



How to Deal with Newly Empowered Xi Jinping

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The long-suffering American hope that economic liberalization would yield intellectual and political freedom in China is officially dead after President Xi Jinping's coronation at the recent party congress. He emphasized party control, strengthened personal power, and stifled intellectual dissent.

Xi appears to be the most powerful Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping if not Mao Zedong. At the congress Xi outlined his vision for the future: The People's Republic of China is to develop into a "fully modern economy" and become "a global leader of composite national strength and international influence."

The PRC already is arguably close to achieving both objectives. Although the country faces significant economic and political challenges, so far it has confounded the doomsayers.

Beijing is likely to pose a substantial challenge to U.S. interests and values. That doesn't make conflict inevitable or even likely, but to effectively respond policymakers should better prioritize Washington's objectives.

Indeed, America's leaders, if they deserve to be called that, should start by rescuing the U.S. political system from laughing-stock status. By all appearances, President Xi is serious, determined, and competent; he knows both privilege and hardship; he even lived in America, now his country's chief adversary. Even Chinese inclined toward democracy have trouble defending the American system these days.

The operation of Congress fails to live up to what the world's most powerful nation requires. The democratically elected U.S. body should easily outdistance China's rubber-stamp National People's Congress, but the inability of American legislators to address so many serious problems seems to discredit America's democratic experiment.

Moreover, Washington needs to restore its economic self-confidence. The U.S. should emphasize opening Chinese commercial and investment markets, not closing the American economy. The U.S. economy needs to become more competitive and efficient. The Trump administration's deregulation campaign and tax cuts are an important start. More needs to be done.

The administration also should press President Xi to live up to his past emphasis on market reforms, which would benefit American businesses and Chinese consumers. Not incidentally, doing so also would help counteract the Xi regime's expansion of state control over the economy. Beijing's objective is more than economic, being designed to strengthen the central government's power.

Politically, Washington should treat the PRC as a serious competitor. Depending on the issue, China may be adversary or friend. The U.S. should emphasize areas where the two nations' interests coincide and look for compromises where interests diverge. Washington cannot dictate: negotiation over contested issues is inevitable.

North Korea may be the most important current controversy between the U.S. and Beijing. The PRC desires neither a failed state on its border—consider how Americans view Mexico—nor a reunited Korea allied with America hosting U.S. troops. The Trump administration should address those interests to win China's cooperation.

Overall, Washington must channel the two nations' rivalry away from military confrontation. The PRC would be a formidable opponent even now. It would not win a global war with America, but has demonstrated no interest in matching the U.S. around the world.

Rather, China hopes to deter Washington from intervening against the PRC in its own neighborhood. While the Pentagon hopes to counteract China's anti-access/area denial strategy, deterrence is much cheaper than power projection. A few missiles or torpedoes are far less expensive than the aircraft carrier they might sink.

Moreover, even victory for the U.S. would not mean the end of conflict. A resentful, still growing PRC would be an even more formidable foe in the future. The American people aren't likely to fund endless conflict far from the U.S. when their own defense is not directly at stake. Limiting Beijing's influence in its own neighborhood is not worth catastrophic conflict. Washington must assess what interests are worth defending at what cost.

One positive strategy for Americans in and out of government would be to expand the free information flow to Chinese citizens. The administration should not launch an official propaganda campaign. Telling nationalistic Chinese what to believe would be counter-productive.

In contrast, widening their access to information while allowing them to draw their own conclusions would be a better approach. Washington should cooperate with private organizations to blow holes in the Great Firewall and use the access of Chinese media to the U.S. to address Beijing's restrictions on American journalists. The U.S. and world gain if the Chinese people know the opportunities and benefits of freedom.

Although the PRC's climb to greatness is not assured, it is likely to pose an ever more serious challenge to the U.S. The Trump administration must develop creative approaches if Washington is going to respond effectively.

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