

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Be Tough, Not Stupid, In Dealing with China

Doug Bandow
October 16, 2015

Whenever China is mentioned in a presidential campaign, the consequences are rarely good. In 2012 residents of Ohio, where anti-Beijing ads proliferated, might have believed that the campaign hinged on which candidate was tougher on China. Next year U.S. policy toward the People's Republic of China might become a broader election issue, leading to serious damage in the relationship.

U.S. policy toward the PRC is an important political issue. Trade, proliferation, human rights, cyberwar, security, and more are at stake in how the existing superpower and emerging great power get along in coming years. How bilateral ties develop--whether cooperation or confrontation dominates--may define the 21st century,

Unfortunately, political campaigns generally are not well-suited for the thoughtful discussion of complex, nuanced international issues. Today's GOP candidates all demand more military spending to support confrontation against nations far and wide. Many Republican voters are skeptical of any foreign policy message that does not involve pummeling one nation or another.

It should come as no surprise, then, that China has entered the campaign. One of Beijing's loudest critics is Donald Trump. So far, however, he has focused on economic issues, as did Barack Obama and Mitt Romney when they battled for Ohio's votes three years ago. Trump has not talked about war with the PRC. Indeed, in general he appears to be less spoiling for a fight than the other leading GOP contenders.

Carly Fiorina promised to be "more aggressive in helping our allies ... push back against new Chinese aggression." With Washington already pledging to defend allied territorial claims, arm allied states, and step up military patrols, it's not clear what more she would do.

Marco Rubio denounced the PRC's "increasingly aggressive regional expansionism" and the administration's alleged "willingness to ignore human rights violations in the hope of appeasing the Chinese leadership." If the Florida Senator has discovered a means to force an authoritarian foreign power to transform itself politically, he should share it. Beijing will not adopt democracy on Washington's say-so.

However, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, desperate to revive his flagging campaign, acted as China's harshest critic before dropping out. He declared: "Given China's massive cyberattacks against America, its militarization of the South China Sea, continued state interference with its economy, and persistent persecution of Christians and human rights activists, President Obama needs to cancel the state visit. There's serious work to be done rather than pomp and

circumstance."

Indeed, Walker explained, "honors should only be bestowed upon leaders and countries that are allies and supporters of the United States, not just for China, which is a strategic competitor." He also apparently believed telling Chinese President Xi Jinping to stay home would generate dividends around the globe: "I think China, as others in the world, would actually respect some leadership once and for all from the United States. Part of the problem right now is that they don't respect us."

Of course, the state visit went forward without incident, or great success. No country or leader is entitled to a state visit, of course, but Walker's convoluted reasoning was what one would expect from a governor play-acting as an uber-hawk to leap-frog his equally belligerent competitors. U.S. policy toward Beijing can, and perhaps should, be tough. But it should not be stupid.

First, it is a mistake to view a state visit as an "honor." It is a diplomatic tool. No matter how much Luxembourg might deserve the "honor," it would be silly to host the reigning grand duke for a state visit. As well as the heads of state of most of America's allies. They don't matter much diplomatically.

Second, disrespecting another nation's leadership is a curious way to seek its respect. Privately telling Beijing that there would be no state visits would get its attention, though stationing nuclear weapons in Taiwan would be even more effective in that regard--and would be more likely to affect their behavior, though not necessarily for the good. Cancelling an already scheduled trip would be seen as a studied insult, enough to anger but not sufficient to coerce. That would make progress on important issues less likely.

Third, everyone believes that "there is serious work to be done" with China. The disagreement is over the best way to do so. Treating other nations seriously is one step in attempting to work through contentious issues. Hosting a state visit might help achieve that goal.

Fourth, lumping together radically different issues makes serious work less likely to succeed. Fiscally irresponsible Washington is in no position to lecture the PRC on internal economic policy. Christians do face persecution, but the situation, though complex, is far better than a few years ago. Moreover, the rising number of Chinese believers, not Washington demands, is forcing the Communist Party to increasingly accommodate religion.

There's no easy answer to cyberwar, but U.S. companies and governments possessing the ability to retaliate as well as defend would be more effective than cancelling a state visit. Resolving conflicting territorial claims will require very serious work, but is mostly the concern of allied states now squabbling with Beijing. Telling President Xi he won't get a state dinner until his government gives up its claim to the Senkaku or Spratly Islands won't have much effect.

Of course, being unrealistic and even irresponsible is par for the course in American politics. And with 14 months to go until the presidential election, there's room for a lot more China-bashing.

But much is at stake in maintaining a civil if not overly warm relationship. Even Donald Trump admitted that he has sold real estate to Chinese buyers: "Am I supposed to dislike them," he asked? Hopefully any threats and insults will be forgotten by the winning candidate, like both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, who chose to build cooperative relationships despite their campaign attacks.

However, the more heated the rhetoric, the more likely the PRC is to respond in kind. And GOP hawks like Walker may turn out to be true believers rather than pragmatic cynics. If so, U.S.-China relations could be heading for stormy times.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan.