

# U.S. POLICY OPTIONS TOWARD CHINA: AN APPRAISAL

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Most Americans will agree that the Chinese government has behaved badly in a number of ways, although they may not agree on exactly which Chinese government behavior is a problem. Perhaps it's the treatment of ethnic or religious minorities, such as the Uighurs or Tibetans or Christians; maybe it's the crackdown on protests in Hong Kong and failure to uphold the "one country, two systems" principle; or assertiveness in territorial disputes; or censorship; or protectionist trade practices; or intellectual property theft; or cyber-hacking; or spying; or most recently, being slow to disclose the emergence of the coronavirus and engaging in a propaganda war regarding who is at fault. It's a long list, and everyone has their own priorities.

But while there is loose agreement on the existence of a problem, there is great difficulty in coming up with an appropriate response. What can or should the United States government do about any of this? Is it possible to change the behavior of other governments? Is the U.S. government in a position to do it? Is it appropriate to do so?

The average American probably doesn't put a lot of thought into the issue. Foreign policy is low on the list of people's concerns (Hrynowski 2020). As a result, if the general sentiment in the United States is becoming anti-China due to Chinese government behavior (with a big assist from prodding by certain politicians and assorted

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China hawks in Washington), as it has been (Devlin, Silver, and Huang 2020), the small community of foreign policy experts who have influence over these issues will have a good deal of power to push an aggressive response toward the Chinese government. The American voting public is not likely to be checking the details of the various options carefully.

This lack of scrutiny is a problem, because finding the right approach to responding to the behavior of the Chinese government is one of the most important foreign policy choices of our time. We may or may not be moving into a “great power competition,” but regardless, the state of the U.S.-China relationship will be a crucial factor in international relations and governance for decades to come. How the U.S. government responds to the Chinese government’s actions is a key element affecting that relationship.

## China’s Recent Moves Toward Greater Authoritarianism and Foreign Policy Assertiveness

Over the years, optimism about the prospects for a Chinese shift toward democracy and protection of rights has waxed and waned. The Tiananmen crackdown was a low point; China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) was a high point.

In support of the vote on granting China permanent normal trade relations as part of its accession to the WTO, President Clinton and several high-ranking officials in his administration talked up the possibility of democratic progress in China, although their comments were vague, and more hopeful than certain. Clinton himself said:

By joining the WTO, China is not simply agreeing to import more of our products; it is agreeing to import one of democracy’s most cherished values: economic freedom. The more China liberalizes its economy, the more fully it will liberate the potential of its people—their initiative, their imagination, their remarkable spirit of enterprise. And when individuals have the power, not just to dream but to realize their dreams, they will demand a greater say [Clinton 2000].

In recent years, though, the Chinese government has taken a number of steps backward. Beijing has tightened controls over freedom of thought and freedom of speech. The Unirule Institute, China’s leading market-liberal think tank, was forced to close

(Kuo 2019). And Fudan University had to remove “freedom of thought” from its charter. In its place, there is now a phrase about following the Communist Party’s leadership, casting doubts on how much academic freedom exists in China (Reuters 2019).

On the geopolitical front, Beijing has been taking a more assertive approach all around the world, with its own region seeing the strongest moves. It has increased military activities near the Taiwan Strait (Thim 2018) and been more aggressive in the South China Sea and East China Sea (Council on Foreign Relations 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, the Chinese leadership seems intent on destroying the “one country, two systems” principle that it agreed to for the governance of Hong Kong. A new national security law to be imposed on Hong Kong would make secession, subversion, terrorism and foreign interference a criminal act, and give the mainland government unprecedented power to operate on the island. This will further undermine Hong Kong’s self-governance, and Western-style rule of law and freedoms could virtually disappear under the new policy (Wong and Kahn 2020; Mahtani et al. 2020; Wong, Cheung, and Cheng 2020).

In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China has launched an extensive propaganda campaign to boost its public image, among other things by engaging in “Mask Diplomacy” (Wen and Hinshaw 2020) and pledging millions of dollars in donations to the World Health Organization (Reuters 2020). These efforts have backfired, though, and Americans’ views of China have continued their decline as two in three Americans now have a negative view of China (Devlin, Silver, and Huang 2020). Overall, anyone hoping for China to move toward economic and political freedom will be disappointed by the developments of the last few years.

## The Trump Administration’s Approach to China

Trump and his administration have vacillated between approaches to China, with a recent trend toward a more aggressive one. In January 2020, Trump came out with praise for China, tweeting: “China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi” (Trump 2020). Later, however, he ramped up his criticism of China, stating: “It could have been

stopped in China before it started and it wasn't, and the whole world is suffering because of it" (Mason and Spetalnick 2020). Likewise, in the case of Hong Kong, he initially appeared to support Beijing, but more recently has shown support for the pro-democracy movement (see Trump 2019).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he has long been critical of China for its trade practices (Stracqualursi 2017).

Beyond Trump himself, the Trump administration is full of "China hawks" who constantly push for confrontation with Beijing. Trade policy adviser Peter Navarro is famous for his "Death by China" book and movie. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has persistently criticized China and called it a "central threat" to the United States (Santora 2020).

The administration's aggressiveness can be seen, among other places, in Trump's issuance of a joint declaration with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2017, confirming that the Senkaku Islands fall under Japan's administration and are covered by the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty (White House 2017). The administration also sent a record-high number of patrols to the South China Sea in 2019, ramping up its effort to challenge China's territorial claims (Power 2020). Finally, the administration has been countering China's aggressive actions along the Taiwan Strait by sending warships and aircraft to the region (Doornbos 2020; Ali 2019) and approving more arms sales to Taiwan to show its support (Browne 2020).

What we have with Trump and his administration, then, is an initial split between two extremes in the approach to China, with Trump being conciliatory on some issues, and the hawks pushing for aggressiveness. More recently, there has been a move toward even greater assertiveness by both Trump and others within the administration.

Instead of blanket U.S. aggression toward China, though, what is needed is a nuanced and thoughtful approach to the many real concerns that exist. Where are the biggest problems with the behavior of the Chinese government? What could plausibly be done about them? We should be able to find something in between being an occasional cheerleader for Xi Jinping and pushing the United States into a cold (or hot) war with China.

<sup>1</sup>Years prior to becoming president, Trump praised the "strength" of the Chinese government's 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown (Haltiwanger 2019).

## A Better Way to Deal with the China Problem

Future U.S. presidents will need to figure out an effective way to deal with various aspects of the Chinese government's bad behavior. There are no easy answers, but I will offer some suggestions.

### *U.S. Policy Should Focus on Cooperating with Friends and Allies Rather Than Sanctioning Rivals.*

Sanctions are a favorite tool of U.S. policymakers. Due to U.S. influence over the global financial system, they can target foreign countries or individuals with financial penalties that are designed to affect behavior.

Sanctions might assuage a few people's anger and give the impression that something is being done. But do they actually change behavior? Their success rate in achieving their goals is not great (Taylor 2017). It can be difficult to use them effectively even on small countries, as 60 years of Cuba sanctions have shown (these sanctions may have even helped strengthen communist rule there). The likelihood that they will work on a major power such as China is even lower—especially if the United States is acting alone. A more effective approach would be to work with like-minded countries to achieve our shared goals. In essence, we should cooperate with our allies rather than penalize our opponents.

Many of the differences with China are over values: free speech, a free press, religious rights, representative democracy, to name a few. Values vary around the world, and there is nobody we agree with on everything. We don't even agree with ourselves a lot of the time, as domestic values differ internally and change over time. But within a broad range, we can find countries who agree with us on core values—namely, democracy, rights protections, rule of law, the role of markets, and transparency. We should identify those countries and undertake international projects that reinforce those values. For example, there could be a project on the role of the judiciary, examining how courts can best promote these values. This approach highlights and elevates our values, and can be used to convince other countries outside of the like-minded club of their merits.

Along the same lines, we could engage in more trade liberalization with countries that share our core values. Penalties directed at China are confrontational; a trade liberalizing agreement among other countries is less so. Importantly, we should not characterize

such an initiative as an effort to “constrain China.” It is about moving ourselves forward, not holding others back. In essence, this would be the Transpacific Partnership model, but it would be less focused on China, in terms of its geography and its content. It would include a renewed effort to liberalize trade with the European Union, as well as a trade agreement with the newly independent United Kingdom.

Some U.S. policymakers seem reluctant to work with allies. Their view may be that as the world’s most powerful country, we don’t need anyone’s help. But that perspective is out of date by decades. The United States will never have the level of power it did in the 1950s, when much of Europe and Japan had been ravaged by war. We need to put the delusions of a “great power competition” aside and think about the distribution of power in today’s world, and the appropriate U.S. role, more realistically.

*We Should Jointly Condemn China’s Bad Behavior,  
But Do So Diplomatically Based on Facts*

There are many actions that have been taken by the Chinese government that deserve condemnation: mistreatment of ethnic minorities, crackdowns on proponents of democracy in Hong Kong, and abuses of power by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), among others. Unfortunately, much of the rhetoric on these issues coming from “China hawks” in the United States is wildly misleading and inflammatory, and probably helps the CCP by allowing it to portray its critics as unhinged. The CCP can highlight their statements to Chinese citizens, in order to show how evil and dangerous the United States is.

For example, Senator Tom Cotton puts forward conspiracy theories about the origins of COVID-19, saying we cannot rule out “deliberate release” of the virus. He qualifies this allegation by saying it is “very unlikely” (Cotton 2020). However, putting “very unlikely” suggestions out there for public consumption, and repeating them, is often how conspiracy theories work. Statements like this one are probably intended for domestic audiences, but they are heard by Chinese people as well, and they have implications for the power of the Chinese government. In all likelihood, they enhance it, as the government can put them on display for its citizens, to portray its critics as crazy.

What we need to do here is tone down the inflammatory rhetoric. In this regard, one thing we should do is stop talking about the “Chinese” as a problem, which suggests something bad about the people or the culture and has led to racist acts against Asian-Americans here in the United States. Instead, we should focus clearly on the “Chinese government” or the CCP.

Nonetheless, we should still look for ways to push Beijing toward a more open and democratic system where the rights of its citizens are better protected. Imposing our values on others is a risky proposition, and it should be pursued carefully and in limited circumstances. Every country has its own unique characteristics, history, and beliefs. Most people resist outside criticism of their government and society, and this can stir up nationalist feelings and resentment, and make them resistant to change (Terman 2016). We need to pick our battles carefully and fight those battles based on an objective assessment of what the Chinese government is actually doing. Putting all the inflammatory rhetoric aside, what exactly is happening to ethnic and religious minorities in China? A recent series in the *New York Times*, based on leaked Chinese government documents, addressed this issue in an objective manner. Documentary evidence, rather than social media speculation and hyperbole, should inform our response. In addition, we need to have a wide range of countries on board, otherwise our effort will not be effective.

With all these caveats in mind, on the treatment of minorities, Hong Kong, democracy, freedom of speech, and other issues, there should be an effort to make the case to the Chinese government (and the Chinese people) that liberalization, openness, and rights will make their society better. Such an approach may not seem fruitful at the moment, but governance in China has evolved before and is likely to evolve again. Dialogue on these issues may be possible again someday.

### *Keep the Movement of People Between the United States and China Flowing*

There is a great deal of fear these days about Chinese influence on our own system, in part related to Chinese citizens who live and work in the United States. But we should have confidence in our system and its appeal to others. When people interact, they learn more about each other. As Chinese people come to America, meet Americans, and see our system, many of them will see the benefits (indeed, many

Chinese people who come to the United States to study end up staying here). They may not immediately be converted to believers in democracy and limited government, but they are likely to end up feeling more positive about the United States (Tea Leaf Nation Staff 2015). On Twitter and on cable news, it often seems like American society is falling apart. But the actual lives of most Americans are very different, and most people who come here from other countries will have a generally good experience. At the very least, these exchanges of people will help facilitate the spread of accurate information about America, which Chinese citizens are not likely to get from their own state-controlled media.

*We Should Respond Most Aggressively to Issues That Directly Affect Americans*

If Chinese individuals or companies have engaged in cyberhacking, the U.S. government should prosecute them vigorously. Direct harm to Americans justifies stronger action by the U.S. government. There is no reason for the Chinese government or Chinese people to be upset by this, as long as due process is provided.

Similarly, the actions of the Chinese government related to the spread of the coronavirus should be scrutinized closely. Everyone needs to be assured that the Chinese government, at all levels, is doing everything it can to prevent this from happening again. To this end, while the Chinese government is unlikely to move toward greater transparency and openness internally, it must do so in its relations with other governments, in particular in relation to the origins and spread of COVID-19.

By contrast, issues such as the status of democracy and free speech in China are important, but do not affect Americans in the same way. Actions taken in these areas should be more circumspect. To some extent, there is a territorial principle involved here. Actions that affect Americans or the American system merit a more aggressive response than those that are mostly contained in China.

*We Need to Set a Better Example with Our Own Domestic and International Behavior*

Persuading others to live up to high standards works better if you yourself do so. In recent years, the United States has failed in this regard on many fronts. Internally, the integrity of our elections and



the strength of our rights protections have been lacking, and the press seems to be under attack constantly these days. Externally, we talk a lot about democracy, but we sometimes support autocrats or use military force to get what we want from others.

If we are looking to influence the behavior of other countries, we need to think about our own actions. As things stand now, while we may think of ourselves as moral and good and a model for others to follow, much of the world does not see us that way. That undermines our ability to convince anyone of anything. A recent *Washington Post* article asked, “Why can’t the world do a better job of calling out racism in China?” (Fish 2020). A big part of the answer is the continued racism in the rest of the world, including the United States.

## Conclusion

These suggestions are designed to improve U.S.-China relations, by changing the way U.S. policymakers approach these issues. None of them will, on its own, repair that fraying relationship. We will spend the coming decades managing it delicately. But the suggestions could help prevent it from becoming too tense and acrimonious, or devolving into a more dangerous conflict, even a new Cold War. Josh Rogin (2020) talks about “a new consensus on how to handle Beijing,” involving “broad agreement that the United States should pursue an aggressive approach grounded in all-out strategic competition.” He then adds: “If you believe confronting China’s bad behavior is akin to recklessly steering the United States into a new Cold War, this new consensus is a bad thing.” But the goal of U.S. policymakers should be something very different: How can they confront and criticize the Chinese government in a productive way, without triggering a Cold War?

Some people in the foreign policy community seem to have given up on China at this point. One narrative making the rounds is that people claimed that letting China into the world trading system would lead to democracy, and since that has not happened yet, the previous approach to China was a mistake. As McMaster (2020) notes:

Since the heady days of Deng Xiaoping, in the late 1970s, the assumptions that had governed the American approach to our relationship with China were these: After being welcomed into the international political and economic order,

China would play by the rules, open its markets, and privatize its economy. As the country became more prosperous, the Chinese government would respect the rights of its people and liberalize politically. But those assumptions were proving to be wrong [see also White House 2020].

Such a view is too simplistic. The transition from authoritarianism to democracy has taken place in many ways around the world. Each country proceeds at its own pace. There is no single model. Chinese reforms will happen in their own way on their own time. We may be able to help facilitate them to some degree with a carefully calibrated approach. But in order to do so, we need to move away from both President Trump's occasional endorsements of the current Chinese political system and from the overheated and counterproductive rhetoric of many of the China hawks.

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