

The U.S. Can't Check China Alone

What the State Department Gets Wrong About Beijing

By Odd Arne Westad

In mid-November, the State Department's Policy Planning Staff released a 74-page report arguing that China aims to fundamentally revise the world order in the service of its authoritarian goals and hegemonic ambitions. Seeking to elucidate "the intellectual sources of China's conduct," the document is clearly meant to evoke "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," the seminal article that the first director of policy planning, George Kennan, wrote in Foreign Affairs under the byline "X" in 1947. The new report, intended as a blueprint for China policy in the second Trump term that was not to be, raises problems that remain relevant for the incoming Biden administration. But it has far less to say when it comes to solutions.

The Trump administration's report correctly sees China as the greatest challenge to the United States since the end of the Cold War, showing how Beijing has grown more authoritarian at home and more aggressive abroad. It also rightly recognizes how China has tried to gain an advantage by applying economic pressure and conducting espionage—as well as by exploiting the naiveté that causes many foreigners to miss the oppressive nature of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Yet the report is limited by ideological and political constraints; given that it is a Trump administration document, it must echo President Donald Trump's distaste for international organizations, even though they are key to dealing with China.

Last year, in an essay in Foreign Affairs ("The Sources of Chinese Conduct," September/October 2019), I discussed policymakers' attempts to come up with an updated version of Kennan's policy of containment and assessed the parallels between the Soviet Union then and China today. As I argued then, the differences between the Cold War and the current challenge are greater than the similarities, and although officials should learn from previous policy, they must not be constrained by it. Indeed, the greatest weakness of the Trump administration's report is its inability to break free of what has hobbled U.S. policy toward China up to now: an attempt to apply twentieth-century remedies to twenty-first-century problems. Although the administration's diagnosis may be close to the mark, the treatment proposed is destined to fail.

WHAT MAKES CHINA TICK

China's foreign policy today is driven by a toxic mix of nationalism and past grievances, but it is also infused with pragmatism and patience. Powered by its extraordinary economic growth, China continuously seeks to test the ability of any foreign country to stand up to its interests as defined by the CCP. As the State Department's report recognizes, this policy in no way excludes limited cooperation with other countries. Nor is this kind of foreign policy behavior unknown elsewhere; nationalism in various forms is on the rise around the world. But China is unique both in terms of its size and its future potential. It is also a repressive dictatorship in which a small, self-selected elite makes all the important decisions, a system of government that makes other countries fear it even more.

What are the aims of the CCP's current leaders? Two stand out. The first and most important is to continue China's economic rise so that the country becomes stronger domestically and the CCP's rule—already based largely on economic success—remains entrenched at home. The second is to establish China as the predominant power within much of Asia, including the western Pacific, Central Asia, eastern Russia, the Himalayas, and the Indian Ocean. Its policies elsewhere, so far, are largely reactive and opportunistic. But within this crucial zone—crucial not just for China but also for the rest of the world—it has moved closer and closer to obtaining the supremacy it so desperately wants. This process has been aided by the weakness of Russia, the long malaise of Japan, and the waywardness of U.S. foreign policy. But these factors were not responsible alone; China's behavior is driven mainly by domestic factors. Blaming Chinese expansionism on the United States' mistakes, as the State Department's report does, is not just self-centered and therefore faulty but also analytically dangerous.

The only possible way forward for U.S. strategy is to exploit the contradictions between the CCP's two main aims: maintaining economic growth and conducting an expansionist foreign policy. As the report concludes, some of this contradiction will be laid bare on its own as the rest of the world wakes up to the true nature of the Chinese regime. But the United States should do more to force China to choose between these two goals. The Biden administration should go beyond what the Obama and Trump administrations did to assist Asian countries that want to resist Chinese pressure. It should increase the United States' military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific and develop policies on trade, investment, and technology that reward China's compliance with bilateral and multilateral agreements and punish its infringements.

THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

One key lesson from the twentieth century that remains valid today is that the United States cannot do any of this without broad cooperation from international allies and friends. Going it alone today would exceed U.S. capabilities, much more so than would have been the case when the Cold War began. Back then, the United States counted for almost 50 percent of global GDP, and it still needed allied support to succeed. Today, the U.S. share is less than half of that, and without a revitalization of the American economy, it is set to decline even further.

And yet the report suggests that it is now in the United States' interests to destroy and then selectively rebuild existing international institutions. Given the current economic balance of power, this idea is sheer madness. So is the Trump administration's reluctance to cherish and support regional organizations, such as the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which serve as anchors of pluralism and international cooperation. Moreover, it would without a doubt be in the United States' interest to seek other opportunities for cooperation, such as trying to get Russia to engage more broadly with the West, without refraining from criticizing Moscow's international behavior.

This is not the Cold War, in which the United States' opponent was more or less self-isolated and reaped the grim rewards of its confinement. Unlike the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the CCP wants its country to "go out," as it puts it, and engage more with the rest of the world in order to further its aims. To counter such Chinese policies, the United States needs to not only have specific strategic and institutional responses. It also, more fundamentally, needs to reformulate an answer to the question of why it should have a strong global position while other powers should wield less influence. For much of the twentieth century, the answer was obvious:

the United States was economically, technologically, and militarily preeminent, and it was willing to create alliances and international institutions through which other countries could advance their own interests. Little of this is obvious today. To make matters worse, the U.S. political system's debilitating partisanship and utter inability to handle the COVID-19 pandemic have laid bare American weaknesses for all to see. Right now, for people around the world, it is almost impossible to imagine U.S. policies and institutions as worthy of emulation.

It is deeply worrying—although perhaps not surprising, given the Trump administration's lack of self-awareness—that a strategic report calling for U.S. policies that will “secure freedom” almost completely ignores the most basic fact about the current situation, which is that the United States can compete effectively with China only through fundamental reform at home. The United States needs better health care. It needs better infrastructure. It needs better-paid jobs for ordinary people and affordable education that prepares them for a profoundly changed workplace. And in order to achieve all of this, it needs a strong, competent, and capable government, based on at least a limited political consensus about what kind of nation the United States wants to be. Without such rebuilding at home, any attempt at competing abroad will be futile.

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