



The United States Does Not Need to Contain China

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In 1990, analyst Strobe Talbott observed that the Soviet system went “into meltdown because of inadequacies and defects at its core, not because of anything the outside world has done or not done or threatened to do.” That is, the problems the Soviets came to confront were mainly a direct result of misguided domestic and foreign policies and would have come about no matter what policy the West pursued.

Something similar seems to be happening with China today. About a decade and a half ago, China began to move away from its accommodating, laid-back foreign policy approach, a change that its current leader, Xi Jinping, has embraced and accelerated. In addition, the country has become fully autocratic and has increasingly adopted measures that stifle independent thinking and the private economy. As a result, it has gone into, or will likely soon go into, a period of economic stagnation. This suggests that, although there may be little reason to expect collapse as happened to the Soviets nearly two years after Talbott’s essay, it increasingly appears as if China does not really present a significant threat. Insofar as China might be seen to be threatening, efforts from what Talbott called “the outside world” to contain it scarcely seem necessary.

Assessing the changes

An early manifestation of the change was for China to become more “assertive” in international affairs as its economy grew. But in practice, the new policy has not led to greater influence for China because it has often been heavy-handed, even bullying, and has alienated people and regimes around the world including important neighbors like Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, India, and Australia. Particularly impressive was China’s militarized conniption fit earlier this year over a brief visit to Taiwan by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The caper not only heightened awareness in Taiwan about defense, but it inspired a parade of visits to Taiwan from parliamentarians from around the world, eager to express their support.

A mellower approach to increase status and influence, China's Belt and Road Initiative, has not fared much better. Xi grandly proclaimed it to be "a project of the century" when authorizing some \$75 billion in loans in 2016, but many of these proved to be economically misguided, and the budget was slashed to \$4 billion in 2019. Elizabeth Economy also pointed out that there has been a backlash and that "stories of Chinese corruption and scandals with infrastructure projects are contributing to rising Sinophobia."

It is not at all clear that these efforts constitute or ever constituted a plan by China to "rule the world," as a Washington Post headline once put it, in part because they were accompanied by behavior that was, as in the days of old, accommodating. But to the degree that these efforts were designed to boost China's image and to increase its influence, they have been a very considerable failure.

At the same time, China has continued to pursue a strong move toward a command economy in which inefficient state-owned enterprises are favored over efficient private ones and in which, above all, the reign of the antiquated, kleptocratic Communist Party under one-man rule is privileged over economic growth.

For several decades China experienced a remarkable degree of economic development. This rise was impressive in part because China started from such a low level due to the disastrous policies of Mao Zedong. Given the Maoist alternative, China's rise was generally welcomed and facilitated by the rest of the world, and it was accompanied by what Fareed Zakaria calls a "hard-earned reputation as a smart, stable, and productive player on the world stage." In the process, China has come to rank second or perhaps even first in the world in gross domestic product (GDP). Although this has caused some to label it a "superpower," it is a ranking that China, due to its huge population, had previously held for much of the last two millennia. In per capita GDP, by contrast, China registers in seventy-eighth place—about the same as the Dominican Republic.

In a recent book, China specialist Susan Shirk surveys in detail how China has "derailed" its rise over the last decade and a half. The book is titled, *Overreach*, a word that, as she notes, has strong connotations of self-induced failure: "to defeat oneself by seeking to do or gain too much" or "going to excess in a way that is costly to itself." In this case, China has greatly expanded its military budget and increasingly adopted the "wolf warrior" foreign and economic policy that has, as she notes, provoked "a defensive counterreaction from other countries by harming and alarming them." Or, as Zakaria puts it with a similar sense of dismay, China's policies have been a series of "own goals."

Overall, the changed policies have also led, or are leading, to the prospect of severe and prolonged stagnation in China's economy, though studies disagree on whether China is now entering that condition, has been in it for ten years, or will start to do so in another decade or so. Problems include surging debt, declining productivity, a rapidly aging population, fraudulent statistical reporting, foreign protectionism, pervasive corruption, environmental degradation, a clamp-down on civil liberties (one can get life for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble"), and a massive policing and censorship of the Internet. As Shirk documents, such developments are not so much due to foreign machinations, but to changes in internal processes and pressures.

It is too early to be certain, but it appears that one of Xi's big domestic projects, "Zero Covid," may be in deep trouble as well.

Assessing the Threat

There are economic concerns as China seeks to establish something of a high-tech economic empire, evades international rules, steals secrets, and harnesses data. But this may well be undercut as its economy stagnates and, in particular, as the world adopts countermeasures—a process that, as Andrew Odlyzko of the University of Minnesota has pointed out, is well underway.

From a military or geopolitical perspective, some have argued that China, which has been expanding its military and could continue to do so even if its economy stagnates, has three goals: to take over Taiwan (gaining 20 million intensely hostile new citizens), to exert control over the seas around it, and perhaps to establish some sort of regional “primacy” as a springboard to global power.

Even taken together, these goals scarcely suggest a threat that is Hitlerian. Moreover, by applying economic pressure and engaging in “wolf warrior” belligerence, China’s efforts at the last two goals, as noted, have mainly generated hostility and severely undercut its regional influence.

And, beyond harassment, it is likely that a takeover of Taiwan—unless the Taiwanese, whose GDP per capita is nearly triple that of the mainland, happily welcome the invaders—has already been deterred by present deployments. This is because a true military conquest would very likely require insecure, stagnating China to outdo Pearl Harbor by raining thousands of missiles not only on Taiwan but on American military bases and ships in Japan and Guam—a huge, costly, and essentially absurd undertaking. A formal declaration of independence by Taiwan might unleash irrational passions in China, but, barring that, China seems likely to remain sensibly content with the present arrangement.

Xi also wants to overcome what he and other Chinese view as past humiliations—ones going back to the opium war of 1839. That scarcely seems to present a threat, and to a considerable degree, it seems sensible for other countries, including the United States, to accept, and even service, such vaporous and cosmetic goals. The United States, after all, continually declares itself to be the one indispensable nation (suggesting that all others are, well, dispensable). If it can wallow in such self-important, childish, essentially meaningless, and decidedly fatuous incantations, why should other nations be denied the opportunity to emit similar inconsequential rattlings?

If China yearns for self-absorbed pretensions about being a big player, that should be of little concern. And its success rate is unlikely to be any better than that of the “hegemonic” United States which for example has, for example, been trying unsuccessfully to bring Cuba to heel for over sixty years (a policy that has been condemned by almost every other country on the planet), even as it has been unable to halt the importation of drugs and illegal immigrants. Moreover, its abject military failures in Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan are unlikely to inspire imitation.

Conclusion

Xi seems to have been adept at working his way into unchallenged one-man rule in China and at embedding himself at the center of a congenial and compliant echo chamber. However, he seems otherwise to be doing just about everything wrong. Under the circumstances, then, policies of containment are scarcely required. The alternative is to wait (perhaps for a very long time) for China to mellow and get itself back on the rails while warily profiting from China’s economic size

to the degree possible, maintaining the decades-long comic opera charade in which Taiwan is independent as long as it doesn't say so, and perhaps issuing periodic, if unproductive, complaints about civil liberties in China. To the degree that China's policies have been a reaction to what it views as hostile provocations by the West, and particularly by the United States, that stimulus, or excuse, for its policy would be relaxed.

Napoleon once said, "Never interrupt your enemy when he's making a mistake." While it is not clear that China should be considered an "enemy," the basic sentiment does otherwise seem to apply in this case.

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