



The U.S. Shouldn't Be Afraid of China

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Overreaction may be more dangerous than Beijing itself.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Joe Biden had their first phone conversation on Feb. 10, a frosty talk that likely presages an equally cool relationship. The administration is reviewing policy toward China, which may hew surprisingly close to former U.S. President Donald Trump's hard line. That's a mistake.

Former U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's famous statement that U.S. citizens had nothing to fear but fear itself was powerfully effective. Despite China's increasingly fearsome reputation, the United States' greatest fear of the country should be fearing China too much.

Although a rethink of U.S. policy is warranted, given China's dramatic advances and growing assertiveness, Washington should develop its response from a position of confidence. This certainly is not "the most dangerous time arguably in our lifetime," as Republican Sen. Jim Inhofe said. The Soviet Union might not have manufactured Apple products, but it was a bristling, paranoid nuclear state—as was, at points, the United States. That fear brought the world close to nuclear war on several occasions, including as late as 1983 with NATO's exercise Able Archer 83 that almost frightened the Soviets into war.

And contradicting today's conventional wisdom, engagement with China was a stunning success—if you remember where Beijing started from. The country visited by U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1972 was a madhouse convulsed by the Cultural Revolution, a *mélange* of a mass party purge, crackpot collectivist utopia, multisided civil war, and monomaniacal personality cult. Beijing's uncertain future destabilized a region already beset by the Cold War-turned-hot on the Korean Peninsula and in Vietnam.

However, Chairman Mao Zedong's death four years later led to the rapid transformation of China's leadership and orientation. Although many analysts, including me, were overly optimistic about the prospects for positive political change amid China's radical social and economic reordering, the country became dramatically more liberal even after the Tiananmen Square protests.

Chinese citizens gained control over their personal lives, escaped immiserating poverty, and exploited intellectual interstices in the looser authoritarian system that developed. Widespread interaction with the West was constrained but tolerated. This much-improved China likely would not have developed had the United States and other democratic states attempted to keep China confined internationally.

Alas, along came Xi. Although Chinese policies began to harden before his rise, he dramatically put party (and personal) power first. He reinforced the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a Leninist institution and moved backward toward Maoist totalitarianism at home. Under him, socialism with Chinese characteristics looked like fascism, with private businesses conscripted as an instrument of state power. He asserted nationalist prerogatives abroad.

China's expanded capabilities, ambitions, opportunities, and threats created a new policy urgency in Washington and Western capitals. There's no doubt that Beijing poses a serious challenge to U.S. global dominance. A more influential China could undermine the larger international order as well. Xi's increased aggressiveness—evident in Hong Kong, throughout Asia-Pacific waters, toward Taiwan, through the Belt and Road Initiative, in the pandemic's aftermath, and more—spurred a dramatic hardening of attitudes toward Beijing across party lines in Washington. Even Biden, despite his not-so-distant anodyne description of China as a “competitor,” appears likely to mostly pick up where the contentious Trump administration left off.

Whatever the proposed policy prescription, however, fear is the wrong response.

Xi's rule will not be forever. When he goes, whether through death, retirement, or coup, China could return to a more liberal path. Mao's philosophy, in contrast to his pervasive imagery, did not survive his death. The twice-purged statesman, Deng Xiaoping, enjoyed the ultimate revenge, engineering his country's radical transformation away from Maoism.

Similarly, Joseph Stalin's death in 1953 led to substantial liberalization in the Soviet Union despite the continuing Cold War. Then-Premier Nikita Khrushchev ruled with a lighter touch, an early and more limited version of perestroika and glasnost—even allowing publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's work—until Leonid Brezhnev organized a coup on behalf of stasis.

With China's future uncertain, Washington should play the long game. Western nations should better model democratic values and encourage a freer information flow to the Chinese people, both online and off. The sort of frontal assault on the CCP's legitimacy launched by the ever-maladroit former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo risks convincing Chinese leadership that it faces an existential threat, ensuring a more hostile and fevered response. Worse, such tactics aid the Beijing leadership in donning the mantle of Chinese nationalism.

Although China is a far more comprehensive rival than the Soviet Union, its feet are made of clay. Excessive debt, inefficient state enterprises, and discriminatory economic policies are significant weaknesses. China also is heading over a demographic cliff, which may leave it old before it grows rich. There are serious political weaknesses as well. Xi appears stronger than any leader since Mao, but he has made many enemies. Substantial disquiet at his policies is apparent within the CCP.

Meanwhile, the United States remains abundantly blessed in areas where China is naturally poor. The U.S. has no fear of running out of arable land. An aging population is more than adequately supplemented by immigration of a type unimaginable in China at present. California remains an infinitely more attractive place for global talent than Shenzhen. A free society, in which both information and criticism flow, is a better incubator of talent and innovation. Time is on Washington's side more than Beijing's, despite its own share of economic and political challenges, from growing debt to fierce partisanship.

Whatever the domestic advantages of both wolf warrior and COVID-19 diplomacy, internationally they have been a bust. Global opinions of China are at record lows, both in the West and among China's neighbors. Worse for China, it lacks allies, other than the almost insolvent and perpetually unfriendly North Korea. Pakistan is more dependent than a partner. Nor does China have genuine friends. Who else believes in the principle of Han ethnic superiority? Trade, investment, and the BRI might gain temporary favor with some governments, but Beijing's determination to use any advantage accrued has proved costly.

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Also important, though often ignored in fevered warnings of the “China threat,” is the fact that China does not pose an existential danger to the United States. The U.S. remains secure an ocean away from China; the U.S. military, including its nuclear arsenal, remains far superior to the People's Liberation Army and even an inferior U.S. force could deter (very unlikely) Chinese plots to attack the United States in the future.

Beijing's aggressiveness toward its neighbors has grown but remains bounded. So far, at least, China seeks to reclaim what it views as historic territories lost when it was too weak to assert its claims. That is, China wants border territories from India—not provinces or the entire nation—and peripheral islands from Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam—not home territories. The one admittedly important exception is Taiwan. Overall, there is little evidence that the occupants of former Zhongnanhai imperial garden contemplate a maritime blitzkrieg across the Asia-Pacific. The threat today, though real, remains of a vastly different magnitude than imperial Japan's depredations eight decades ago.

Indeed, any plausible military confrontation would occur in the waters of the Asia-Pacific along China's coast. U.S. policymakers tend to conflate U.S. influence there, as well as the security of allied states, with vital U.S. interests. However, diminution of the first and threats to the second are not the same as attacks on the third. No doubt, Washington gains from its dominance of the Asia-Pacific and would find a more competitive environment practically uncomfortable and emotionally traumatic. Nevertheless, the United States would remain largely safe at home.

In this environment, U.S. allies should be the first responders in any crisis. The stakes—economic, political, and military—evidently are more important to them. Moreover, Washington faces the tyranny of distance. Projecting power is far more expensive than deterring the projection of power—hence Beijing's emphasis on anti-access/area denial capabilities and the Defense Department's preference for additional bases, materiel, and forces in the region.

It would be better, however, for threatened states to emphasize anti-access and area denial against China, which has only limited its ability to project power. Success requires the ability not to defeat China but only to substantially raise the price of aggression. U.S. allies can and should take the lead against dangerous Chinese pretensions.

Unfortunately, careless promises by Washington to defend China's neighbors long have discouraged them from doing more. Taiwan faces the greatest threat, yet its military response has been anemic at best. Defense outlays lag, and polls of Taiwanese citizens indicate little willingness to fight. Similarly, Japan's effort, with barely 1 percent of GDP going to its Self-Defense Force, is a scandal, at least if the Japanese truly worry about a clash with the People's

Liberation Army over the Senkaku Islands. Washington should feel no obligation to defend nations that leave their security to others.

The Trump administration launched a full-scale attack on China with significant energy but inadequate forethought. The strategy boosted China's growing isolation, which is neither achievable nor desirable. The Biden administration can do better. It should start by recognizing that the United States occupies a position of strength. Although the challenge is great, U.S. citizens should fear neither China nor the future.

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