FOREIGN POLICY
14-4-22

What Exactly Is America’s China Policy?

The United States needs to right-size the China threat to know how to counter it.

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That China seeks to challenge the United States’ privileged position in Asia is beyond doubt. But does China intend to go even further—to replace the United States as the global hegemon, remake the liberal international order, and threaten freedom and democracy everywhere? And if so, does Beijing have the resources to do it? The right China strategy for the United States depends on the correct assessment of Beijing’s strategic ambitions and its options to achieve them.

That presents Washington with a conundrum. Chinese pronouncements about the country’s global ambitions are notoriously vague, forcing U.S. policymakers to interpret them for hints of Beijing’s strategy—reminiscent of the ways Kremlinologists once tried to divine the Soviet Politburo’s intentions. These interpretations, in turn, can vary greatly depending on a U.S. policymaker’s lens and perspective. Unlike the relative constants of U.S. foreign policy, such as its approach to North Korea, U.S. China policy has thus undergone significant shifts as the assessment of the exact nature of the China threat has evolved.

The Trump administration undertook the most profound shift of U.S. China policy in decades, viewing China as an existential threat to the international order and the American way of life. The Biden administration, even as it kept in place key Trump-era policies, has instead taken a less apocalyptic view, treating China as a regional military challenge and a competitor for global influence. Yet even within the Biden administration—which has outlined the most comprehensive China strategy of any U.S. administration to date—the shape and conduct of its policies will be influenced by the various assessments of the China threat among the key policymakers involved. The United States needs to right-size the China threat to know how to counter it.

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From U.S. President Richard Nixon’s surprise trip to China half a century ago until Donald Trump’s accession to the presidency in 2017, the United States saw China as a potential partner—a country that would want access to Western markets, capital, technology, and universities and accept U.S. military encirclement and cultural influence in return. At the 2005 Shangri-La Dialogue security conference in Singapore, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously challenged Chinese defense officials: “Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment [in the Chinese military]? Why these continuing large and expanding arms purchases? Why these continuing robust deployments?”

Rumsfeld surely knew the answer to these rhetorical questions. No Chinese government, whether communist or democratic, was likely to accept so much vulnerability indefinitely. Indeed, a more assertive posture emerged in Beijing around the same time as U.S. financial sector practices triggered the 2008 global financial crisis; as China’s GDP approached that of the United States in purchasing power parity terms; and as the Chinese military gained the ability to hold U.S. aircraft carriers, airfields, and naval bases in the Western Pacific at risk. Since taking

power in 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has expanded China's navy, built up its maritime gray-zone forces, constructed artificial islands in neighboring countries' waters in the South China Sea, mounted air and sea challenges to Japan and Taiwan, ramped up economic espionage, extended China's financial and diplomatic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, invested in global media to spread Beijing's version of the news, banned and censored unfriendly foreign scholars and journalists, and unleashed "wolf warrior" diplomats to rattle cages around the world.

U.S. policymakers eventually began to push back, even as they continued to think of China more as a potential partner than as a looming threat. Writing in Foreign Policy in 2011, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for what came to be known as the "pivot to Asia" to help counteract China's growing influence. But the Obama administration was tied up in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program, and the attempted pivot brought little more than a heightened diplomatic presence in the region. China still seemed manageable through negotiation. U.S. President Barack Obama stood with Xi at the White House podium in 2015 to announce China's promise not to militarize the sand islands it had built in the South China Sea or to continue stealing U.S. technology through hacking. But China went on to do both.

Only under the Trump administration did Washington make the decisive policy change from cooperation to confrontation. In 2018, the U.S. government, for the first time, labeled China a "strategic competitor." As significant as that change was, the Trump administration was by no means united in its assessment of the China threat. Various factions characterized the threat in various ways: as systematically unfair trade, abusive economic espionage, growing sway over U.S. corporations, or an assault on the regional balance of power in Asia.

What eventually emerged as the dominant view under Trump was that China posed a fundamental, existential threat to the United States and its way of life. The U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Staff wrote in 2020: "The CCP [Chinese Communist Party] aims … to fundamentally revise world order, placing the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the center and serving Beijing's authoritarian goals and hegemonic ambitions." U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared earlier that year: "If we don't act now, ultimately the CCP will erode our freedoms and subvert the rules-based order that our societies have worked so hard to build. If we bend the knee now, our children's children may be at the mercy of the Chinese Communist Party, whose actions are the primary challenge today in the free world."

Key figures outside of the administration who were close to Trump and frequently advised him went even further by comparing China to the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. The Committee on the Present Danger: China, co-founded by former Trump strategist Steve Bannon, declared in March 2019: "As with the Soviet Union in the past, Communist China represents an existential and ideological threat to the United States and to the idea of freedom." Later that year, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich characterized China as "the greatest threat to us since the British Empire in the 1770s, much greater than Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union."

Having decisively broken with previous, more benign U.S. assessments of China, the Trump administration adopted a series of new policies aimed at translating its harsh threat assessment into a tougher line on China. Washington launched a trade war, upgraded the diplomatic treatment of Taiwan, resuscitated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, conducted more frequent

freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea, and set up a China Initiative at the Justice Department to root out economic espionage.

As confrontational as they were, these measures hardly rose to the level of seriousness and strategic heft that the Trump administration's more extreme threat assessments seemed to require. And despite the common thread of taking a harder line against China, it was unclear what exactly these policies aimed to achieve. Was the goal a more level playing field in economic competition—or putting a brake on Chinese economic growth and slowing its rise? Was it about U.S. military deterrence in Asia—or pushing Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to be able and willing to defend themselves? Was it forcing China to comply with established norms in global institutions such as the World Trade Organization, World Health Organization (WHO), and U.N. Human Rights Council—or withdrawing the United States from those institutions because Trump considered them useless? Was it establishing mutual tolerance between Xi and Trump as fraternal strongmen—or seeking an end to CCP rule?

By not answering these questions, Trump's policies never reached the coherence and depth that Washington's new view of China as an existential threat would have required. And whatever their intent, Trump's disparate policies produced no visible change in Chinese military deployments, trade policies, economic espionage, ideological positions, or diplomatic strategies.

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Many expected a Democratic president to take a less confrontational approach to China than Trump—including in Beijing, where Joe Biden was a familiar face from friendlier times under Obama. Instead, the Biden administration has kept its predecessor's hard-line policies in place. These include the trade tariffs, expanded cooperation among the Quad, South China Sea naval patrols, and U.S. diplomatic support for Taiwan. The FBI's campaign to investigate Chinese economic espionage recently received a new name but probably not a new function. Both administrations clearly have seen China as a strategic competitor, not a potential partner whose rise should be facilitated.

But a closer look reveals important differences between the Trump and Biden administrations' assessments of the China challenge and the resulting policy conclusions. It may appear as a paradox: Biden's China policy is based on a less alarmist assessment of the China threat than Trump's—but is being pursued with a seriousness and strategic depth that makes it a much more formidable challenge to China. Whether it will be effective remains to be seen.

The Biden administration's two principal shapers of China policy—National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Indo-Pacific advisor Kurt Campbell—laid out their threat assessment in a jointly written article in Foreign Affairs a little over a year before Biden took office. Key to what subsequently became the dominant view of China in the Biden administration was to discard what Sullivan and Campbell saw as fuzzy and inaccurate Cold War comparisons, especially in the military realm. "In contrast to the military competition of the Cold War, which was a truly global struggle, the [military] dangers for Washington and Beijing are likely to be confined to the Indo-Pacific," they wrote. These dangers were substantial, involving "at least four potential hot spots: the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Korean Peninsula." But they considered the risk of conflict "by no means as high" as it was with the Soviet Union in Cold War Europe. The threat posed by China was regional, not global.

To call the military threat regional, however, was not to treat it as trivial. Taiwan is the most dangerous of the four military flash points. China needs to control the island if it is to prevent the United States or any other hostile power from using it as a base to threaten the mainland. The United States insists on the "peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue," a policy that goes back to the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué. Were Washington to abandon its position, the credibility of its international commitments would take a severe hit. Taiwan, of course, has compelling reasons to avoid coming under the control of the increasingly repressive Chinese regime. There is obviously no way to satisfy all three actors. Russia's assault on Ukraine has increased anxiety over an already tense situation. A war over Taiwan would likely draw in other powers, wreak tragic destruction, present a risk of nuclear escalation, and spawn decades of disastrous political consequences for all involved.

Sullivan and Campbell went on to describe China as a formidable threat in other domains as well, all of them involving serious stakes. One is the economic domain, where leadership in high-technology sectors such as advanced semiconductors, 5G networks, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and renewable energy technology will enable a country to set standards that other countries must follow, dominate markets, build advanced military applications, and gain a technological advantage in spying on others. With the stakes so high, competition cannot be entirely a clean fight but will involve espionage, counterespionage, and other tools. Competition in what Sullivan and Campbell called the political and global governance domains is also consequential. Increased Chinese and Russian revisionism—with significant similarities between Beijing's view of Taiwan and Moscow's view of Ukraine—has made it increasingly clear that nonaggression, human rights, and other principles of international law are more than values to which the West sentimentally clings but structural rules in which the West has an overriding interest.

Sullivan and Campbell portrayed China as the most serious challenge faced by the United States in the 21st century, but they refrained from drawing it in apocalyptic terms. In their view, the Cold War really was an existential struggle, but the relationship with China should instead be one of "competition without catastrophe." Though by no means returning to the old days of seeing China as a benign global partner, they counseled that the United States should seek to establish "favorable terms of coexistence with Beijing."

Not everyone in the Biden administration appears to accept Sullivan and Campbell's assessment of China as a less-than-existential threat. Rush Doshi, a China director on the White House National Security Council (NSC), outlined a far more aggressive, global threat to the United States and its allies in his 2021 book, The Long Game. Written when he ran the Brookings Institution's China Strategy Initiative, the book argues that China's long-term goals are to break up the U.S. alliance system, establish a global network of military bases, monopolize cutting-edge 21st-century technologies, dominate trade, and support authoritarian elites around the world. In a similar vein, Elizabeth C. Economy, a leading China expert who is now a senior advisor in the U.S. Commerce Department, argues in her book The World According to China that Xi "envisions a China that has regained centrality on the global stage." Under Xi, she writes, China "has reclaimed contested territory, assumed a position of preeminence in the Asia Pacific, ensured that other countries have aligned their political, economic, and security interests with its own, … and embedded its norms, values, and standards in international laws and institutions."

The administration has bulked up with other think tank and academic China specialists with a diversity of views. In the Defense Department, there's Ely Ratner of the Center for a New

American Security; in the State Department, Melanie Hart of the Center for American Progress; on the NSC, Julian Gewirtz and Mira Rapp-Hooper of the Council on Foreign Relations and Laura Rosenberger of the Alliance for Securing Democracy. They and others represent a range of views on the nature and scope of the China challenge.

But in contrast to the Trump administration, the Biden team does not seem to be divided over how to respond to the challenge. In their pre-administration publications, none of them offered policy recommendations radically different from Sullivan and Campbell's. For example, Doshi called for the United States to blunt China's influence through more active multilateral diplomacy and to rebuild the U.S.-centered international order by encouraging domestic revival and strengthening alliances, and Economy recommended that the United States work with allies and partners, emphasize values and norms, and repair political and economic dysfunction at home. Much of this would come to define the Biden administration's policies.

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Like its threat assessment, the Biden administration's China policy differs from its predecessor's in a fundamental way. Despite the label of strategic competition, Trump's China policy was neither strategic nor competitive; Biden's China policy is strategic competition not only in name but in fact.

The headline element is competition. Biden and his China team have framed China's rise as something akin to the Sputnik moment—when the Soviet Union's launch of the world's first artificial satellite in 1957 shocked the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations into a broad overhaul of domestic policies. In this vein, Biden has argued that the United States must "build back better" or else China will "eat our lunch." The administration has introduced new measures to protect key U.S. economic sectors and seeks federal money to accelerate research and development in the key 21st-century technologies. The administration's recently published Indo-Pacific Strategy states that "the United States is investing in the foundations of our strength at home, aligning our approach with those of our allies and partners abroad, and competing with the PRC to defend the interests and vision for the future that we share with others."

The second strategic element is an effort to repair the damage Trump did to the U.S. alliance system. Rapp-Hooper, who directs Indo-Pacific policy at the NSC, pointed out before joining the administration that the United States' large network of allies is a primary strategic asset for Washington because it complicates the calculations of rivals. To this end, administration officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, have worked to restore Japan's faith in the U.S. defense commitment while engaging Tokyo in the effort to deter the Chinese threat to Taiwan. Washington has reaffirmed its commitment to NATO and the European Union that Trump had brought into question, demonstrated dramatically by the coordinated allied response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The United States has reengaged with WHO and the U.N. Human Rights Council. It negotiated the AUKUS pact with Australia and the United Kingdom to provide nuclear-powered submarines to the Australian navy. As stated in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the objective is "to shape the strategic environment in which [China] operates, building a balance of influence in the world that is maximally favorable to the United States, our allies and partners, and the interests and values we share."

The strategy's reference to "interests and values" draws attention to a third element of Biden's China strategy: a consistent emphasis on human rights. In contrast to the Trump

administration's mixed messages, such as endorsing Xi's crackdown on Uyghur Muslims before calling it a genocide, the Biden administration calls out China's human rights violations on a regular basis and has issued a stream of sanctions on abusive officials and Xinjiang-linked Chinese corporations. Human rights are more than strategy—to any liberal polity, they should be an end in themselves—but they have strategic value in several ways: as an issue that resonates with the American public, as the issue on which most U.S. allies share similar views, and as a Chinese weak point in the competition for international influence. Of course, foreign criticism of China's human rights abuses will not change Beijing's policies with respect to Xinjiang, Hong Kong, democracy activists, religious believers, or lawyers challenging the state. But drawing attention to human rights is a dramatic way to articulate and highlight the core issue in U.S.-China competition: the clash of value systems.

The final feature of Biden's China strategy is the pursuit of limited cooperation on global problems such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and the spread of infectious diseases. "We believe it is in the interests of the region and the wider world that no country withhold progress on existential transnational issues because of bilateral differences," the Indo-Pacific Strategy affirms. Cooperation on public health and nonproliferation has proved elusive so far. But Biden's climate envoy, John Kerry, has achieved some success in gaining at least verbal cooperation with China on climate policy.

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To judge whether Biden's China policy fits the challenge, it would help to know what China aims to achieve. Unfortunately, Xi's voluminous utterances on foreign policy offer little insight into his plans for China's role in the world. He has often spoken about China's global ambitions, but his words are usually vague and subject to interpretation. At the opening of the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi gave an address that caused considerable alarm around the world. He said China was ready to move "closer to center stage" and make "greater contributions to mankind," claiming that the Chinese system "offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind." To many, these remarks implied that China intended to export its authoritarian governance model on a global basis, with "independence" being a code word for shucking off Western influence.

But speaking at the United Nations in Geneva in January 2017, Xi put forward what sounded like a more cooperative slogan: "Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind." This concept was soon enshrined in both the CCP's and the country's constitutions as the official guiding principle of Chinese foreign policy. In his speech, Xi said no country should intervene in another's internal affairs; all countries should jointly "manage global affairs"; international issues should be settled not by war but "through dialogue and consultation"; "big countries should treat smaller ones as equals"; countries should cooperate to "build a world of common prosperity"; the world should build an "open world economy … beneficial to all"; and countries should treat the diversity of civilizations not as a source of global conflict but as "an engine driving the advance of human civilizations." Some read these remarks as reassuringly nonaggressive; others saw them as a broadside against U.S. influence in international affairs and a claim to define for others what the "shared future" should be.

As Doshi has pointed out, Xi often uses the phrase "great changes unseen in a century"—but despite Doshi's impressive research in Chinese documents, it remains ambiguous whether Xi

thinks these great changes extend beyond China's domestic "rejuvenation" and achievement of major-power status to a global displacement of U.S. power. All this confusion and ambiguity underlines the futility of relying on Xi to provide clarity about China's international aims.

In a further attempt to gain insight into China's strategic thinking, analysts often turn to the writings of ranking Chinese academics, on the perhaps flawed assumption that they know—or even have influence on—what Xi is thinking. But these writings offer no more help because they, too, are abstract and vague. For example, Yan Xuetong, the dean of Tsinghua University's Institute of International Relations and one of China's most prominent foreign-policy experts, has called on China to exercise "humane authority" to establish a new international order. "Fairness, justice, and civility are higher than equality, democracy, and freedom as universal values," he elaborated in his book Inertia of History. "If China proposes these values, then it will have more legitimacy in claiming global leadership than the United States." Does this mean China should be fair and civil—or establish an international hierarchy under Chinese hegemony? In an interview with the International Herald Leader, a newspaper run by the official state news agency Xinhua, Yan denied any contradiction between fairness and civility and exercising punishment on rival countries: "Treating enemies with benevolence and righteousness is not consistent with humane authority." China, he went on to suggest, should exercise authority over other countries as a way to demonstrate its morals and virtues. Despite his credentials, Yan delivers only a worldview—not a strategy and least of all a policy.

Or consider Zhao Tingyang, a member of one of the country's most important academic organizations, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He has reinterpreted the old Chinese concept of tianxia ("all under heaven")—the idea that the known world centered on the Chinese emperor, known as the "son of heaven"—for the modern age. Zhao proposes to replace "American imperialism, [with its] hegemonic dominance … over the politics, economics, and knowledge production of other countries" with an "all-under-heaven world system harmonizing all nations"—in effect, the bending of other countries' interests into compatibility with China's. But is this China-led harmony to be achieved by moral influence alone or more coercive means?

Western China analysts also sometimes turn to Yao Zhongqiu, a professor at Beihang University who writes under the pen name Qiu Feng. He argues that China should leverage its "historical moment" to export Confucian values, which he considers universal. In tune with Xi's directive for all Chinese to display "four confidences"—in the country's path, theory, system, and culture—Yao writes that "there is always a country assuming the role of the leader" that creates and maintains world order. That country will naturally be China. But first, Yao argues, Beijing must "stabilize the domestic population and gain their support for assuming a global historical role." Will China seek to sway the world by the power of its example—or will it build up power at home to leverage abroad?

These leading academics—and others like them—provide a heady ideology for Chinese dominance but rarely venture into concrete foreign policy. They are making their careers as philosophers and visionaries, not as strategic planners. Xi is doubtless a strategist, but his public statements are designed to buttress China's reputation, burnish its image, reassure partners of China's goodwill and honesty, and demonstrate at home that China is treated with respect abroad. Anyone looking to Chinese leaders or academics for clarity on Beijing's global goals would be wise to heed the advice of the ancient Daoist philosopher Laozi: "Those who speak do not know, and those who know do not speak."

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Whatever China's strategic vision, its ambitions are constrained by the hard realities of demography, economy, geography, and global politics. Internally, Beijing struggles to recruit the loyalty of its 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities—especially Tibetans, Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Mongolians, who occupy large strategic territories around the rim of the Han Chinese heartland. Within the heartland, the regime races to keep up with the growing welfare demands of a new, large, urban middle class, even as the population ages and the economy slows.

China shares land or sea borders with 20 countries, all distrustful to varying degrees and most seeking to balance against Chinese influence with ties to the United States, Japan, and one another. The sea lanes on which China's highly globalized economy depends are vulnerable to interdiction by the U.S. and other navies. And China faces five independent power centers—the United States, the EU, India, Japan, and Russia—in a multipolar system that is not going to disappear. As China's power increases, all but Russia have turned increasingly resistant to Chinese influence, as have most of China's smaller neighbors. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has deepened Moscow's dependence on Beijing for economic and diplomatic support, but in the long run, that dependence will also feed Russia's long-standing fear and resentment of Chinese power.

Not only are these conditions unfavorable to China's prospects for achieving global hegemony. They actually give China a positive stake in important features of the international status quo—the norm of territorial integrity, the principle of sovereignty, and the system of open trade and investment.

To be sure, the rise of China represents an epochal change in the world order—the accession of a new great power with interests only partially consistent with the United States' and in important ways adverse to them. But the realistic options for dealing with this challenge are limited. A grand bargain that divides Asia between Chinese and U.S. spheres of influence would give up too many core U.S. interests—human rights, Taiwan, Washington's Asian alliances—and probably spark an unraveling of U.S. alliances elsewhere. Nor would such a bargain satisfy either country, instead generating further instability. On the other hand, trying to overthrow China's ruling party or crash its economy is beyond Washington's means and would produce dangerous consequences even in the trying. The right policy will be found neither by minimizing the China threat nor by hyping it.

Success for Biden's strategy should not be measured in terms of containing China in its current position or negotiating a grand bargain in Asia. Rather, it should be counted a success if the United States prevents the forcible takeover of Taiwan, keeps a robust military presence in Asia, maintains its alliance system, leads in key 21st-century technologies, and exercises more influence than other countries in global institutions.

Whether Biden's strategy can be sustained in the current state of U.S. political polarization—and if so, whether these goals can be achieved—remains in question. But several features of the China challenge make it reasonable to hope that such a success is possible. First, unlike the former Soviet Union, China does not have an ideological program to impose on the world—even as it seeks to protect its own prestige. Second, China does not articulate a vision of an alternative set of norms for the world order but seeks more influence in the existing one. Indeed, it is in some ways more conservative than the United States on global norms such as sovereignty and nonintervention. Third, although China seeks to expand control over territories it

has long claimed, it has so far not announced novel claims to additional territories. In this sense, unlike Adolf Hitler's Germany, China is not expansionist.

China's ambitions to take over Taiwan, weaken the U.S. alliance system in Asia, and lead in the 21st-century economy are profound challenges to Washington's interests. But unlike Russia with its war on Ukraine, China—even under Xi—has managed its push for great-power status in a way that seems designed to avoid triggering a military or political crisis. Chinese leaders display ambition—but also caution and realism. If U.S. leaders can show an equal combination of strength and realism—and the kind of strong alliance leadership demonstrated in the Russia-Ukraine crisis—it will be possible to avoid the worst outcomes even in an era of sharp competition. The United States can compete and win as long as it invests in its greatest assets: alliances, innovation, and the appeal of democratic values.

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