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Fifty Years Of China

Despite today's challenges, Nixon's opening China was the right move.

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In February 1972 the seemingly impossible happened. President Richard Nixon, who made his name as a red-baiting anti-communist, arrived in Beijing, where he shook hands with Mao Zedong, one of the world's most consequential communist leaders. The world's ideological axis shifted.

At first the relationship focused on security, especially constraining the Soviet Union. That strategy proved to be a brilliant success. Although Beijing and Washington did not become military allies, it was enough that they ceased to treat each other as enemies.

Mao died in 1976, triggering a power struggle which left the pragmatic Deng Xiaoping as China's "paramount" leader. He pushed market reforms and opened the People's Republic of China to foreign investment and trade. The PRC's big cities and commercial centers welcomed the world and grew accordingly. The once desperately poor country responded to Deng's injunction "to get rich," though the resulting capitalist rewards were very unevenly spread.

American consumers benefited. So did U.S. exporters—much that Americans import are intermediate goods, used to make products for export. China's incredible growth, fueled by drawing unemployed and underemployed rural workers into industry, also moved hundreds of millions of people out of poverty.

Along with economic freedom came personal autonomy. Before Mao's death China was one of the most regimented societies on earth. During the Cultural Revolution a lack of perceived revolutionary enthusiasm could result in a very public and brutal death. That all changed. During the early reform years a tour guide told me about the incredible changes in his life—being able to choose where to work and who to marry without state approval, for instance.

Class warfare also gave way to intellectual exploration and social modernization. Explained Jeremy Brown of Simon Fraser University: "For many people, especially students and intellectuals, it meant freedom to seek higher education, debate controversial issues, read foreign articles and books, and travel abroad for academic conferences."

Support for political liberalization was evident up into the 2010s. The 1989 Tiananmen Square protests were triggered by the death of Hu Yaobang, a CCP general secretary removed by Deng for his relatively liberal views. Hu's replacement, Zhao Ziyang, was next dumped by Deng for opposing the brutal military crackdown. The outcome of the Tiananmen Square crisis—which featured protests across the country and support from workers as well as students—was not foreordained.

Deng's deep party connections made the difference. Still, the result was a close-run affair that easily could have liberalized political strictures. Even after the pervasive party purge that followed, the PRC's authoritarianism was loose. Direct challenge to Chinese Communist Party rule typically earned a prison term. However, independent journalists could report on local problems and human rights lawyers could represent dissidents in court. Policies and philosophies could be carefully discussed among friends, at universities, through NGOs, and by foreigners. Liberals faced attack from unreconstructed Maoists, but still publicly engaged Chinese policymakers.

In this China I could accept a university invitation extended without CCP approval, lecture on free markets at a university School of Marxism, explain to other students why Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea were excessive, be asked about Tiananmen Square in class, attend a conference on economic reform organized by a private NGO, use a VPN to access the global internet, attend a large Beijing church operating publicly, fly almost anywhere in the country (minus Tibet and Xinjiang) without hindrance, and return home to write about the PRC's human rights abuses. And then repeat the process.

In short, engagement with America and the West worked. It did not deliver democracy, which was too much to expect from the simple operation of markets. And it was undercut by serious mistakes, especially downplaying issues of corporate and cyber espionage and technology transfer. Nevertheless, the China of, say, 2012 was vastly different and better than that of 1972.

Had Nixon failed to orchestrate the opening with China, how would the world have turned out? The Soviet Union might have been more aggressive and less amenable to détente. Its underlying weaknesses probably still would have yielded an existential crisis. However, under a tougher leadership the end of the Cold War might have been more violent and dangerous.

The PRC's turn away from mad Maoism would have remained likely—the Cultural Revolution ravaged elites as well as masses. Deng probably would have won the post-Mao power struggle. He likely would have pushed at least some economic reforms, though probably far less dramatic in scope.

He also might have favored some outreach to the West, but the deal would have been much harder to consummate. Mao and Nixon both had full authority as leaders and credibility as hardliners to act; Deng and Jimmy Carter, not so much. Without the Nixon breakthrough, a more threatening international environment probably would have left China hostile to and suspicious of America and the West. Beijing might have

launched an earlier arms buildup. Worse, the PRC might have become a very large North Korea, more threatening militarily if less successful economically than today.

Of course, the more liberal China of a decade or so ago no longer exists. However, today's creeping totalitarianism was not inevitable. Xi Jinping demonstrates that individuals matter, even in the PRC. He shares Mao's skill in accumulating and using power for ill, including by shrinking the space available for free thought and serious debate. Almost everyone in China—students, religious believers, Uyghurs, liberals, entrepreneurs, professors, parents, Hong Kongers, anyone inclined to think independently, and even CCP members—is being told to shut up and conform to “Xi Jinping thought,” whatever it turns out to be, or else.

Despite the serious challenge posed by the PRC, it is important not to overstate the threat. Beijing's weaknesses are substantial. A shrinking and aging population with too many men; highly indebted and inefficient state enterprises responsible for a disproportionate share of employment; a national property bubble representing a huge share of people's wealth; wide geographic differences in wealth. Internationally, China has few true friends let alone allies. Initiating political and economic warfare in response to foreign criticism harmed its image in once friendly nations as different as Australia, Germany, and South Korea. Asian states are moving closer to Washington.

President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's campaign to essentially become the new Mao has undermined the flexibility and accountability which the communist party claimed for itself. Innovation does not thrive when the entire population is instructed to think as the party leader dictates. Entrepreneurs once expressed appreciation for the CCP providing political stability. Now they realize that their liberty also is at risk. Certainly, U.S. democracy has demonstrated its weaknesses, but attempting to regiment 1.45 billion people is likely to generate far worse results.

Americans can best address the PRC's economic challenge by attacking impediments to growth and innovation at home and working with allied states to address Chinese misbehavior abroad. The U.S. should not mimic China by adopting industrial policy and managed trade. Trump erred by declaring economic war on everyone, including America's closest allies, rather than working with others to confront Beijing.

Moreover, the security threat shouldn't be overstated. The U.S. possesses a far stronger military and the means to deter an attack on America: There will be no Chinese aircraft carriers moving on Hawaii, let alone California, today or in the years ahead. Nuclear weapons alone make that impossible. And while the PRC's arms buildup is impressive, China remains a relatively poor nation which spends more on internal security—meaning to oppress its own people—than on the military. What Beijing is doing is amassing the ability *to deter a U.S. attack*, so-called anti-access/area denial capabilities.

Thus, The PRC's “threat” is to replicate America's Monroe Doctrine and keep the U.S. out of its neighborhood. At stake is U.S. influence in East Asia, an important interest, but not an existential threat to America's future. At some point an increasingly

financially enfeebled Washington—with the debt-to-GDP ratio already near the post-World War II record and headed upward—is going to find it difficult to field a military capable of imposing America’s will nearly 8,000 miles from home on Beijing. Instead of expecting Americans to continue to dominate East Asian waters, U.S. friends and allies need to do more and increasingly work together. Although controversial to suggest, that might require Washington’s friends to deploy nuclear weapons, a better option than for the U.S. to risk Los Angeles for Taipei, Tokyo, Seoul, or Manila.

Finally, China’s future is not set. Last year a publication of Xi’s “selected discourses” included his denunciation of “what he called ‘discordant and cacophonous voices’ in the party. He cited unnamed cadres saying that, ‘we have for the past five years sufficiently stressed concentration [of powers] and unity in the party...[and] from now on we must put the emphasis on developing democracy within the party.’” He attacked these party members for “political obfuscation and mental obtuseness” and “ulterior motives to push through [evil] agendas.” If the man supposedly in full control believes it necessary to so attack his critics, he perceives a threat. And if this movement bothers him while he is in charge, it likely will reemerge strongly once he is gone.

The PRC poses a more significant challenge to U.S. dominance than did the Soviet Union. But the threat is very different. Although China might not have turned out as we wished, Richard Nixon’s trip to Beijing a half century ago remains a diplomatic masterstroke which changed the world for the better.

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