

An Unsentimental China Policy

The Case for Putting Vital Interests First

By [Graham Allison and Fred Hu](#)

February 18, 2021

Fifty years ago this July, U.S. President Richard Nixon announced what would become his signature foreign policy achievement: the opening to China. The following February, in what the press called “the week that shook the world,” he flew to Beijing to meet Mao Zedong, the leader of communist China. So began a half century of U.S. engagement with Beijing. At the time, China was the tip of the spear advancing communist revolutions worldwide. But within the decade, U.S. President Jimmy Carter had normalized the relationship, recognizing the regime in Beijing as China’s sole legitimate government and abrogating the U.S. defense treaty with Taiwan. The rest is history: China helped the United States win the Cold War, and the thaw in U.S.-Chinese relations allowed Asia to emerge as the most economically dynamic region in the world. Prior to the Trump administration, engagement with China was applauded as a rare bipartisan success in U.S. foreign policy, with both Democrats and Republicans agreeing that Washington could work with Beijing to advance American interests and values. Today, as China’s government has become more repressive at home and aggressive abroad, leaders in both parties have declared engagement a failure. As U.S. President Joe Biden’s senior Asia adviser, Kurt Campbell, and the president’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 2019, “The era of engagement with China has come to an unceremonious close.”

Yet it is worth remembering what engaging China was all about. For most of the past half century, efforts to improve ties with the country were not about transforming it. Starting with Nixon, the motives were decidedly unsentimental: to balance against the

Soviet Union, to convince China to stop exporting revolution, and to help lift millions of people out of poverty. It was only after the Cold War that a desire to change China became a prominent objective of U.S. policy.

Today, as Biden and his team develop a new strategy to meet the defining international challenge of this generation, many are urging them to give up on engagement altogether. That would be a mistake. Instead, the administration should heed the central lesson of five decades of U.S. policy toward China: it works best when focusing realistically on geopolitical objectives essential to protect American interests, and worst when attempting to engage in political engineering to promote American values.

THE LOGIC OF ENGAGEMENT

The historical record leaves no grounds for debate about what Nixon and his successors during the rest of the Cold War—Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan—had in mind when they sought to improve ties with China. For each of these four presidents, the objective was first and foremost geopolitical. Nixon had an urgent requirement: to create the conditions for the withdrawal of the more than 100,000 U.S. troops bogged down in Vietnam. For all four presidents, however, the overarching goal was to tip the balance of power against the Soviet Union by widening the cracks between it and China. The opening represented a step in “triangular diplomacy,” in the words of Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s national security adviser. By widening the fissure between Moscow and Beijing, each would be more willing to work with Washington.

Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan had their eye on this geopolitical prize; none of them were seeking to change the Chinese Communist Party. Had any of these presidents been offered a deal that promised victory in the Cold War but zero change in China’s political system, they would have accepted it in a heartbeat. Reagan admitted as much in 1984.

After a six-day trip to China, he sought to reassure those who questioned engagement with Beijing. “I’m an anti-Communist if you talk about Communism for the United States,” he said, “. . . but I have never thought that it was necessary for us to impose our form of government on some other country.” The United States and China, he insisted, could “live at peace in the world together.”

These presidents also sought to bring China inside the tent of an emerging U.S.-led world order. (As President Lyndon Johnson once said of a different rival, “Better to have him inside the tent pissing out, than outside pissing in.”) In a meeting with his staff, Nixon laid out the logic of the opening to the Chinese. “The reason why it has to be done . . . is that they are one-fourth of the world’s population,” he said. “They’re not a military power now but 25 years from now they will be decisive. For us not to do now what we can do to end this isolation would leave things very dangerous.” Or as Kissinger later summarized, “Nixon . . . urged a relaxation of tensions on the basis of geopolitical considerations in order to return China to the international system.”

For most of the past half century, efforts to improve ties with China were not about transforming it.

Carter—along with his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski—continued the effort to integrate China into this order. Despite his signal commitment to human rights, Carter explained in 1978, the world “must accommodate diversity—social, political, and ideological.” Brzezinski was more explicit in a briefing the next year for a group of business leaders. “We recognize that [the United States and China] have different ideologies and economic and political systems,” he said. He added: “We harbor neither the hope nor the desire that through extensive contacts with China we can remake that nation into the American image.”

Beyond security objectives, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan wanted to promote development in China, which had the greatest number of poor and hungry people in the world. Like their predecessors, these presidents believed that the United States had an obligation to help lift others out of poverty. This conviction was a major factor in Washington's choices after World War II to reconstruct Europe, create the World Bank, and establish what became the U.S. Agency for International Development.

WHAT WORKED

Judged by its own standards, U.S. engagement with China succeeded. Its chief aim, widening the fissure between Moscow and Beijing, bore fruit quickly. In May 1972, Nixon flew to Moscow for a summit with Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, where the two leaders signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, heralding a period of restrained competition known as *détente*. Perhaps even more valuable to the United States was the way in which the opening to China undermined communism's claim to ideological solidarity; after all, Mao had established a relationship with his country's archenemy without consulting its senior partner in the communist bloc.

The opening also prompted a broader shift in Chinese foreign policy toward greater geopolitical realism. In an early sign of its waning revolutionary ardor, Beijing reduced its support for North Vietnamese communists and nudged them toward the peace deal they signed with the United States in 1973. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, in 1979, China became a vital ally in the Reagan administration's covert war to expel Soviet forces, supplying money and arms to Afghan opposition groups. And as tensions with the Soviet Union intensified in 1980, China even hosted U.S. radar and surveillance systems on its territory.

What about the second goal of engagement, to bring China into the world order? That, too, was a success. Today, when it has become fashionable to demonize China, it is hard to appreciate how far the country has come from the revolutionary firebrand it once was. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was supporting wars of liberation around the world, helping Pakistan and North Korea design nuclear weapons, opposing UN peacekeeping operations, and isolating itself from the global economy. Today, it has become an active member of all the major international organizations. Of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, it contributes the most troops, and the second-most amount of money, to UN peacekeeping efforts. In the UN Security Council, it rarely exercises its veto and usually votes with the United States.

U.S. policy works best when focusing realistically on geopolitical objectives essential to protect American interests.

Perhaps the most telling example of China's successful integration into the global system occurred during the 2008 financial crisis, when the United States urgently sought to rally global support to prevent another Great Depression. Even though China was the least affected of the major economies, and even though the crisis had begun in the United States, Beijing swiftly responded to Washington's call. China was the first country to introduce an economic stimulus, and at \$2 trillion, its package was the largest in the world. In the midst of extreme market gyrations, when Moscow sought to persuade Beijing to dump its massive holdings of U.S. Treasury bills, China flatly rejected that advice.

As for the third goal of engagement, to lift the Chinese out of poverty, the result has been nothing short of miraculous. After Nixon's opening, China experienced decades of economic growth, which resulted in the most dramatic reduction in poverty of any large

nation in history. The country achieved this by abandoning communist economics and embracing Western free-market principles. In 1978, nine out of every ten Chinese were living below the World Bank's "extreme poverty" line of \$2 a day. Today, more than nine out of ten are above that line.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which critics of China frequently cite, contains two sets of rights: one economic and social, the other political. Like the U.S. Constitution, the declaration affirms the right to freedom of expression and a representative government. But it also declares, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family." Although China's record on political rights has been abysmal, when it comes to expanding citizens' economic rights, it has succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

CHANGING CHINA

From the time of Nixon's opening to the end of the Cold War, U.S. policy toward China pursued these specific, practical goals—and largely succeeded. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, caught up in the euphoria of victory, many imagined that the world had reached "the end of history." U.S. policymakers foresaw a "unipolar era," in which liberal democracy and market capitalism would be triumphant and peace would reign. These ideas informed President George H. W. Bush's and President Bill Clinton's expectation that integrating China into the international trade system would lay the foundations of a new liberal world order. As Clinton explained his rationale for inviting China to join the World Trade Organization in 2000, "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." Clinton was confident of the link between economic and political liberalization. "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,” he said. “And when individuals have the power . . . to realize their dreams, they will demand a greater say.”

President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama carried this strategic rationale into the twenty-first century. Like Clinton, they both believed that economic engagement with China would promote the aspirations of the Chinese people and eventually force the Chinese leadership to open up the political system. As a high-ranking Bush administration official told *Foreign Policy*, “Their policies will align with ours—not over months, but it’s going to happen.” Confident in this arc of history, Obama made the same forecast during a 2009 trip to China, saying, “When you start seeing economic freedom like that, then political freedom starts . . . gearing up.”

As is now obvious, these expectations were illusions. China was never going to become a democracy and follow in the footsteps of Japan and Germany, taking its assigned place in a U.S.-led international order. What ensured failure was a form of blindness that accompanied a vision: the United States became mesmerized by an ideal end without accepting that it was unachievable.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Looking at this record of dealing with China, the Biden administration should find four lessons instructive. First, when pursuing geopolitical objectives, engagement has succeeded more often than failed. Washington was able to create a viable exit from Vietnam and, more important, tilt the balance of power against the Soviet Union. By persuading Beijing that it could achieve more of what it wanted by joining the U.S.-led international order, Washington slowed the spread of nuclear weapons, countered global terrorism, promoted global economic growth, and avoided another Great

Depression. The secret to success was that the United States shaped objective conditions to the point where Chinese leaders could be persuaded that it was in their interest to do what Washington wanted. Facing a much more powerful China, Biden and his team will have a far harder time following this playbook. Still, they will discover that only by creating the right alliances and alignments with other countries can the United States hope to influence China's behavior.

China was never going to become a democracy and follow in the footsteps of Japan and Germany

Second, those who advocate regime change in China to promote democracy are as misguided as those who pushed wars in the Middle East in pursuit of the same objective. When he was secretary of state, Mike Pompeo proposed making that goal the center of U.S. policy toward China and tried to enlist other nations in the cause. That was a sure formula for failure. Americans should never waver in their conviction, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, that all humans have “unalienable rights”—and that these apply to the 1.4 billion people ruled by Beijing, including 13.5 million Uyghurs and 6.5 million Tibetans. But addressing the immediate threats to U.S. survival requires working with the China that exists, not dreaming of the China one might wish for. Preventing military crises, combating climate change, containing future pandemics, preventing nuclear proliferation, fighting terrorism, managing financial crises—none of this can be done without accepting the reality that the autocratic regime in Beijing runs China now and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

The third lesson for Biden is that policies of openness and integration have been engines of economic growth for the world, and they will remain essential for a successful future. While U.S. President Donald Trump was busy turning the United States inward, Chinese

President Xi Jinping stepped up to become the driver of globalization. Most of the world enthusiastically welcomes the United States' return. But Washington is coming back wielding a smaller share of global GDP and facing a challenger whose economy is now, by some metrics, as large as its own. Thus, the United States will struggle to establish level playing fields on which global competition can deliver win-win results and ensure that it gets its share of the winnings. Nonetheless, this is what has to be done—and no one said statecraft was easy.

Finally, as happens often in history, success in addressing the grand challenge of one generation creates a new, more formidable challenge for those who follow. Engagement with China allowed the United States to prevail in the cardinal struggle of the twentieth century. It also left Washington in a long-term rivalry with what the Singaporean statesman Lee Kuan Yew rightly called “the biggest player in the history of the world.” In the broad sweep of history, this is the United States' fate: to confront successively graver challenges, from the Revolutionary War to the Cold War. As Washington contends with the current contest with Beijing, it is worth recalling words Kissinger said in a 1976 speech about dealing with the last great challenge: “We know what we must do. We also know what we can do. It only remains to do it.”

CORRECTION APPENDED (FEBRUARY 18, 2021)

An earlier version of this article stated that in 1972, the Soviet Union was China's most important ally. In fact, by then, the Sino-Soviet split had occurred, although the two countries did remain treaty allies until 1979. The article also claimed that China contributes the most troops of any country to UN peacekeeping efforts. In fact, it is the biggest contributor among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and the ninth-largest contributor in the world.