

Regime Change Is Not an Option in China

Focus on Beijing's Behavior, Not Its Leadership

By Evan S. Medeiros and Ashley J. Tellis

The relationship between China and the United States is the central drama of global politics today. It captures and defines the current era: great-power rivalry, ideological competition, the diffusion of advanced technology, and the weakening of U.S. hegemony. Dealing with China is shaping up to be a far more significant challenge for U.S. policymakers than competing with the Soviet Union ever was. Not only is Beijing more capable than Moscow was during the height of the Cold War, but China's sprawling economic footprint makes it a far more difficult rival. A sharply segregated global economy allowed the United States to contain the Soviet Union, but China today is the top trading partner of over 100 countries, including many with close links to the United States.

This perplexing combination of intensifying competition and growing interdependence has sparked a searching conversation in the United States about how to approach China. The debate has taken a dangerous turn in recent years. Beginning in 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Deputy National Security Adviser Matt Pottinger, among others, started speaking about putting pressure on the Chinese Communist Party in ways that many interpreted as calls for regime change. Pompeo, slamming Beijing's "new tyranny," memorably declared: "If the free world doesn't change, communist China will surely change us." Distinguishing between the Chinese people and their regime, Pottinger urged the former "to achieve citizen-centric government in China" as an antidote to the CCP.

This rhetoric is rooted in a strain of thought that contends that the characteristics of a regime—rather than the country's national interests or its position within the international system—determine state behavior. Reflecting this perspective, Zack Cooper and Hal Brands recently argued in *Foreign Policy* that because "acute Sino-American antagonism will persist so long as a powerful China is governed by the Chinese Communist Party," U.S. policymakers may need to help bring about "long-term changes in Chinese power or in the way China is governed."

Such arguments resonate across the U.S. political spectrum. President Joe Biden's team has kept ideology at the center of its evolving China strategy, highlighting Beijing's draconian crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. The Biden administration has stopped well short of pursuing regime change as an explicit goal, but the president's description of a "battle between the utility of democracies . . . and autocracies" reflects an acceptance of some measure of ideological struggle.

Although ideological competition may be inevitable, targeting the CCP is not only a highly impractical strategy but also a dangerous one. Any attempt at regime change would likely fail and impose long-term costs on U.S. efforts to shape Chinese behavior. Few U.S. allies and partners would support undermining the Chinese party-state—blunting perhaps the most important tool in Washington's strategic arsenal. Such an approach would isolate the United States and intensify its already deep rivalry with Beijing. Instead, Washington should focus on changing Chinese behavior, not the CCP.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Advocates of a strategy to change the Chinese regime argue that the CCP's singular interest in hanging on to power drives China's repressive internal politics and international assertiveness, including its efforts to damage liberal norms and institutions. In this view, the party's illiberal character makes it a uniquely coercive and predatory actor. Then U.S. National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien articulated this point in a 2020 piece in *Foreign Affairs* in which he argued that "the CCP's ideological agenda extends far beyond the country's borders and represents a threat to the idea of democracy itself."

This analysis, however, ignores additional factors that motivate Chinese behavior. Even before the CCP came to power in 1949, for instance, China often acted like an aggressive imperial power, coercing its neighbors to accept its regional hegemony and seeking (but frequently failing) to institutionalize a system of deference to Chinese preferences. The balance of power between China and nearby governments, elite politics within China, and the reactions of China's neighbors to Beijing's demands, among other factors, all interacted in complex ways to produce assertive behavior.

Although updated for contemporary circumstances, these dynamics remain relevant today. Any strategy that focuses primarily on targeting the CCP itself would therefore fail to significantly alter Chinese behavior. Even if the United States tried to transform the character of the Chinese party-state—by, for example, targeting CCP leaders through sanctions and supporting internal challenges to the government—success would be far from guaranteed. Such an approach misdiagnoses the sources of Chinese assertiveness, and it would lock Beijing and Washington into a dangerous and spiraling conflict.

Any effort to hurt the CCP from the outside would also be unlikely to secure the support of the Chinese people and would instead reinforce loyalty to the party, especially among the large, growing, and ambitious middle class. Many in China would see such a campaign as an attempt to impede the country's long-delayed rise and recall the Western interference that kept China weak and divided throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The specter of revived U.S. imperialism at a time when Chinese suspicion of the United States is at an all-time high could supercharge Chinese President Xi Jinping's popularity and push him to take even more ambitious actions abroad, to the detriment of U.S. interests and broader peace and security throughout Asia.

An attempt to topple the CCP would also undermine U.S.-Chinese cooperation on issues that require a modicum of partnership—including responding to Iran and North Korea's nuclear programs and addressing climate change. What is more, an aggressive strategy would reduce Washington's ability to handle the most contentious issues in its relationship with Beijing, including the status of Taiwan.

The most important reason to avoid obsessing over China's disagreeable regime, however, is that this fixation threatens a core U.S. advantage: Washington's wide network of partners and allies. Building and sustaining international coalitions that constrain Chinese actions will be vital for any attempt to alter Beijing's behavior. Coordinated action among U.S. allies, partners, and friends is crucial, for example, to combating China's exploitative economic practices and deterring potential military aggression throughout Asia. And the hard reality facing Washington is that most U.S. allies and partners are not interested in regime change in Beijing. Most assume it is impossible, and others view it as counterproductive. Instead, most want to profit from their

economic relations with China as its economy grows and diversifies. They want to limit Beijing's assertive behavior abroad, but they have little desire to undermine the Chinese government at home.

A U.S. strategy centered on regime change would therefore face serious problems bringing partners on board and could potentially damage Washington's larger efforts to orchestrate an effective balance of power both in Asia and around the world. If the United States loses sight of this central goal, it will be less able to resolve international problems and impose real costs on China.

BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

The United States should not ignore the CCP's egregious actions at home and abroad. Nor should U.S. officials pretend that they are indifferent to the harmful character of the Chinese government. Competition between the two states over ideas of governance, both domestic and international, is clearly emerging. But Washington should stay focused on confronting the regime's threatening behaviors instead of launching a crusade against the CCP itself. This means prioritizing the creation of an international environment that collectively balances, binds, deters, and shapes China's choices.

Such a strategy requires nurturing states that are, at a minimum, not vulnerable to Beijing's pressure and, at times, willing to push back against Chinese coercion and predation. This involves forging coalitions on important issues such as technology transfers, deepening trade integration among friendly capitals, and ensuring that allies such as Australia and Japan are both willing and able to counter potential Chinese military actions in the Indo-Pacific. It could also entail articulating explicit norms of acceptable international behavior, legitimizing them through multilateral institutions, and, if necessary, enforcing them with U.S. military power. Constraining Beijing's behaviors in this way, rather than targeting the regime, offers the best hope for strengthening the rules-based international order that protects the United States' vital interests.

A practical approach aimed at altering China's behavior will also inevitably focus on preventing Beijing from undermining fundamental U.S. diplomatic, economic, technological, and military interests. To achieve this, Washington could target a wide range of activities, including Chinese efforts to abuse the international trading system, steal advanced technologies from the United States and its allies, intimidate U.S. partners, project Chinese influence abroad, and promote Beijing's hybrid market-authoritarianism as an alternative to the liberal order. Opposing these activities does not, however, entail an exclusively confrontational relationship or mean that all bilateral competition will necessarily be zero-sum. Still, this strategy inevitably presumes some form of competitive coexistence between Beijing and Washington, with both sides constantly jockeying for advantage and influence around the world. Such a relationship may be simultaneously dynamic and disruptive, but that outcome would be preferable to overt conflict, which would be the inevitable result of a U.S. policy that set out to deliberately destabilize the governing regime of a peer competitor.

Ultimately, what matters is not whether the United States can change China's motivations but whether Washington can alter Beijing's actions and conduct. Such an approach might make only tactical progress: neither the brutal character nor the revisionist impulses of the CCP are likely to change. But as long as Washington shifts how Beijing thinks about its interests and how it pursues them, the United States can protect the broader liberal international order—and that would be victory enough.

- EVAN S. MEDEIROS is Penner Family Chair in Asian Studies at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a Senior Adviser with the Asia Group. He formerly served as Senior Director for Asia and Director for China at the National Security Council from 2009 to 2015.
- ASHLEY J. TELLIS is Tata Chair for Strategic Affairs and a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.