



The U.S. Can No Longer Ignore or Contain China. What Now?

Howard W. French | Wednesday, July 8, 2020

With the unrelenting news of soaring coronavirus cases in the United States, and the historic push to address long-ignored questions of racial and social justice, one of this era's most consequential issues has received less attention, but it will soon stand out again. How should the United States and the West more broadly respond to the continuing rise of China?

Consider some major developments in recent weeks, starting with the imposition by Beijing of a new security law on Hong Kong. The law sharply curtails what was left of Hong Kong's semiautonomous status, which was promised to last for 50 years after the city's handover to China from Britain in 1997.

New details have also emerged about the forced confinement and "reeducation" of China's mostly Muslim Uighur minorities in the northwestern region of Xinjiang. According to recent reporting by the Associated Press (<https://apnews.com/269b3de1af34e17c1941a514f78d764c>), China "regularly subjects minority women to pregnancy checks, and forces intrauterine devices, sterilization and even abortion on hundreds of thousands" in Xinjiang. Adrian Zenz, a China scholar at the Jamestown Foundation, found that "in 2018, 80 percent of all new IUD placements in China were performed in Xinjiang (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/whats-happening-in-xinjiang-is-genocide/2020/07/06/cde3f9da-bfaa-11ea-9fdd-b7ac6b051dc8_story.html)—despite the fact that the region makes up only 1.8 percent of the nation's population." Some human rights advocates describe China's state-imposed birth control and sterilization policies in Xinjiang as "genocide."

It is true that there have been symbolic gestures about both Hong Kong and Xinjiang from the U.S. Congress. But on the latter topic, recent weeks have also brought unconfirmed but plausible reports that President Donald Trump told his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, that he supported his treatment of the Uighurs

(https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-asked-chinas-xi-to-help-him-win-reelection-according-to-bolton-book/2020/06/17/d4ea601c-ad7a-11ea-868b-93d63cd833b2_story.html). Indeed, Trump even admitted in an interview last month that he avoided sanctioning China over Xinjiang because he worried it would derail trade talks (<https://www.axios.com/trump-uighur-muslims-sanctions-d4dc86fc-17f4-42bd-bdbd-c30f4d2ffa21.html>).



The USS Ronald Reagan and USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Groups steam in formation in the South China Sea, July 6, 2020 (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jason Tarleton for U.S. Navy via AP Images).

Now, two American aircraft carriers are conducting joint operations in the South China Sea meant to demonstrate U.S. “resolve” in the region. China has pushed hard since late in the Obama administration to dominate the South China Sea by claiming sovereign control of isolated islets, against the ruling of an international tribunal, and by building artificial ones, as well, which it has armed, despite once pledging not to do so.

Some international security analysts applaud the American aircraft carrier deployment as long overdue. But there has been far too little public discussion in the United States about Washington’s longer-term options in the South China Sea, or about bottom lines regarding China, and that is because the United States and other Western powers have failed to define where their vital interests lie in this part of the world.

The need for that kind of clarity was driven home in its own way by a mocking tweet

(<https://twitter.com/globaltimesnews/status/1279413115759837185?lang=en>) from China’s exuberantly nationalistic English-language publication, Global Times, which recently boasted, arguably with only modest exaggeration: “China has a wide selection of anti-aircraft carrier weapons like DF-21D and DF-26 ‘aircraft carrier killer’ #missiles. South China Sea is fully within grasp of the #PLA; any US #aircraftcarrier movement in the region is at the pleasure of PLA: analysts.”

Is the defense of the principle of freedom of navigation, which is supported by international law, worth the potential loss of an American aircraft carrier in the South China Sea? What about respect for international tribunal rulings, like the one by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that rejected China’s maritime claims near the Philippines in 2016 (</articles/19398/after-much-awaited-judgment-day-what-s-next-in-the-south-china-sea>)? Is it worth the loss of a flag ship? No one knows where America stands on any of this, and the situation has not been helped by the Senate’s long failure to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

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The United States has similarly failed to formulate a coherent response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a hugely ambitious scheme to bind much of the world to Beijing through the creation of both physical and financial infrastructure on a vast scale. Some of China’s announced Belt and Road projects remain vaporware. Others will almost certainly never pay for themselves in conventional balance sheet terms. But those are both poor reasons not to take the entire effort seriously by developing a meaningful and serious response.

This failure, shared both by Washington and its oldest traditional allies in Western Europe, is all the more glaring for their equally shared prior failure to respond to more than a decade of rapid Chinese diplomatic and business advance across the African continent—a failure which, in fact, continues today. To be effective, a response should not be grudging or pugnacious, and that is certainly the case with the Belt and Road Initiative and in Africa. The nations of Africa, Central Asia and elsewhere, where China is and has been expanding its reach, are right to want more active economic partners. It is the failure to engage them more meaningfully (</articles/27912/have-china-s-value-propositions-become-more-attractive-than-america-s>) that has hurt the West's interests more than any Chinese action, per se. What such an engagement might look like is a question for another column.

As the coronavirus crisis has shown, China may stumble from time to time in the years ahead, especially so long as its current turn toward reinforced authoritarianism continues under Xi. It is also only just now beginning to reckon with the enormous costs of a looming aging crisis (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/chinas-twilight-years/480768/>), which will impose dramatic limits on overseas and defense outlays in the future. Nevertheless, China is still likely to have the world's largest economy within a decade and will rank as a military peer of the United States, and indeed overmatch it in its own Pacific backyard, through a combination of recent intense naval expansion and missile development.

Broadly speaking, with the end of a first and possibly only Trump term fast approaching, the United States faces three paths forward with regard to a China that can now neither be ignored nor contained. But neither straight-out confrontation nor zero-sum competition are wise or practical options. The pandemic should have already served as a stark reminder of the tight interdependence of today's world, and there will be many more reminders to come. What happens, for example, if China is the first to roll out an effective vaccine against COVID-19? Does the United States snub it, or try to deny China the immense credit it will win for the breakthrough? Does it work with China to jointly develop vaccine production and distribution protocols that advance public health globally, or does it focus narrowly on its own needs, reinforcing the recent impression that many now have of it, especially in the era of Trump and "America First," as a purely self-interested power?

The first path forward for the United States is to join together with formal and informal allies to patiently build coalitions that invite China into discussions about acceptable parameters of international behavior, working hard to uphold these standards even when Beijing abstains or falls short, as will undoubtedly happen. As old fashioned an idea as this is, it has never really been attempted since China's rise began in the 1980s.

The second option is to go it alone, which is largely what the failing Trump policy consists of. If it is pursued further, beyond November, it will lead to the continued atrophying of alliances and partnerships, and generally, to the decline of American influence everywhere. Beijing will have little trouble imposing its own order on large parts of Asia and the Pacific if all it has to worry about is an America that sends the occasional aircraft carrier its way, thinking that this constitutes effective policy.

The final option is to simply go home, meaning more radical American withdrawal. This might mean the calculation that rocks or artificial islets in the South China Sea are not worth the loss of a U.S. flagship, and that it is time to stop pretending they are. The ultimate form of withdrawal might mean all the way to the Western Hemisphere—not America First, but the Americas only. This is a vision of U.S. power briefly contemplated, and

then rejected, under Franklin Roosevelt early on in World War II. It would hasten moves by many European countries, along with Japan and South Korea, to cut new bargains with China and Russia for their own security, and result in a radical downsizing of America in the world. Countries in Africa and much of the Global South, too, would write the United States off and perhaps look back with nostalgia at the time when it seemed to stand—even with great hypocrisy—for certain principles, and not just for itself. America would remain rich for a time, but amid greater uncertainty about the future than imaginable even today.

This sounds like a radical, almost unimaginable outcome, even under America's present leadership. But one needn't arrive at such a state only through planning. It is just as possible through stumbling, which is what can happen when a nation's most important interests are not clearly defined.

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