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An Answer to Aggression

How to Push Back Against Beijing

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The Chinese Communist Party's initial mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent attempts to exploit the crisis have produced enduring problems for the rest of the world. But the CCP's behavior has also helped clarify the threat that China poses to the security, prosperity, and well-being of other countries. Public opinion polls show that over 60 percent of Americans of both political parties now hold a negative view of Beijing's leadership and intentions, and similar attitudes can be found across the democratic world. This heightened awareness of a shared danger creates an opportunity for the United States and its allies to formulate a new and more effective strategy for dealing with China.

For the past four decades, Western democracies have hoped that engagement with China would cause its leaders to abandon any revisionist ambitions they might harbor and accept their country's place as a "responsible stakeholder" in the U.S.-led international order. Expanding flows of trade and investment would, it was thought, also encourage Beijing to proceed down the path toward greater economic and political openness. The policy of engagement was not absurd on its face; it was a gamble rather than an outright blunder. But as has become increasingly obvious, the West's wager has failed to pay off.

Instead of opening up and mellowing out, with Xi Jinping at the helm, China is pursuing unusually brutal and oppressive policies at home and acting more aggressively abroad. China is trying to replace the United States as the world's leading economic and technological nation and to displace it as the preponderant power in East Asia. Beijing has ratcheted up its efforts to exploit the openness of democratic societies in order to shape the perceptions and policies of their governments. It is working hard to establish itself as the leader of the developing nations and, with their support, to rewrite rules and reshape international norms, standards, and institutions in line with its own illiberal, authoritarian preferences. In the long run, China's rulers evidently hope that they can divide, discredit, and weaken the democracies, lessening the appeal of their system, co-opting some, isolating others, and leaving the United States at the head of what will be, at best, a diminished and enfeebled coalition.

It is one thing to have such dreams, another to actually fulfill them. In addition to its impressive strengths, China has large and mounting liabilities, including a slowing economy, a rapidly aging population, and a system of governance that relies on costly coercion rather than the freely given consent of its people. These liabilities will complicate the regime's plans and could eventually derail them. But it would be imprudent to assume that this will happen soon or of its own accord.

Deflecting Beijing from its present, revisionist path will naturally require defensive measures. In the face of China's growing strength, the United States and its allies need to bolster their defenses against overt acts of military aggression or coercion. They must also do more to protect

their economies from exploitation and their societies and political systems from penetration and subversion.

But better defenses alone will not suffice. An effective strategy must also have a strong offensive component; it must be designed to identify and exploit the CCP regime's vulnerabilities instead of simply responding to its actions or trying to match its strengths. A purely reactive posture might have been adequate for dealing with a far weaker, nascent rival, but it cannot succeed against an opponent as powerful and aggressive as China has become. Even as they block Beijing's attempts to advance toward its goals, the United States and its allies must therefore find ways to regain the initiative.

The aims of this approach should be twofold: first, to deny Beijing its immediate objectives, imposing costs, slowing the growth of China's power and influence, and reducing the threat it can pose to democracies and to an open international system; and second, by demonstrating the futility of China's current strategy, to change the calculations of its ruling elite, forcing them to eventually rethink both their foreign and their domestic policies. This will take time, and given Xi's obvious predispositions and commitments, success may well depend on changes in the top leadership of the CCP.

As a National Security Council white paper that the White House released in May notes, it would be foolish to premise U.S. strategy on "determining a particular end state for China." But Washington need not be fatalistic. Even as they acknowledge that China's future is not theirs to decide, the United States and its allies should articulate a hope for deeper reforms that will someday change the fundamental character of the regime. The democracies should not waver in their insistence that universal values do in fact exist and that all people, including China's citizens, are entitled to the rights and freedoms that flow from those values. Anything less would be a betrayal of principle, and of those in China who hold fast to this belief.

A LENINIST STATE IN A LIBERAL ORDER

Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China, in 1949, the nation's leaders have felt threatened from within and without. The principal danger has always been the United States, which Chinese leaders have seen as working tirelessly to constrain their country, even as it has spoken earnestly of engagement. In Beijing's view, the United States has sought to encircle China with a ring of alliances. It has also challenged the legitimacy and endangered the survival of the CCP's one-party Leninist system by proclaiming the existence of a liberal international order based on principles at odds with authoritarian rule.

Faced with these threats, the party has pursued three essential goals: to preserve its monopoly on political power, to restore China to its rightful place as the dominant power in Asia, and to demonstrate the superiority of its socialist system by transforming the country into a truly global player whose wealth, power, and influence will eventually exceed those of the United States. Although these goals have not changed over time, Beijing's confidence in its ability to achieve them has. After a period of relative quiescence, the regime now feels strong enough to push back, not only against the material strength and physical presence of the United States and its democratic allies but also against the insidious threat of their liberal democratic ideals.

A turning point in this process came shortly after the 2008 financial crisis. The near collapse of the global economy aroused a mix of anxiety and optimism among the CCP elite, deepening fears about their own ability to sustain growth and stay in power, while persuading them that the United States and other liberal democracies had entered a period of decline. Beijing responded with repression and nationalism at home, mercantilism and assertiveness abroad. These tendencies became much more pronounced after Xi came to power in 2012. Under Xi, the CCP has finally abandoned Deng Xiaoping's advice to "hide its capabilities and bide its time."

Despite his swagger, Xi is driven by a sense of urgency. He is keenly aware of his country's many problems. CCP strategists have also anticipated for some time that China's growing power would eventually provoke counterbalancing from others. If such a response comes too soon, they recognize, it could choke off China's access to Western markets and technology, halting its rise before it can achieve a sufficient degree of self-reliance.

Unlike other, earlier rising powers, such as the United States, which established regional dominance before pursuing their global ambitions, China is trying to do both at once. The mix of instruments used varies with distance. Close to home, Beijing is expanding its conventional anti-access/area-denial capabilities and modernizing its nuclear arsenal in an effort to weaken the credibility of U.S. security guarantees and undermine the network of democratic alliances that rests on them. But because China's capacity to project military power over long distances is limited, the further from its own borders China goes, the more it must rely on other tools—namely, economic statecraft and political influence operations.

With the advanced industrial democracies, Beijing wants to preserve the status quo, which it considers favorable, for as long as possible. The regime seeks to discourage these countries from implementing tougher policies by highlighting the benefits of continued cooperation and the costs of potential conflict. It wants them to believe that they face a choice between, on the one hand, continued profits and collaboration on issues such as climate change and communicable diseases and, on the other, the terrifying specter of protectionism, deglobalization, and a new Cold War. The regime hopes that the democracies will choose the promise of cooperation, thus safeguarding Chinese access to Western markets and technology, which are still essential to the country's quest to become a high-tech superpower.

With its massive Belt and Road Initiative, a network of infrastructure projects that stretches across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, China seeks to secure resources, tap new markets, and expand its military reach. But Beijing also aims to cement its self-proclaimed position as leader of the global South. Abandoning its past reluctance to be seen as posing an ideological challenge to the West, it now openly offers its mix of authoritarian politics and quasi-market economics as a model for nations that want to, in Xi's words, "speed up their development while preserving their independence."

The CCP is also leveraging its relationships with elites in the developing world to gain influence in international institutions (such as the World Health Organization) and encouraging developing countries to enter new groupings that it can more easily dominate. Rejecting what he calls the "so-called universal values" of liberal democracy and human rights, Xi has declared his desire to

build a nonjudgmental "community of common destiny" in which China would naturally take the lead.

To an underappreciated degree, the global South appears to be central to the CCP's strategy. China's rulers may not want to rule the world, but as the analyst Nadège Rolland has argued, they do aspire to a "partial, loose, and malleable hegemony" over much of it. Taking a page from Mao Zedong's peasant-centric playbook, today's leaders may also believe that they can "encircle the cities from the countryside," rallying poorer nations to roll back the influence of a divided, demoralized, and declining West.

THE COOPERATION TRAP

A more competitive stance toward China does not preclude working with it when interests converge. But Washington shouldn't get its hopes up. Seemingly sensible proposals that the United States engage in "responsible competition" or "cooperate while competing" overlook the zero-sum mentality of China's current rulers and understate their ambitions. As the CCP's mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak made plain, just because transnational policy coordination is desirable does not mean it will be forthcoming. Democratic governments must avoid the familiar trap of allowing the alluring prospect of cooperation to take precedence over the urgent necessity of competition.

Nor should the democracies worry that tougher policies will empower hawks in the CCP. At this point, there is no evidence that doves are nesting quietly in its upper ranks. Persistent opposition to Xi's current course is more likely to force change than further attempts at accommodation. The dominant hawks must be discredited before any doves can be expected to emerge.

Faced with greater resistance to its actions, Beijing will inevitably blame "hostile foreign forces" and amp up its patriotic rhetoric. But these are well-worn tactics that have been deployed even when the United States was bending over backward to get along. Beijing will beat the nationalist drum no matter how Washington and its allies behave. All that the democracies can do is convey as clearly as possible that their stiffer stance comes in response to the CCP leadership's misguided policies.

Beyond heightening its rhetoric, the regime may manufacture crises, both to play to a domestic audience and to discourage foreign powers from challenging it. This is a real danger, as the June skirmish on the Chinese-Indian border suggested, but it should not be exaggerated. Despite being strategically forward-leaning, the CCP has generally been cautious in its tactics. It has shown no inclination to lash out blindly or enter into confrontations that it has reason to fear it may lose or that could spin out of control. Nevertheless, a strategy that applies greater pressure to Beijing must be accompanied by enhanced defenses and a stronger deterrent.

BATTLEGROUND ASIA

The starting point for a successful U.S. strategy lies in preserving a favorable balance of military power in the Indo-Pacific. If China can control the waters off its coasts and sow enough doubt about U.S. security guarantees, it will be able to reshape relations with its maritime neighbors in

ways that enhance its power while freeing up resources to pursue aims in other regions. Absorbing Taiwan, for example, could give China control of some of the high-tech manufacturing capabilities that it needs to strengthen its military and economy.

It will be especially difficult for Washington to right the military balance in a time of tighter defense budgets, but it can be done. Pentagon planners will have to shift scarce resources away from the Middle East and Europe and toward the Indo-Pacific, while deepening cooperation with regional allies (particularly Australia and Japan) and democratic partners (including India and Taiwan). They also need to prioritize the development and large-scale acquisition of relatively inexpensive weapons, such as long-range conventional missiles and unmanned air and undersea vehicles, that can offset China's sizable investments in its anti-access/area-denial capabilities and its growing surface fleet.

A successful strategy for long-term military competition with China must also have an offensive component. Greater investment in undersea warfare is an area of particular promise in this regard. By upgrading their already substantial capabilities in this domain, the United States and its allies would highlight the possibility of a maritime blockade of China. That, in turn, could reinforce Beijing's inclination to build uneconomical overland pipelines and transportation infrastructure. It would also force China to invest more in antisubmarine warfare—a costly and difficult business in which its navy has little experience. For similar reasons, the United States and its allies should refine their capabilities to deliver precision strikes with stealthy cruise missiles, conventional ballistic missiles, and hypersonic delivery vehicles. This could induce Chinese planners to throw money at underground bunkers and air and missile defenses, including for its newly built and potentially vulnerable island bases in the South China Sea, rather than spending still more on their own offensive forces. Such U.S. and allied investments should be designed to redirect a greater portion of China's military budget toward capabilities that are less threatening to the United States and its allies and away from those that are more so.

THE GROWTH GAME

The world's democracies opened the doors to their economies and societies on the assumption that doing so would cause China's system to converge with their own. Instead, they now find themselves vulnerable to a massive and powerful state that rejects their values and threatens their prosperity and security.

In the economic realm, what is required is not total decoupling but partial disengagement, a substantial realignment of trade and investment policies that takes account of three facts. First, for the foreseeable future, Beijing is not going to abandon its problematic policies of stealing technology, subsidizing industry, and restricting access to its market. Despite their win-win rhetoric, Chinese leaders are mercantilists; they see economic relations as yet another zero-sum struggle in which the goal is not primarily to improve their citizens' welfare but to enhance the power of the party and the nation. Second, because of the nature of the Chinese system and Beijing's doctrine of "civil-military fusion," even nominally private companies must be regarded as likely tools of the state. And finally, a China ruled by the CCP is not merely an economic competitor but also a geopolitical and ideological rival.

In light of these facts, the United States and other advanced industrial countries can no longer afford to treat China as just another trading partner. Doing so only accelerates the growth of China's power while weakening the foundations of their own. The democracies should do nothing to make it easier for Beijing to sustain its growth without far-reaching reforms of the sort that engagement was intended to encourage.

To defend themselves against surveillance or sabotage, Washington and its partners must restrict the role of Chinese companies in building information technology networks and other sensitive infrastructure and prevent them from acquiring more of their citizens' personal data. The democracies also need to limit their reliance on China for some critical materials and manufactured goods, using tax incentives to encourage the diversification of supply chains. If the CCP continues to wield trade as a weapon, the democracies will have no choice but to limit their overall dependence on the Chinese market.

For military and commercial reasons, the United States needs to preserve and extend its advantages in high technology. This will require a mix of defense and offense, running faster to stay ahead and doing more to slow China down. To foster innovation, the U.S. government needs to invest more in education and basic research, encourage greater cooperation with the private sector, and adopt immigration policies that attract talented people from around the world. At the same time, Washington must work with like-minded countries to reduce the rate at which ideas and technologies first developed in their university, corporate, and government laboratories diffuse to China. These efforts will not prevent China from advancing, but they will slow its progress and force it to bear more of the costs of innovation.

Some of the ways in which China obtains technology are clearly illegal. The United States must toughen its enforcement of existing laws against intellectual property theft and cyber-espionage, but it should also go further and punish violators with tariffs on their products and restrictions on their ability to raise capital in U.S. financial markets. Given Beijing's mercantilist practices and hostile intent, even Chinese companies that are not violating the law must be subject to greater scrutiny and special restrictions. Proposed investments from China should be tightly screened, and stricter limits should be imposed on the export of critical technologies, such as the machinery and software required for manufacturing high-end semiconductors. Washington has made strides in these areas, but it has tended to do so unilaterally. Undertaking these measures on a multilateral basis would give them teeth.

More generally, the United States must abandon for the moment the dream of building a fully integrated global economy. Instead, it should work with like-minded countries to rebuild and strengthen a partial liberal trading system, one in which all the participants genuinely adhere to the same principles of openness and defend their interests against those that do not. This is the best way to promote trade among the democracies and reduce Beijing's economic leverage—forcing it to pay a price for its predatory behavior and perhaps, with enough time and pressure, convincing it to change.

PROTECTING OPEN SOCIETIES

The CCP exploits the openness of liberal societies and, in particular, their commitment to freedom of speech. Its use of social media platforms banned in China to spread disinformation about COVID-19 in the West is just the most recent illustration of this phenomenon. Many of Beijing's influence operations are more subtle. In an effort to shape the perceptions of foreign elites, it engages them in profitable business ventures, hires local lawyers and lobbyists to sway them, and donates generously to the influential think tanks and universities they frequent.

Most of these activities are legal in the United States, and many are the hallmarks of a free society. Nevertheless, tighter rules are clearly required in certain areas. Former members of Congress, military officers,and executive-branch officials should be barred from lobbying for companies from countries (such as China) that the U.S. government has identified as posing a security threat. And private institutions such as think tanks and universities should have to disclose the gifts they receive from foreign entities.

In addition to passing stronger laws, the democracies should focus on increasing public awareness of what the CCP calls "United Front" tactics. These typically involve employing seemingly unofficial Chinese organizations or private individuals to gain access to influential institutions and people in target countries. More readily available information about the links between these intermediaries and the organs of the party-state would help reduce the risks of manipulation. Their counterparts in democracies must also be made to understand that in today's China, there is no such thing as a truly independent think tank, foundation, university, or company.

The American higher education system is an extraordinarily valuable asset that attracts people from the world over. Although the vast majority of students and researchers from China pose no threat, prudence demands restrictions on those who are affiliated with the People's Liberation Army or other elements of China's security apparatus. Scientists and engineers who choose to accept funding from and share their expertise through Beijing's talent-recruitment programs, whether Chinese nationals or American citizens, should be barred from taking part in projects funded by the U.S. government. And to directly impose costs on the CCP elite, Washington should restrict educational and other visas for party officials involved in human rights abuses or other noxious and threatening activities, along with members of their families.

The challenge for the United States and other free societies is to do all of this while remaining as open as possible to individual Chinese citizens who have legitimate reasons to study, work, and live in their countries. Continued openness helps undercut the CCP's claims that Western democracies have a problem with the Chinese people, rather than with their government.

WINNING OVER THE DEVELOPING WORLD

As the pandemic spreads across the developing world, it will create opportunities for China to deepen its influence there. If countries that have received loans through the Belt and Road Initiative are unable to repay their debts to Chinese lenders because they have been stricken by the virus, Beijing may seize the valuable assets or natural resources they put up as collateral. Or it may seek to accrue political capital, and gain future diplomatic leverage, by renegotiating the loans on more favorable terms.

Beijing is in a tight spot. If it insists on the prompt repayment of outstanding loans despite the current crisis, it should be held accountable for the additional hardship that results. On the other hand, if some of their debtors default, Chinese banks will suffer losses, and Xi may face renewed criticism at home for his costly overseas adventures. In any event, the United States and the other advanced democracies should ensure that the support that international institutions offer distressed countries is not funneled directly to Beijing, bailing it out of a problem of its own creation.

China must be made to bear the reputational costs of its exploitative practices. Beijing is allergic to accusations that it engages in "debt-trap diplomacy," an aversion that can be reinforced with continued scrutiny, especially from independent journalists and local nongovernmental organizations. Governments and nongovernmental organizations in the advanced democracies can make developing countries more resistant to Chinese influence by helping strengthen these institutions of civil society.

Washington cannot oppose every one of China's expanding activities in the developing world, nor should it try to. Some of China's investments will prove wasteful, others may provoke a local backlash, and some could even draw Beijing into counterinsurgencies or other costly armed conflicts. When its gambits in the developing world saddle Beijing with new burdens and generate new vulnerabilities, Washington and its allies should not stand in the way. At the same time, to prevent developing countries from being drawn still further into China's orbit, the democracies must have something positive to offer. That may include aid, medical assistance, more educational visas, and improved access to their own markets. Western governments should also work with established international institutions and private investors to fund infrastructure projects that are built to high standards, using local labor, and on reasonable financial terms. Here, as in other areas, the objective should be to regain the initiative rather than merely respond to China's actions.

WAGING POLITICAL WARFARE

For all its investment in information control, in the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, China was unable to prevent critical commentary and damaging images from circulating domestically. The authorities soon regained their grip, silencing critics and unleashing a torrent of self-praise, detailed accounts of disorder in other countries, and disinformation about the source of the virus. Yet the episode highlighted both the importance that the CCP attaches to shaping how others speak and think about its actions and the difficulty of actually doing so.

The democracies should not abandon their efforts to penetrate China's tightly controlled information sphere. They should continue to invest in methods of circumventing the "Great Firewall." But finger-wagging and public diplomacy campaigns are not the right approach. Instead, the goal should be to amplify critical Chinese voices and to enable accurate information about what is happening inside China's borders to flow back into the country. Before the pandemic began, the Chinese public was already concerned about the CCP's corruption, unfair treatment of ordinary citizens, and wasteful overseas investments. Especially if the coming economic recovery is slow, dissatisfaction on all these issues is certain to grow. If the regime

feels compelled to spend more money to deal with rising discontent—either by addressing the genuine needs of the Chinese people or by spending still more on internal security—it will have to divert scarce resources from the pursuit of its external objectives.

There is a growing recognition that China's problematic behavior stems from the character of its regime; it is, as a European Union communiqué put it in 2019, "a systemic rival" of the liberal democratic West. In addition to highlighting the differences that separate them from an authoritarian China, the United States and like-minded countries need to reassert their commitment to their shared ideals. Unless their leaders can forcefully and credibly articulate those principles and act on them, the democracies will continue to drift apart, just as Beijing hopes they will.

The United States and its allies must be prepared to take the offensive in what CCP theorists describe as the struggle for "discursive power"—the battle of dueling narratives. The democracies should not only push back harder against Beijing's false claims about the West; they must also directly attack its distorted narrative about itself. China's material achievements of the last several decades are undeniably impressive. But they were accomplished on the backs of poorly paid and politically powerless workers and peasants, at enormous cost to the natural environment, and with invaluable help from the advanced industrial countries. The CCP's attempts to substitute the "right to development" for widely shared conceptions of human rights provide thin cover for its brutal repression. China's rulers live in fear of their own people; they go to extraordinary lengths to enforce what they label "social stability," spending billions on internal security forces and high-tech surveillance programs. Claims that their system is superior, that its rise is unstoppable, or that it provides a desirable model for others deserve to be debunked.

By contrast, for all their shortcomings, the democracies have a track record of flexibility, innovation, adaptation, and self-renewal that extends over two centuries. They have achieved sustained material progress while granting their citizens the freedom to express their opinions and choose their leaders. Needless to say, the case for liberal democracy will be all the more compelling if its exemplars are themselves seen to be reaping the benefits of the freedom, prosperity, and security that they promise, practicing the virtues that they preach, and extending an open hand to those who wish to follow a similar path.

THE LONG GAME

At present, the United States is not well situated to capitalize on Beijing's belligerence. The Trump administration deserves credit for turning U.S. China policy in a more realistic direction. But for nearly four years, the president has picked fights with the United States' friends and allies, proved incapable of speaking persuasively about democratic values, and refused to criticize Beijing for its egregious violations of human rights. All of this has left the United States poorly positioned to lead a coalition in pushing back against China. Meanwhile, the president's decision to make China a centerpiece in his reelection campaign, blaming Beijing for all the hardships unleashed by the pandemic, has short-circuited some early efforts at bipartisan cooperation in Congress. Still, the fact that the Democratic and Republican Parties are now

accusing each other of being soft on China and competing to stake out the tougher position suggests that a consensus has begun to take shape.

If the United States and its allies are able to engage in sustained resistance, China's leaders may eventually be forced to reconsider their present path. For the moment, however, Xi and his colleagues appear to believe that they have the wind at their backs and that, in any event, they have no choice but to press ahead. It will take time and effort to convince them, or their successors, that their goals are unattainable and that they should adopt a more accommodating stance.

A change in the upper ranks of the CCP, the emergence of a new leading group persuaded of the need to take a new approach, could bring a change in tactics and perhaps an easing of tensions. But the problem likely lies deeper than the current composition of the party's Central Committee. In light of the CCP's implacable insecurities, overweening ambition, and obsessive desire for control, it is difficult to see how a China in which the party continues to wield absolute authority can coexist comfortably in a world where liberal democracies remain strong and united. Assuming the democracies hang together, until China changes, a prolonged period of rivalry is therefore all but inevitable.

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