



As Seeming Consensus Hardens for Cold – or Even Hot – War Against China

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What a difference a presidential campaign and deadly pandemic make. Although the U.S. and People's Republic of China long had been at odds over important issues, the bilateral relationship remained civil if not always friendly. Despite occasional spats, no one imagined a cold war, let alone actual hostilities. But 2020 changed everything. Today the possibility of conflict is on many Americans' minds.

Moreover, the chance of war remains as great today as under the Trump administration. Chinese-American writer Nina Luo observed that after Joe Biden's victory she "felt a sudden sense of relief. The days of 'the China virus' rhetoric from the White House were over." But her optimism soon dissipated, and she observed that "long before Trump took office, xenophobia, anti-Asian racism, and Yellow Peril-style propaganda served as useful tools to advance American domestic and foreign policy goals."

Particularly noteworthy is the latter. Scaremongering is pushing Washington toward conflict with Beijing. Observed Luo: "In recent decades, the defense industry has perfected this rhetoric to make the case for war on China. Republicans and Democrats – including both President Biden and even our most progressive members of Congress – amplify the warmongering and push for increased defense spending."

One might forgive some overstatement if the US really faced a dire threat from the PRC. But America doesn't. To be sure Beijing poses a serious challenge – its economy is growing, human rights abuses are increasing, and geopolitical ambitions are expanding. However, the US remains the strongest power on the planet, is allied with most of the world's industrialized democracies, and cooperates with many other states interesting in constraining if not containing China.

Luo explains, with some overstatement, but not too much:

"China is not a threat because it's attacking US soil. China is a threat because it threatens American global hegemony. Here the underlying logic of Yellow Peril becomes clear. Proliferating the false idea that China will take over the West rationalizes starting conflict in the Asia-Pacific; this nearly perfectly parallels the geopolitical theater of a century ago. The Yellow Peril, the faceless horde, the ever-growing yellow population, an existential threat to the West, to liberal human rights, to the market economy, to the 'rules-based' order, to American primacy."

The Senate is currently moving a group of anti-PRC bills, repackaged as the US Innovation and Competition Act, which currently runs 1445 pages. The measure combines subsidies for domestic industries, federal spending on education, regulation of academic cooperation with China, loans for foreign governments, support for alliances, sanctions on Beijing, restrictions on Chinese investments, and more.

The legislation enjoys bipartisan backing. Explained progressive Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Cal.), it is "perfectly appropriate" to desire "that our values of freedom and liberal democracy win, and we don't allow authoritarian or surveillance capitalism to win."

And so it is, but history suggests that the corporate giveaways and geopolitical hostility which fill the bill are likely to prove counterproductive. A group of progressive organizations warn that "anti-China framing for such initiative is not only politically unnecessary; it is harmful," feeding xenophobia, violence, and other forms of domestic intolerance.

However, such concerns are unlikely to halt passage of the bill. Such is the state of anti-China hysteria in America today. American policymakers should step back and take a clear-eyed look at the less than overwhelming "China threat."

The overriding objective of both countries should be to maintain peace. Washington and Beijing have no reason to fight. Neither poses an existential threat to the other. In Asia the squabble is over influence, but Washington gains less than China loses from the current proximity of US forces to the PRC. When challenged in its own neighborhood, Beijing will always spend, do, and risk more than America. Should war come, the costs would be incalculable, to America, China, and other nations.

The US still might be expected to "win" any direct clash – though wargames have not been reassuring – but any victory over the PRC would be costly beyond reason. China almost certainly would not give up after one defeat. It would be like World War I, after which French Marshal Ferdinand Foch accurately called the Versailles Treaty "an armistice for 20 years." Just as Washington would do everything possible to keep China away from the coasts and out of the Caribbean, Beijing would act similarly in Asia-Pacific waters even in the aftermath of a defeat.

However, the PRC does not seek war with America. It remains a poor country. Despite its large GDP, China's per capita wealth is but a quarter of America's, depending on the measurement used. Beijing and Shanghai showcase wealth and modernity, but the vast rural hinterland is far behind.

Nor is future growth guaranteed. The country faces a demographic crisis, as the population might start shrinking as early as this year. The society also is aging, which means China might end up old before it gets rich. The country has run out of surplus labor, which drove its earlier growth. Productivity has ebbed. Economic inefficiencies loom large – overextended state banks are filled

with bad loans, inefficient, bloated state enterprises survive as economic zombies for political reasons, empty ghost cities await nonexistent residents, and more.

Political stability is not assured. Xi Jinping has gathered ever more power in his hands, but only by breaking widely supported rules that sought to prevent Mao-like accumulations of authority. He has created numerous enemies, who would be only too happy to take advantage of any misstep. And at age 67 he will not be in power forever, even if he keeps his opponents cowed. Once he is gone, for whatever reason, Beijing could again change direction, this time in a more positive direction. The country changed radically after the death of Mao Zedong. It could do the same after Xi's inevitable, and welcome, disappearance.

Militarily the PRC trails America by a vast margin. So the People's Liberation Army is pursuing an anti-access/area denial strategy to keep America out of East Asia, which is nearly 8000 miles from the US. Beijing has no interest in launching an invasion flotilla toward Hawaii, let alone California, but is concentrating on forestalling Washington from imposing Pax Americana along China's coast. Dominating the Asia-Pacific is convenient for the US but isn't necessary to protect Americans from harm.

Geopolitically Washington begins from a position of relative strength. It should work with allied nations, encouraging them to address issues of concern. For instance, China shares East Asia with countries such as South Korea and Japan. If they worry about PRC aggressiveness and territorial claims, they are well able to cooperate in opposition. Just as Beijing attempts to employ A2D2 against America, China's neighbors should do the same against it.

The PRC has turned into a human rights horror show, but there is little that Washington can do to change internal Chinese behavior. Repression is integral to China's authoritarian system. Beijing is not going to surrender its most important tools to maintain power, no matter how much US officials, politicians, and pundits complain.

That doesn't mean America should be silent. Measured allied support for discrete human rights improvements is more likely to generate success. Private sector efforts to embarrass, shame, and punish human rights abusers can add additional pressure. However, expectations should remain modest.

Moreover, the US should seek to empower the Chinese people. Americans should encourage continuing private contact and cooperation. Particularly important are student attendance and professorial exchanges, despite security concerns. Americans should encourage commerce and trade as well. Tourism, too, should continue to help knit the two peoples together. Americans also should work to punch holes in the Great Firewall: the more information the Chinese people have, the more they can seek greater liberty. By the same token, Washington should avoid gratuitous attacks on the PRC and Chinese Communist Party that are more likely to inflame nationalist feelings than encourage liberal sentiments.

The Biden administration is still working to develop its China policy. Beijing poses a complicated challenge. It is more serious than that presented by the Soviet Union because the PRC is far stronger economically than Moscow. However, China is not waging an ideological war, remains integral to the international economic system, has prioritized economic growth which requires interdependence, lacks military allies and even real friends, and faces internal challenges much more daunting than those bedeviling America.

In this situation Americans should play the long game. And do so confidently. Despite this nation's current problems, the US retains enormous strengths. Although most young Chinese are nationalists – strong believers in their country and happy being Chinese – they also favor personal liberty and autonomy. Moreover, the PRC's rulers are weaker than they appear and likely believe. Ultimately, however, Americans have only limited ability to influence China's future transformation, which will remain up to the Chinese people.

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