



# Diplomacy with China is good for America

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The early Monday announcement of U.S. Ambassador to China Terry Branstad's intended departure from his role is a fresh symptom of dysfunction in Sino-American relations. The news comes amid a troubling pattern of escalation in U.S.-China engagement — most recently visible in talk of “decoupling” — that must be broken to avoid needless and potentially catastrophic great power conflict. Re-centering the Washington-Beijing relationship on realist diplomacy is imperative for U.S. security.

The case against antagonism toward China does not rely on naïve imaginations of Beijing's virtue. We should not condone the Chinese government's viciousness toward its public, particularly the Uighur people, as former National Security Adviser John Bolton President Trump has done to curry favor with Xi. The unpleasant truth is China's moves toward a market economy did not produce the shift into liberal, democratic governance long hoped for in the West. Xi's lifelong presidency amounts to neo-Maoist dictatorship, his government's subjugation and surveillance of the Chinese people to an Orwellian horror, and the treatment of the Uighurs and other minority groups to genocide.

The United States should not pretend ignorance of this truth for the sake of ease or profit. If Beijing curtails trade or communication in retaliation for U.S. insistence on speaking accurately about the Uighur camps and forced sterilization and abortion, so be it. Yet accepting the possibility of consequences for honesty is not the same as actively pursuing policies of estrangement and hostility that will harm ordinary Chinese people and us alike. Economic decoupling, if even feasible, will hurt both countries, and diplomacy is the basic stuff of international relations — not a reward for good behavior.

Separating the American and Chinese economies is a project so large as to approach impossibility. Some decoupling may be achievable in the technology sector, where the bulk of the current conversation is focused. Still, the prospect of severing economic ties substantially or entirely is not, as Trump recently put it, “interesting.” It's terrifying. There are innumerable points of contact between our two economies; severing them would be incredibly painful for the United States as much as for China. (U.S. companies realize this, and decoupling could likely only be accomplished via outright authoritarianism.)

It's not as simple, as Trump told reporters a week ago, as shutting down trade so that we no longer “lose billions of dollars” in the form of a trade deficit to China. The president has long failed to fathom the mutual benefit of trade, apparently seeking North Korea-style self-reliance without comprehension of the miserable deprivation. “[W]ithout trade, we could have piles of money,” explained Cato Institute trade expert Scott Lincicome at The New York Times after one

of Trump's earlier flights of protectionist fancy. But we wouldn't have any of the goods trade brings us, either, Lincicome continued, which is what improves our material quality of life: "Throughout history, autarky means poverty, not wealth."

The risk to U.S. interests in courting conflict with China is not limited to the economic realm. Nearly 100 issue-specific diplomatic forums between Beijing and Washington have broken down over the past four years, a remarkable loss of diplomatic infrastructure and information-sharing. These ties may not have often "solved" enduring points of disagreement between the two states. Still, they were the kind of steady, constructive communication channels critical to prevent dangerous misunderstandings and confrontation over normal great power friction.

There is a habit in Washington that predates (but is also exemplified) by this administration of using diplomacy — high-level talks and this type of working-level contact — as a prize for democratization or compliance with U.S. demands. "Do what we like," the thinking goes, "then we'll talk to you." This is exactly backward and wildly unsafe. Diplomacy should be central to U.S. foreign policy, maintained not as a reward but as a baseline necessity for our national security. (Branstad's vacancy should be promptly filled, and not with a deliberately combative selection.)

Beijing's status as a rising regional power makes diplomacy even more vital for the United States. If their government is willing to talk, ours should be because the alternative is unthinkable. Beyond the economic consequences of treating China as an enemy instead of the sometime rival, sometime partner it is, military conflict is a chance we must not take. Outright war — to say nothing of nuclear strikes — would be a world-altering disaster. Cold War, as recent history showed in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and beyond, isn't truly cold, and a new Cold War with China would be costly and bloody for both sides.

No sort of war with China is inevitable, nor is large-scale economic disruption and suffering. De-escalation through diplomacy is still possible. Realism is key here: Diplomacy does not mean saying nice things. It means the slow, difficult work of maintaining productive communication between Washington and Beijing so shared goods like trade can flourish and shared woes like decoupling, war, and Cold War may be avoided.