Such efforts have borne fruit before. Far from being a failure, the almost half-century of contact since U.S. President Richard Nixon visited Beijing has encouraged China's decided shift away from Maoism. To be sure, the result was not a liberal Western-style democracy as many had hoped, but without sustained contact with the West—through commerce, tourism, academia, diplomacy, culture, and more—China might not have decisively rejected its recent past.

The 21st century will be a far better place if Washington and Beijing can prioritize cooperation over confrontation and avoid the destructive conflict that accompanied the last major transformations of the global balance of power. As the 19th century waned, long-preeminent Great Britain was challenged by two rising powers. London accommodated the United States and confronted Germany. After two wars against the latter, Britain no longer was a great power. The United States and China might never be close friends, but they must avoid becoming bitter enemies.

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