

What to do about an authoritarian China with totalitarian characteristics?

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Next year marks the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Mao Zedong and his fellow revolutionaries made a new state, proud and independent. As well as authoritarian and murderous. That era seemed over, but oppression with totalitarian overtones has returned to the PRC. What should America do?

China's history is long and tortured. Once a great empire that dominated its neighbors, it turned inward, falling behind both its neighbors and more distant Western powers. But in Tiananmen Square on Oct. 1, 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

The Communists became the new elite and for nearly 30 years Mao dominated his nation. Estimates of the total number who died under the man known as the "Red Emperor" range between 35 million and an astounding 100 million people.

Only his death in 1976 finally freed the Chinese people. Economic reform soon followed, with perhaps the greatest reduction in poverty in such a short time in human history. Moreover, personal autonomy greatly expanded, with people increasingly free to live their lives, outside of politics, anyway.

Finally, the intellectual atmosphere relaxed. Political opposition was verboten, but the Chinese Communist Party had little credibility. There was hope that Western contacts, economic development, and increased wealth would lead to a steadily freer Chinese society.

Then along came Xi Jinping. He has oft been compared to Mao in terms of the power that he has amassed. But more important is his role as the anti-Mikhail Gorbachev and even anti-Deng Xiaoping. Increasing his personal authority obviously is a priority. But so is empowering the state.

His government has assaulted intellectual freedom, internet access, religious liberty, foreign business, and economic autonomy. This attack also is evident in Hong Kong, once promised legal autonomy, and even against Taiwan, still beyond Beijing's direct control. Perhaps most creepy is the attempt to create an essentially totalitarian system of surveillance and social

control.

President Xi may ultimately fail in his attempt to remake the PRC. Still, it seems naive to imagine that China is destined to evolve in a more liberal direction. Which means America and its allies are likely to face a wealthier and more authoritarian China controlled by a president setting a consciously anti-Western course.

That doesn't mean Beijing poses a direct military threat. Historically China's reach has been limited and there's no evidence that the PRC as yet has global military ambitions. Moreover, it is encircled by potential adversaries with which it has fought in the past: India, Russia, (South) Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Finally, America possesses a significant military lead and will easily preserve the capability to deter the PRC from any aggressive moves on U.S. territory.

Even China's apparent economic gains are less than they appear. Beijing, like America during the Cold War, has found Africa to be tough going. By pursuing politically-driven projects with poor, inefficient, and corrupt governments around the world the Belt and Road initiative risks expensive failure. And the harder the PRC pushes, the more other nations shove back, most notably in its own neighborhood, as Southeast Asian nations increasingly welcome Indian and Japanese military involvement.

Nevertheless, Washington and its friends cannot ignore the transformation taking place within China. While outside influence over the PRC's internal affairs is extremely limited, it would benefit from a more liberal Chinese society. Trade provides Western nations with enormous economic benefits, but Chinese investment even in civilian industries raises increased concerns with Beijing appearing to consciously target liberal democracy.

It is imperative for Washington to avoid war — the PRC would be no pushover, and even if the U.S. and its allies won the first conflict, the latter would be only the first one. A la Germans a century ago, nationalistic Chinese would likely be energized and initiate another round. Yet how to encourage the PRC's often fractious neighbors to cooperate to constrain what threatens to be an overwhelming superpower?

Western policy must evolve. About the only certainty is the importance of not treating the Chinese people as enemies.

However, with events in the PRC moving speedily and dramatically in the wrong direction, allied states should consider its response. China remains far freer than it was when the Red Emperor ruled. But how far President Xi intends to go is not evident.

The West may eventually find itself facing a more rational version of Mao ruling a far more powerful China. We should start preparing for that time today.

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