

Mutual Illusions Endanger U.S.-China Relationship

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Relations between the world's two most important nations have descended to frigid coexistence if not outright cold war. There are increasing possibilities of a military as well as political clash, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

The problem is made worse by illusions held by both sides. It is one thing when governments consciously decide that war is necessary. That usually ends up being a bad, even disastrous decision—consider Washington's invasion of Iraq. Truly inexcusable, however, is blindly stumbling into an avoidable conflict.

Today Americans see China through a glass darkly. We need to look more carefully at the People's Republic of China.

The behavior of Xi Jinping and Chinese Communist Party is neither cruelly irrational nor malignantly aggressive. Of course, many of the PRC's recent actions are terrible—I have been harshly critical of Xi as well as Beijing's general human rights record and specific policies, such as treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and tightened control over Hong Kong. However, it is important to understand the 'why' behind such decisions. Historically China has suffered grievously from instability, division, and invasion. Taiwan was part of China until snatched away by Japan. The PRC also sustained terrorist attacks by Muslim Uyghurs. While these facts do not justify Beijing's current policies, China's often unpleasant reality helps explain its actions. U.S. officials also should recognize that their own behavior has at times been even more egregious—consider the horrendous consequences of the Iraq invasion—and they should more carefully consider their own actions.

Some of what the PRC is doing mirrors what the youthful American republic did. The latter enthusiastically stole British industrial technology and expanded territorially as unpredictable

circumstances and military might permitted. Among America's dubious victories: brutally suppressing Filipino independence fighters and seizing half of Mexico. Chinese angst over the "century of humiliation" is real. Evidence of that historical reality persists—just visit the Bund in Shanghai. For decades territorial claims could not be effectively pressed without political and military power. National unity had to wait until China regained sufficient strength. Of course, early American precedents do not justify Chinese military threats against Taiwan or other states. However, the PRC's behavior is not sui generis.

Washington continues to apply a double standard internationally. Consider its reliance on the Monroe Doctrine, by which the U.S. insists that the rest of the world stay out of the Western hemisphere—treating the latter as an unabashed American sphere of influence. One can imagine Washington's hysterical reaction if Chinese ships sailed along the East Coast and into the Caribbean, Chinese military bases filled Latin America, Beijing lectured the U.S. on policy toward Cuba, and PRC officials debated the possibility of war with America. Hypocrisy is common when leading countries pursue their own interests, but Washington should at least recognize the frequent and flagrant inconsistencies in its positions.

U.S. attempts to separate the Chinese people from the Chinese government are likely to fail. The distinction is real—in fact, many people around the world like Americans, while understandably detesting U.S. government policy. However, Beijing enjoys popular credibility at home, having presided over decades of growth and national transformation. Moreover, while the Chinese public is aware of the defects of the Chinese Communist Party, and many people detest the CCP's increasingly harsh rule, Washington's obviously political attacks are more likely to intensify nationalism than spur opposition.

Indeed, nationalism is a powerful force in China, sometimes used by and at other times restrained by Beijing. Even students who resent government controls over information and expression tend to back the PRC's extensive territorial claims throughout Asia-Pacific waters as well as over Taiwan. Neither less censorship nor more democracy would likely cause China to resolve these issues on America's terms.

In Washington there is a dangerous presumption that all America needs to do is declare its will and Beijing will dutifully comply. For instance, Leon Panetta, former Secretary of Defense and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, recently opined: "I think frankly if China understands that we're serious about that, China's not going to" attack Taiwan. However, the PRC preemptively responded in kind years ago when a Chinese general doubted the U.S. would be willing to trade Los Angeles for Taipei. Beijing is serious about maintaining national claims over Taiwan and responding sharply to any secession threats, like most other states, including America. If war happens over Taiwan or other territorial claims, even a U.S. victory likely would not be final, but merely the first round. China would immediately begin preparing for the next bout.

Some seemingly inexplicable Chinese behavior reflects popular political currents. "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy has been an international failure but apparently plays well internally. So did the Anchorage spat between U.S. and China officials (the Biden administration might have

reaped similar political benefits in America). Washington should carefully consider how its activities and rhetoric likely affect both Chinese government policy and public opinion.

Even if Beijing is in the moral and practical wrong U.S. allies will not automatically side with America. Nations no less than people dislike being forced to choose between friends. Moreover, China's economic attraction looms large. The PRC's position grew far stronger when the Trump administration abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Biden administration essentially dismissed trade expansion entirely. Equally important, Beijing's neighbors would be fools to make their permanent neighbor into a permanent enemy by siding with the U.S. in war over anything less than vital interests. Even an initial victory could prove transient. And an aging America with rapidly rising debt isn't likely to forever maintain an outside military and station it thousands of miles from home.

Washington can and should advance both U.S. interests and values. However, being convinced of American rightness does not guarantee success in diplomacy or victory in war. Avoiding international conflict usually requires pragmatism, compromise, and accommodation. "Failure is not an option" has become a military cliché for Washington policymakers. However, that is an inane principle for anything short of an existential struggle, which is not what divides America and China. An unrealistic policy, especially one risking war, nuclear conflict, and extended hostility, is the height of immorality as well as impracticality.

Developing American policy toward the PRC will remain one of Washington's most difficult tasks in the years ahead. That task should be approached without illusion, with the preservation of peace an essential objective. A cold war would be foolish. A hot war would be unforgivable.

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