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The main image of the cover shows a close-up of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump. Xi Jinping is on the left, wearing a dark blue jacket over a white shirt and a patterned tie. Donald Trump is on the right, wearing a dark blue suit, a white shirt, and a bright red tie. They are both looking towards each other. In the background, several Chinese military personnel in blue uniforms with gold epaulettes and caps are visible, some holding rifles.

**U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY  
IN THE TRUMP ERA**

# U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY IN THE TRUMP ERA

A WPR REPORT | MAY 2020

Integrating China into the liberal trade order was expected to have a moderating effect on Beijing. Instead, under President Xi Jinping, China has asserted its military control over the South China Sea and cracked down on domestic dissent, all while continuing to use unfair trade practices to boost its economy. The Coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated tensions. As a result, a bipartisan consensus has emerged in Washington that the U.S. must rethink the assumptions underpinning its approach to China's rise. But President Donald Trump's confrontational approach, including a costly trade war, is unlikely to prove effective. This report provides a comprehensive look at U.S.-China rivalry in the Trump era.



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**Editor's Note** All time references are relative to each article's publish date, indicated at the top of the article.

# WHAT AMERICA'S CHINA DEBATE GETS RIGHT AND WRONG—AND WHAT IT'S MISSING

HOWARD W. FRENCH | JULY 2019

America's foreign policy establishment is at war with itself over the shape of the country's approach toward a steadily rising China. For now, it is only an epistolary war. But as the debate deepens, its outcome will go far toward deciding how the United States responds to its most serious global rival for economic and geopolitical power for decades ahead.

Among a slew of recent op-eds and policy papers about how Washington should manage the perceived challenge that China represents, two statements stand out as poles in the debate and, as such, deserve extended consideration.

The first, which appeared in early July in *The Washington Post*, takes on the Trump administration for **driving a “downward spiral” in relations with China**. While the authors mostly trace this to President Donald Trump's confrontational approach on trade, they also criticize the administration more generally for treating Beijing increasingly like an enemy, beginning with an early strategy document identifying China as a strategic competitor.

To be sure, this letter—signed by a large number of leading China scholars and former American officials—identifies a certain amount of worrisome Chinese behavior, including growing domestic repression, an increasing state role in the economy, a failure to respect past agreements and a more aggressive foreign policy. These all demand what the letter calls a “firm and effective response.” But the authors insist that China is not an economic enemy or existential threat to the United States, nor is it a monolith. To the contrary, they go on to say, many Chinese



**ABOVE** U.S. President Donald Trump with Chinese President Xi Jinping during the G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan, June 29, 2019 (AP photo by

elites believe that a “moderate and cooperative relationship” with the United States is in China’s interest, but the increasingly confrontational stance from Washington only strengthens the hand of Chinese nationalists.

The problem with this reasoning is that there is little sign in today’s Beijing that these proverbial moderates exercise much influence. What’s more, the letter’s uber-traditional stance continues to put the onus of forbearance heavily on Washington, where it has been since Beijing launched the reform-and-opening policies that began to reinsert China into the world economy in 1979.

These traditionalists are on much more solid ground when they say that treating China as an enemy and working to decouple it from the Western-led spheres of the global economy will damage the “international role and reputation” of the United States. Other countries don’t want to be forced to choose

between China and an American-led West, and if pushed, some—perhaps even many—may choose not to side with Washington.

The authors also dismiss fears that China wants to replace the U.S. as a global leader as overblown. This may be so, but such suspicions are not entirely paranoid or bereft of evidence. If anything, the U.S. has suspended its disbelief about China's ambitions and capacities for too long, flattering itself with notions of its own indispensable leadership, while underappreciating the fact that for a country of China's size and history, a desire to be preeminent in the world comes pretty naturally.

The United States, the authors say, should maintain its military deterrence of China, adopt a defensive-minded posture and work with its allies. This all sounds like good common sense. The problem is that such a stance has done little to stop or even slow China from flexing its muscles. Nor has it halted China's creeping expansionism that I wrote about in my book, "Everything Under the Heavens," particularly in the South China Sea.

Finally, the authors say that America should work harder at strengthening its own competitive capacities. Here one wishes to declare in agreement, "Yes, and how!" At the same time, they assert that America should strive harder to serve as a model for others. Once again, but with a twist, "Yes, but under Trump, how?"

The [second letter](#) worth examining more closely was written in direct response to the first and signed by a number of former defense and diplomatic officials as well as scholars. In it, the

authors eschew all nuance and describe China as a "virulent and increasing threat to human freedoms," which they blame on what they call "misrule" by the Chinese Communist Party. The problem with claims as sweeping as these, of course, is that they bear little serious scrutiny.

It is true that the prevailing evidence suggests that what is arguably one of the world's worst human rights

**BEYOND GETTING ITS OWN HOUSE IN ORDER, IT IS FAR FROM OBVIOUS WHAT ELSE AMERICANS SHOULD DO ABOUT THE CHALLENGE THAT CHINA PRESENTS.**

abuses is taking place in China today: the arbitrary detention and forcible reeducation of large numbers of Uighurs, a Muslim minority in the far west of the country. Ostensibly an anti-terrorism measure, the real purpose of the massive detention program seems both far grander in scope and more sinister: to suppress Islam in the country and force the Uighur population into cultural conformity.

As bad as this sounds, however, there is little reason to believe that large sections of the Chinese population harbor resentment about being misruled. And as long as standards of living are rising, as they have been sharply for decades, a radical change in this sentiment seems unlikely, even given the tight limits on expression and association in China that people in many other societies, both rich and poor, might find intolerable.

Things only get more problematic from there. This second letter credits the United States with having “pursued an open policy of ‘engagement’” with China for the past 40 years, only to complain that this has resulted in an “incremental erosion of U.S. national security.” Here, one would like to hear the counterfactual. Would it have been preferable to continue treating Beijing as an irredeemable adversary after Mao’s death? Can the authors really believe that keeping China locked out of the global economy—thereby condemning its massive population to continued poverty—would have been better for American security, let alone morally defensible? Moreover, the United States was bound to become relatively less powerful as the global economy grew more diversified and democratized, a process that will continue in the decades ahead as many more people continue to emerge from poverty, whether in India or Africa or elsewhere.

From here, the wheels really fall off the second letter’s argument. The authors maintain that for the U.S., “politics is the norm and war is the exception. It’s the opposite of the [Chinese] worldview.” But China has fought precisely one war since Mao’s death in 1976, a border conflict with Vietnam that it initiated with America’s blessing in 1979. By contrast, the United States

has engaged in so many conflicts over this time that when Trump called former President Jimmy Carter a few months ago to ask for advice on how to deal with China, Carter had one suggestion: **stop fighting wars**.

The authors of the second letter go on to cite a grab bag of grievances, from China's pushiness in the East and South China Seas to its ambitious infrastructure-building Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI, and what they call its "debt-trap diplomacy and ambitions for worldwide hegemony." They use these to claim that China's grand strategy and pursuit of power are a threat to the existing international order.

In fact, China takes a quite eclectic approach to the international order. It supports—and draws support from— institutions built in another era mostly through Western leadership, while creating new institutions and mechanisms, like the BRI and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, when it senses a need and, especially, a vacuum. As for the idea that China has a chiseled and predetermined grand plan for world dominance, the working title for another book of mine—this one on China's engagement with Africa—was "Haphazard Empire," so improvised did the whole enterprise seem upon closer examination.

The writers of the second letter, whom I'll call hardliners, haven't gotten everything wrong. The United States has coasted along in its policy toward China for far too long, believing its own press about the elixir of American-style capitalism and liberal values, and its power to turn other societies into acceptable facsimiles of itself. Quite often, Washington has not been as firm as it should have been on reciprocal matters of trade or intellectual property, or even regional and international security and human rights. That said, all but declaring China an evil menace will achieve little good, and probably much bad.

The inadequacy of both of these letters points to a conclusion that is hard to shake. The United States has never before seen anything like the challenge that China represents, as no previous



rival has combined its size, its sustained speed of growth and its civilizational determination to strengthen itself. The point here is not that China is destined to conquer all in its path. It has immense problems of its own that few in America can even imagine. Some of these will be the subject of future columns.

Nonetheless, beyond vague calls for the U.S. to get its own house in order and reinvigorate its partnerships, which few sensible people can argue with, it is far from obvious what else Americans should do about the across-the-board challenge that China presents.

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# AMERICA'S CHINA POLICY HASN'T FAILED, BUT IT NEEDS TO BE RECALIBRATED

ALI WYNE | MAY 2018

Forty years after China embarked on the economic reforms that have helped transform it from an isolated and impoverished communist outpost into an increasingly confident and capable global power, a growing number of observers in the United States have, understandably, concluded that Washington adopted the wrong strategy toward Beijing. Their judgment is largely rooted in two propositions. First, the United States was mistaken to assume, or hope, that China would become more democratic as its economy grew. Second, by persisting with efforts to integrate China into the postwar international order, the United States ultimately enabled the rise of a country that now stands not only as its principal competitor, but also as its putative replacement on the global stage.

It is difficult to dispute the first point, although Elizabeth Economy of the Council on Foreign Relations rightly **cautions** that “political change is a long game, and the game is not over.” Especially under Xi Jinping, however, Beijing has **taken a decisively authoritarian turn**—cracking down more aggressively on foreign nongovernmental organizations, more explicitly renouncing Western values and governance, and consolidating what may well be the world’s most intrusive, far-reaching surveillance state. With the Chinese Communist Party’s decision to end presidential term limits, moreover, Xi is poised to preside over China for as long as he lives. The New Yorker’s Evan Osnos **observes** that China is “reentering a period in which the fortunes

of a fifth of humanity hinge, to an extraordinary degree, on the visions, impulses, and insecurities of a solitary figure.”

But the second point—that the U.S. has aided the rise of its now-chief competitor—is more debatable. Could the U.S. have either stalled China’s progress indefinitely or cultivated a less formidable competitor?

Because of the multitude of differences that define U.S.-China relations, it is virtually impossible to imagine that China would have developed into a U.S. ally. Their histories and cultures aside, the U.S. prides itself on being the world’s most successful experiment in democracy, while China regards Western-style pluralism as a threat to its survival. Yet there are two paradoxical similarities between the two countries. First, China largely believes itself to be unique in the annals of human history, though it neither proclaims its exceptionalism as loudly nor proselytizes its singularity with nearly the same vigor as the United States. Second, having spent most of its history atop an Asian-Pacific hierarchy, China has neither experience in nor enthusiasm for sustaining an international system in partnership with an approximate peer.

Nor is it much more plausible to reconstruct the past four decades in such a way that China would have been permanently deferential to U.S. strategic interests. Despite being the principal beneficiary of the postwar order, after the U.S., Beijing has long chafed at its exclusion from that system’s design. In addition, both Chinese officialdom and popular culture widely regard Western pre-eminence since the Industrial Revolution as an aberration from a far longer stretch of Chinese centrality. China is animated not only by longstanding nostalgia—embodied in Xi’s oft-stated call for “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”—but also by an increasing material **capacity to realize it.**

While China may not have undergone as rapid a revival had the U.S. remained more agnostic, it is wishful thinking to believe that Beijing would have stagnated indefinitely without American assistance. Its history demonstrates that it is nothing



**ABOVE** President Xi Jinping arrives for a plenary session of China's National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People, Beijing, March 13, 2018 (AP photo by Andy Wong).

if not resilient. In just the past 90 years, China endured its own devastating civil war, followed by a brutal Japanese occupation, the worst famine in human history and, shortly thereafter, a decade of intense political upheaval.

The U.S. may have been able to postpone the challenge from China, but it would not have been able to do much once Beijing had arrived. Across four decades and eight administrations in Washington, U.S. policy toward China has

facilitated the development of dynamics that have helped to prevent strategic competition from devolving into unconstrained hostility, including robust people-to-people exchanges, deep economic interdependence, and a wide array of institutionalized as well as informal policy dialogues.

Could the U.S. have either stalled China's progress indefinitely or cultivated a less formidable competitor?

Finally, what if the U.S. had tried to contain China? It may have bought itself considerably more time, but at the risk of creating an implacable antagonist. In 1967, five years before his landmark trip to China, Richard Nixon **warned** that the U.S. would be imprudent "to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates, and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation."

Today, America's relationship with China is increasingly challenging, frustrating and tense. It is preferable, though, to deal with a complex competitor that has a stake in maintaining a baseline level of stability in bilateral ties, than it would be to contend later on with a determined adversary

## COULD THE U.S. HAVE EITHER STALLED CHINA'S PROGRESS INDEFINITELY OR CULTIVATED A LESS FORMIDABLE COMPETITOR?

more explicit and aggressive in its revisionism. While China is chipping away at certain elements of the postwar order, it has hardly divested itself from that system. Consider, for example, its growing contributions to United Nations peacekeeping forces and its continued desire to gain a greater voice within two foundational—and U.S.-led—institutions of the postwar order: the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. And for all their tension, Washington and Beijing have amassed an impressive record of cooperation, working together to boost economic stability in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, addressing climate change, bringing the Iran nuclear deal to fruition, and ramping up economic pressure on North Korea.

No one disputes that distrust between the U.S. and China is growing rapidly across a number of dimensions. But, as Cold War historian Odd Arne Westad notes, “Communist Party leaders are obsessively studying how the Soviet Union collapsed, in order to avoid a similar fate for their country.” They appreciate that an armed confrontation with the U.S. would do lasting, if not irrevocable, damage to their ambition of achieving a peaceful national renaissance. As such, China will likely focus most on competing with the U.S. economically. Its huge Belt and Road Initiative aims to cement Chinese trade and investment across Eurasia, while its “Made in 2025” campaign seeks to make China a world leader in 10 domains of cutting-edge technology.

But China does not necessarily seek to succeed the U.S. as the world’s superpower, especially if such a mantle would impose on it real and/or perceived obligations for steering global affairs. Reflecting on a recent gathering in Beijing between Western journalists and scholars and Chinese elites, Financial Times columnist Martin Wolf explained that “China does not want to run the world.” Summarizing the views of the Chinese participants at the meeting, Wolf added that China’s “internal problems are ... too big for any such ambition. In any case, it has no worked-out view of what to do.”

What is the verdict, then, on America’s China policy, and where should the two countries go from here? Those who urge the U.S.

to recalibrate are right to warn against illusion that masquerades as ambition. Greater economic prosperity has not accelerated political liberalization in China to date. But Washington would be wise to appreciate a corollary danger: yielding to fatalism that poses as realism. The U.S. and China cannot paper over their differences indefinitely. They can, however, deepen existing areas of cooperation and pursue new ones. Mutual interests and economic interdependence remain the best hopes for anchoring a relationship that would have been exceedingly challenging no matter how the past 40 years had unfolded.

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# THE U.S. SHOULD BASE ITS CHINA STRATEGY ON COMPETITIVE COOPERATION, NOT CONTAINMENT

JUDAH GRUNSTEIN | APRIL 2019

U.S. foreign policy has often been likened to an oil tanker. It can shift course, but major changes in direction happen slowly, if ever. This is understandable, after all. America's global partnerships have in most cases developed over generations, representing institutional investments and deep-rooted national interests.

One prominent exception to this rule, however, is now taking place before our very eyes: the U.S. foreign policy consensus on China, which has shifted rapidly over the course of the past few years and continues to move. This change reflects the degree to which the assumptions that long guided Washington's approach to China were both overly pessimistic and overly optimistic in ways that now seem obvious, especially since President Xi Jinping came to power in Beijing. Overly pessimistic, because China's restrictions on speech and dissent have neither stifled innovation nor constrained the aspirations of an expanded middle class. Overly optimistic, because instead of China's integration with the global economy leading to liberalization at home and moderation abroad, China under Xi has grown more repressive and assertive.

The response in Washington over the past five years has resembled the five stages of grief, but with their order scrambled. Instead of progressing from denial to anger, then bargaining, depression and acceptance, China-watchers in the United States have gone from denial to bargaining, followed by depression, acceptance and most recently anger.

## UNLIKE THE COLD WAR, COMPETITION BETWEEN THE U.S. AND CHINA PROBABLY WILL NOT RESULT IN A CLEAR-CUT WINNER OR LOSER.

**BELOW** U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, right, during a joint press conference at the Great Hall of the People, Beijing, Nov. 9, 2017 (AP photo by Andrew Harnik).



This **slow awakening** to the breaking bad version of China's rise has now matured into a full-blown movement in Washington fixated on the "China threat," complete with its own political action committee, the Committee on the Present Danger: China, which officially **launched** in late March. Although the CPDC, as it is known, is led mainly by discredited hacks like Frank Gaffney and Stephen Bannon, the idea that China

represents an existential threat to the U.S. and the international order has become increasingly mainstream. Talk of a second Cold War is now commonplace in foreign policy coverage, as are calls for a containment approach to China.

This newfound resolve is not limited to the United States. A recent report released by the European Union identified China as a "systemic rival," while member states such as France and even Germany lobby for the bloc to adopt a more strategic approach to Beijing's unfair trade policies and its investment in Europe.

The Trump administration's China policy so far has in many ways emphasized a more hard-edged "China threat" approach, most visibly in the ongoing trade war and the U.S. intelligence community's high-profile pressure campaign to keep allies from

adopting 5G telecommunications networks built by Chinese telecom giant Huawei. There has also been **increased scrutiny** of Chinese espionage and influence operations, particularly on American university campuses. And the first two strategy documents released by the Trump administration identified China as a "strategic competitor" and made responding to that challenge—rather than the fight against violent extremism—the U.S. military's primary objective.



Because of the vacillating positions of President Donald Trump, though, it is impossible to know for certain if he seeks to radically remake the relationship or simply chip away at the U.S. trade deficit with China. As I mentioned [last week](#), a more coherent China strategy will be one of the major challenges facing Trump's eventual successor, whoever that is, in order to undo the damage Trump has done to American foreign policy.

But what would that more coherent strategy look like?

To begin with, it requires defining the nature of China's relationship to the U.S. in a way that convinces a broad swath of the American electorate of the compelling need for appropriate action. In this regard, the pendulum of history seems to be swinging in the opposite direction of the "China threat" crowd's preferences. Short of a direct existential threat to the U.S., an America already weary of its post-Cold War global responsibilities and foreign military interventions is unlikely to enthusiastically shoulder a generational struggle of the sort they're proposing. And whatever threat China actually poses to U.S. national security is indirect, inasmuch as China's expanding economic interests are likely to result in expanded global influence that will compete with America's global interests.

Moreover, it is misleading to talk of a Chinese effort to undermine the international order, to say nothing of remaking that order in China's image. It would be more accurate to describe China's engagement with the rules-based order as selective—at times reinforcing it where it can advance China's interests, at times substituting parallel institutions that are more effective instruments for China's goals, and at times ignoring it altogether. But that would also accurately describe America's historical engagement with the international order. Moreover, China's global engagement seems to be purely based on commercial considerations, rather than ideological ones. While refusing to accept the role of passive rule-taker, it does not necessarily seek to become a rule-maker.

Finally, while it is true that many of Washington's assumptions and hopes for China's rise proved illusory, it would

be a mistake to write off the past two decades of engagement entirely. Although Beijing has not become the “responsible stakeholder” many in Washington hoped for, China has demonstrated a willingness to contribute meaningfully and responsibly to joint efforts to tackle issues where both sides’ interests converged, ranging from climate change diplomacy and the Iran nuclear deal to sanctions on North Korea.

Instead of a new Cold War, then, a more coherent approach to China would be based on the idea of competitive cooperation. As a strategy, competitive cooperation would build on the areas where previous U.S. policy met with success, particularly if the next U.S. president returns to the multilateral fold on issues like climate change and Iran’s nuclear program. There is no reason to needlessly eschew Chinese cooperation where it is forthcoming on issues of concern to the U.S., such as norms governing drone use, artificial intelligence, the militarization of space and nuclear nonproliferation.

Simultaneously, in areas where China flouts the international order, whether in its unfair trade practices or its territorial claims in the South China Sea, the U.S. should not hesitate to stiffen its posture. But the best way to do this is not by alienating potential partners that share Washington’s concerns, as Trump has done, but rather to build coalitions of like-minded states that increase both the leverage the U.S. can wield and the costs China will pay for its recalcitrance.

In many ways, the U.S. enjoys the upper hand in this kind of competition, as demonstrated by its ability to negotiate the Trans-Pacific Partnership that Trump withdrew from, and the inroads it made into security partnerships with Southeast Asian states and India to counter China’s claims to the South China Sea. At the same time, there are areas in which China has the advantage, particularly when it comes to its willingness to invest in high-risk emerging markets and forego conditionality on economic engagement with unsavory governments.

The biggest difference between the current global context and the Cold War is that no one today wants to pick sides, as

illustrated by the difficulty the U.S. is having getting even close allies to reject Huawei's 5G technology. It is the latest sign that, unlike the Cold War, the growing competition between the U.S. and China probably will not result in a clear-cut winner or loser. But the U.S. should still engage with this competition head-on, not to contain China, but to raise America's game.

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# WHY A COLD WAR WITH CHINA WOULD BE SO COSTLY

KIMBERLY ANN ELLIOTT | JUNE 2019

If the U.S.-China trade war develops into a broader cold war, as some observers fear, it will be nothing like the actual Cold War. Between civil war in Russia after World War I, the Great Depression in the United States and then the cataclysm of World War II, America and the Soviet Union never had a chance to develop a significant economic relationship before things hardened into a stark East-West divide. When Washington adopted a containment strategy that blocked most trade with the Soviets, including technology transfers, it had relatively little impact on either economy.

The situation with China today is radically different. After normalizing diplomatic relations in the 1970s, Washington gradually lifted most restrictions on trade and technology transfers. By the time President Bill Clinton came to office in the 1990s, many American policymakers viewed economic engagement as a tool to promote **political as well as economic liberalization in China**. In 2000, the Clinton administration used this argument to convince Congress to extend what is known as “normal trade relations” treatment to China, paving the way for freer trade between the U.S. and China and for Beijing to join the World Trade Organization. The thinking was that rising incomes, along with increased exposure to economically open and democratic societies, would create pressures on the Chinese Communist Party to loosen its grip.

Since that time, China’s role in the global economy has exploded. It is by far the world’s largest exporter of merchandise

and the second-largest importer of both goods and services. In recent years, it has also emerged as **the largest exporter of intellectual property-related services** among middle-income developing countries. According to **data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development**, China is among the top two or three countries as both a source of and host to foreign direct investment, depending on whether Hong Kong is included.

Bilateral trade relations between China and the U.S. have also boomed. China is now America's third-largest trade partner, behind Mexico and Canada, and it is a major supplier of U.S. consumer goods. According to the Retail Industry Leaders Association, China supplies 85 percent of all toys sold in the United States, 41 percent of all imported apparel and 72 percent of imported footwear. It is also the **"predominant source" for consumer electronics**.

But economic success and WTO membership have not produced significant, sustainable political reforms in China. To the contrary, after some signs of loosening up in the early 2000s, the Chinese government under President Xi Jinping has

**BELOW** A boat sails past a cargo ship at a port in Qingdao, Shandong province, China, June 10, 2019 (Chinatopix photo via



cracked down on dissent and is trying to **reinforce party control of the economy**. It has created a highly intrusive surveillance state, especially in Xinjiang province, where the authorities have also detained an estimated 1 million ethnic Uighurs, who are mostly Muslim, in what Beijing calls “reeducation centers.” Human rights groups say they are **akin to concentration camps**. In Hong Kong, perhaps as many as 2 million people poured into the streets earlier this month to **protest an extradition bill** that they fear would lead to China prosecuting political opponents. In addition to these human rights concerns, China’s military buildup, cyber espionage and aggressive policies asserting ownership of contested islands in the South China Sea are all raising red flags among the national security and foreign policy communities in Washington.

So too is the broad consensus that China poses significant challenges for the global economic system, despite the fact that China has been a boon for consumers worldwide. Until recently, the business community in the United States and elsewhere mostly declined to criticize Chinese policies because multinational corporations desperately wanted access to this large and rapidly growing market. That attitude has changed as China’s industrial policies helped its own, often state-backed entities become major competitors to Western companies in more and more areas, from cell phones to solar panels. Large Chinese firms dominating key technologies, such as telecom giant Huawei’s race to control next-generation, 5G wireless networks, is also raising concerns about Beijing potentially manipulating its economic power for geopolitical advantage.

**IN PERHAPS THE BIGGEST MISTAKE OF HIS PRESIDENCY SO FAR, TRUMP OPTED FOR A GO-IT-ALONE STRATEGY ON CHINA.**

But while there may be more consensus that Washington needs a tougher policy toward China, the question remains how to respond effectively and without undue costs for the American economy. So far under President Donald Trump, the costs are piling up. After starting out saying nice

things about his “good friend” Xi, Trump has taken a tougher stance, imposing tariffs on imports from China and **restricting trade with Huawei** on national security grounds. Washington has also increased its scrutiny of Chinese university students and foreign investments in the U.S.

If the much-anticipated meeting between Trump and Xi that is supposed to take place during this week’s G-20 summit in Japan doesn’t go well, the administration could deliver on Trump’s threat to expand the tariffs to cover all or most of the consumer goods imports that were previously spared. The U.S. Trade Representative’s office received thousands of comments from businesses detailing the costs such a move would inflict on them, as well as on **consumers who will face higher prices** on almost everything when they do their holiday shopping later this year.

Rural communities in the U.S. with limited resources are particularly concerned that the restrictions on using Huawei’s telecommunications equipment could make it too costly for them to expand wireless access. American technology companies that sell to Huawei, meanwhile, fear losing an important revenue source in the short run and facing stronger competitors in the long run as Huawei develops alternative suppliers.

Like so much of Trump’s trade policy, is there a coherent strategy here? In perhaps the biggest mistake of his presidency so far, Trump opted for a go-it-alone strategy on China. Other countries, including close U.S. allies in Europe, share Washington’s concerns about China’s trade policies and would have been happy to form a common front demanding reform from Beijing. Instead, the White House insulted those close allies and alienated them by imposing tariffs on their exports too.

Trump’s inconsistency and impulsiveness only make matters worse. Take the back-and-forth on the potential threat posed by more advanced Chinese technology. After quickly reversing himself on a ban of technology exports to Chinese telephone maker ZTE last year, the White House did something similar with Huawei. The Trump administration first announced that American firms that do business with the U.S. government would have one

year to wind down their business with Huawei. But then it undercut that signal to Beijing by **extending the period to three years** because of the potential costs to U.S. business. Then, to confuse the matter even more, Trump suggested that concessions involving Huawei might be part of an eventual trade deal with China—even though Huawei’s technological dominance supposedly poses a national security threat.

Unless there is another shift in the wind, Trump and Xi will meet this weekend in Osaka and hopefully calm things down. Yet no one expects a final agreement to emerge, so **the global economy will likely suffer** from the ongoing uncertainty. Still, if the two leaders can at least get the negotiations restarted and avoid further escalation in the trade war, everyone will breathe a sigh of relief, given how much higher the costs could rise.

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# HAVE CHINA'S VALUE PROPOSITIONS BECOME MORE ATTRACTIVE THAN AMERICA'S?

HOWARD W. FRENCH | FEBRUARY 2019

After my first book came out in 2004, I received a surprise phone call from an assistant to former United States Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, asking if I would meet with him to talk about Africa. Sitting together in his executive's office at Citibank's headquarters in Manhattan, he averred that if Al Gore were to win that year's presidential election, he could return to a leading position in government, and he wanted to know if there was one initiative Washington could take to engage with Africa, what would I suggest?

This was a tall order, not least because I had not been told of his question in advance, but also because American diplomacy toward Africa has been marked for decades by a bipartisan failure of imagination—by neglect and by drift.

If I had to stick to one thing, as he insisted, my suggestion to Rubin was that the United States launch a higher education initiative for Africa that would bring thousands of students from across the continent to American campuses for free or deeply subsidized college or graduate school education, with the proviso built into their visas that they would not be eligible to remain in the U.S. for a fixed period of time after their degrees. This would help ensure these newly trained young people would take their skills back to their home countries

This little moonshot of mine was premised on the idea that America is always at its best when it does good while doing well.

Africans trained at top American schools in the sciences, in business and economics, in journalism and in law could powerfully contribute to the momentum already underway in much of the continent for meeting the immense educational needs of rising generations of young people. And in the process, the United States' connections to the continent whose people and whose labor ultimately made the Americas an economically viable part of the West would deepen, as well.

My next non-fiction book didn't come out until a decade later, but a great deal had already changed in the world, and perhaps nowhere more than in Africa. This was reflected in the new book's very title, which explored the rapid migration of as many as a million people from China to various parts of Africa and spoke of it as that country's "second continent."



**ABOVE** Chinese President Xi Jinping, right, and Nigerian President Mahamadou Issoufou during a welcome ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, May 28, 2019 (AP photo by Mark

In the time between those two books, the United States had not only failed to implement anything remotely like my education proposal for Africa. It had, by and large, failed to find any other creative or impactful way of engaging with the African continent that would break the stale mold of the post-Cold War era, which has only allowed it to see Africa as an arena of terrorism, corruption and disease. Between 2003 and 2015, in the meantime, **the number of African students studying in China had increased 26-fold**, surpassing the numbers for both the United States and Britain, and now trailing only France. Lest one imagine this as a one-way street or paternalistic act of charity, **some studies** have shown that **African newcomers to the U.S. have the highest rates of academic achievement** of any immigrant group.

Three years after my look at China-Africa relations, my most recent book came out, this one about China itself, and its title, too, "Everything Under the Heavens," was meant to be

suggestive. China is now, albeit very belatedly, finally being recognized as a country with truly global ambitions—and one with the energy and political will to match. Like any big power, China's actions stem primarily from an impulse to strengthen its own position and promote its own national interests. But as only the most successful powers manage to do, China has quickly mustered some strong value propositions that make other governments want to draw closer to it.

This merely starts with China's recent calling as a builder of immense infrastructure projects, beginning in Africa in the 1990s but now nearly spanning the world through its huge **Belt and Road Initiative**. Add to that now a more intangible infrastructure: that of the internet and advanced mobile networks, in which its national champion, Huawei, has emerged as a global leader. As Washington is finding to its chagrin, other countries are eager to sign up with Huawei despite purported security risks, because its products are cheap compared to the Western alternatives, and because they are available right now. For a growing number of states, though, there is an additional reason. Far from worrying about China spying on them, they want to learn from China **how to spy on their own populations**. This isn't how we normally think of soft power, but like it or not, that's exactly what it is.

For decades, the United States was better than any other nation in putting forth value propositions that made other countries want to broaden and deepen their ties and associations with it. These were so effective that even when other governments wished to keep America at arm's length,

their people continued to feel an irresistible attraction.

That is changing with dizzying speed now. Just last month, a senior official at the State Department invoked a supposed "clash of civilizations" between the United States and China, promoting a tacitly

**THE UNITED STATES IS IN DIRE NEED OF NEW, POSITIVE-SUM APPROACHES TO THE WORLD.**

racialized view of the world in the deluded belief that it would rally support in the West and beyond for Washington. “This is a fight with a really different civilization and a different ideology, and the United States hasn’t had that before,” Kiron Skinner, the director of policy planning at the State Department, [said at an event in Washington](#). “It’s also striking that this is the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian,” she added.

Remarkably, the comments put China in the position to lecture the United States on what it has often taken as its own franchise: universal values. “We should hold up equality and respect, abandon pride and prejudice, deepen our knowledge about the differences between our own and other civilizations, and promote harmonious dialogue and coexistence between civilizations,” came [the reply from the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping](#).

The decline in America’s value proposition is not, as some are tempted to believe, simply a matter of the Trump administration and its bumbling, go-it-alone policies, though. Under President Barack Obama, there was no shortage of rhetoric about the ideals of democracy and openness and respect for human rights, which have long drawn both admiration and emulation from peoples in far-flung corners of the world. But under Obama as well as other recent presidencies, there had been a failure of both energy and imagination about how to engage the world beyond a limited set of affluent, traditional allies. Beyond the preaching of virtues, or in the best of times, the setting of a positive example, in other words, the United States has been failing at offering ways of helping others to solve big, practical challenges of development and gain in material prosperity. It is as if the country has grown exhausted and inured to these very questions.

Some seem to think that cautioning others about the perils of engaging with China is enough, but they are mistaken. The United States is itself in dire need of new, positive-sum approaches to the world. And still for now, but not forever, others remain eager to hear them.

In a series of first offerings, this column will look at how the world has changed in this millennium and how the United States is failing to recognize and come to terms with the important new dynamics that are in play—and especially how to muster more positive, effective responses.

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# HOW CHINA AND THE U.S. ARE COMPETING FOR YOUNG MINDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

KRISTINE LEE | FEBRUARY 2019

Business leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos last month warned that China has overtaken the United States in the development of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies, such as fifth-generation wireless or 5G. “There’s almost an endless stream of people who are showing up and developing new companies,” Blackstone’s CEO Stephen Schwarzman **told one panel** of his frequent trips to China. “The venture business there in AI-oriented companies is really exploding with growth.”

The attention on China’s rapidly evolving tech sector has overshadowed another area of competition between Beijing and Washington, which may be moving more slowly but is just as consequential: the battle for young minds. Nowhere is this competition to educate and attract younger generations more pronounced than in Southeast Asia, with its youthful demographics, fast-growing economies and array of geopolitical flashpoints.

Countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, where the median age hovers at **around 30**, are looking to harness their young and well-educated workforces for economic growth and become innovation hubs in their own right. In the aftermath of their country’s tightly contested 2014 presidential election, young Indonesian entrepreneurs developed a **crowdsourcing platform** to tally votes and safeguard against electoral fraud. For the past two years, talented Vietnamese



**ABOVE** Students listen as then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry speaks at Ho Chi Minh University of Technology and Education, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Jan. 13, 2017 (AP photo by Alex Brandon).

university students have been vying for **Samsung-sponsored** science and technology scholarships.

But with this entrepreneurial push comes a need for investment, while the infusion of Chinese capital into the region is increasingly seen as perpetuating high-level corruption without strengthening local capacity. This is where the United States and its key allies, notably Japan, can step in—developing human resources to expand

trade and investment in order to maintain a significant but narrowing competitive advantage in the region, where the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development projects **5.4 percent** annual economic growth over the next four years. Japan is at the forefront of the movement to **build partnerships** across government, private industry and local universities that not only expand technical know-how in Southeast Asia, but also provide Japanese companies with a ready-made workforce to feed into their supply chains. The governments of Vietnam and Japan, for example, recently established postgraduate programs at Vietnam National University in Hanoi through which Vietnamese students can earn master's degrees in public policy, environmental sciences, nanotechnology, and other technical subjects under the auspices of the **Vietnam-Japan University project**.

Although American universities retain an enduring allure in the region, U.S. efforts have been more halting and under-resourced, with a few exceptions. In 2017, Carnegie Mellon University and King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, a leading engineering university in Thailand, announced a **long-**

**WHILE THE U.S. REMAINS POPULAR AMONG SOUTHEAST ASIANS, WASHINGTON HAS BEEN PUNCHING BELOW ITS WEIGHT IN THE REGION.**

**term collaboration** for joint research and education programs in information technology, computing and autonomous technologies. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's **Global Startup Workshop**—which brought entrepreneurs, students, investors and other stakeholders from around the world to Bangkok last year—is also a leading example of a prestigious American university using its convening power to elevate the work of Southeast Asian entrepreneurs.

But if the growing presence of Chinese universities in Southeast Asia is any indication, Beijing is quickly trying to rebrand itself as a top-tier source of higher education. As China deepens its ties with the region, including through the infrastructure and development projects of its marquee Belt and Road Initiative, it will increasingly use education as a policy tool to win over younger generations. Beyond a commitment to raising standards of education within its own borders, China has initiated a multidimensional campaign to export its model of education across Southeast Asia. China's Ministry of Education has pledged to set up **10 science and research centers** in countries across the region by 2022, and has already established **three university campuses** in Laos, Malaysia and Thailand. In April 2017, Beijing's elite Tsinghua University launched the **Asian Universities Alliance** with an initial membership of 15 universities across Northeast and Southeast Asia. Pooling resources and strengthening scientific research cooperation across Asian universities in this way could incentivize students to stay in the region, rather than apply for scholarships in the United States. Beijing has also actively tried to **curb U.S. influence** in Chinese universities, including barring visits by American officials and cultural groups.

While the United States remains popular among Southeast Asians—particularly in Vietnam, where a recent Pew survey indicates that **84 percent** of the population views America favorably—Washington has been punching below its weight in the region. The U.S. government, private industry and universities are all well-positioned to partner with local universities to offer



business and public administration, engineering and other technical and vocational training programs. The State Department's [Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative](#) and other consortium-based initiatives, such as Fulbright University in Vietnam, have been successful models, but the U.S. needs to expand its investments in these types of programs. These initiatives should be part of a sustained, concerted effort to educate and train the next generation of leaders from Indonesia to Vietnam who are committed to good governance and maintaining democratic institutions.

Pushing regional allies and partners to pick sides between the U.S. and China is counterproductive, given the potential costs. Most Southeast Asian countries are focused on sustaining their economic growth, and they [can't afford to cut off China](#), which remains the No. 1 trading partner for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the main regional bloc. Instead, the United States should develop a whole-of-government strategy—involving educational initiatives, business outreach, and coordination with close allies like Japan and South Korea—that focuses on deepening relationships with key Southeast Asian countries over the course of the next decade. Building domestic support, particularly among the growing constituency of young students and entrepreneurs, could help determine the long-term success of U.S. strategy in Southeast Asia.

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# WILL COVID-19 ACHIEVE THE DECOUPLING THAT U.S. CHINA HAWKS SEEK?

JUDAH GRUNSTEIN | MARCH 2020

Toward the end of his second term in office, [former U.S. President Barack Obama](#) said in an interview with The Atlantic that “we have more to fear from a weakened, threatened China than a successful, rising China.” It would be hyperbole to claim that the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak will create the weakened, threatened China that Obama warned about. But it could give us a glimpse.

The [draconian measures China took](#) to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus that emerged from Wuhan, the capital of central Hubei province, seem to have prevented a worst-case scenario for now. But [as Howard French detailed](#) in his WPR column last week, the government’s initial efforts to downplay the danger of the outbreak by silencing whistleblowers, as well as the brutality with which it subsequently enforced a quarantine on Wuhan and other cities in central China, have created a backlash of public outrage and mistrust.

Now, the economic costs of the epidemic are coming into focus, with data for February showing [a record contraction in Chinese manufacturing](#), beating out the previous low set after the 2008 global financial crisis. The declines registered in China’s non-manufacturing sectors were the worst since 2011. It’s too early to tell what impact that kind of downturn in China will have on the global economy, although late last month the Port of Los Angeles was already projecting a 25 percent drop in container volume for February and a 15 percent year-on-year drop in

## THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SHOWS THAT, AS WORRISOME AS A CHINA THAT SUCCEEDS MIGHT BE, A CHINA THAT FAILS MIGHT BE WORSE.

volume for the first quarter of 2020. But it's worth noting the difference between the 2008 manufacturing dip, which was an effect of external factors, namely lowered demand due to the financial crisis, and today's, which will be a cause of losses further down the supply chain, due to self-imposed restrictions on domestic economic activity. In other words, 2008 highlighted the Chinese economy's vulnerability to external

shocks, while 2020 highlights the global economy's vulnerability to domestic shocks within China.

The concerns Obama and others expressed over a weakened or thwarted China had to do with the potential for it to become more aggressive abroad, using nationalist fervor to obscure [the Communist Party's governance failures](#). The domestic impact of the Covid-19 outbreak, in terms of both the reputational damage it has done to the Chinese leadership and the concrete damage it has done to the Chinese economy, could be the kind of Black Swan event that creates a real-time laboratory experiment for such a scenario.

It could also shape up to be a trial run for the strategy of decoupling called for by the most extremist China hawks in

Washington. The strategic risks of America's economic interdependence with China have long been apparent. For advocates of engagement and cooperation with China, those economic ties serve as firewalls to keep economic and strategic competition from escalating to conflict. For those who see a looming conflict with China as inevitable, they are vulnerabilities to be cast aside before it is too late.

For years, those hawkish voices

**BELOW** Police officers wearing face masks patrol at a container port in Qingdao, China, Feb. 19, 2020 (Chinatopix photo via AP Images).



remained on the margins of policymaking discussions in Washington. More recently, they have gained influence in the Trump administration, even if they have for now lost out on most, if not all, of the internal debates over how hard a line to take with Beijing in trade negotiations. While it's unlikely the coronavirus will cause the kind of permanent decoupling they call for, it is illustrating some of the dangers of concentrating so many of **the world's production supply chains**—including those for **medical supplies and vaccines**—in China. That could have longer-term implications as companies reassess their strategic planning moving forward. But in the meantime, the U.S. and global economies remain highly dependent on their links to China's, so the impact of any precipitous destabilization in China would not be contained within its borders.

All of this comes against the backdrop of a shift in perception among the U.S. national security establishment. The Trump administration's **National Security Strategy** spoke about an era of strategic competition to describe the new international landscape, language that was subsequently echoed in the Pentagon's **National Defense Strategy**. No longer would the U.S. military focus its efforts on transnational terrorists and other nonstate actors. Great power rivalries with China and Russia, and to a lesser extent Iran and North Korea, are now the major challenges facing America.

What started as an explanation of the assumptions America's military would use to guide its planning priorities has now become ubiquitous in discussions about America's foreign policy posture. And like all conventional wisdoms, the logic of great power competition is often deployed to dismiss any competing frameworks as naïve and unserious. In this, the tables have turned, as the previous conventional wisdom of an interconnected world precluding conflict was often used to portray realist advocates of a tougher line against China as out-of-touch Cassandras.

The truth, as often is the case, lies somewhere in between these two extremes. After a period of rapid globalization, in

which nation-states were often overshadowed by regional integration schemes and multilateral organizations, national sovereignty—and with it, strategic competition—is back with a vengeance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the emphasis around the world on securing national borders. To the extent this backlash is driven by hate-based phenomena like racism and xenophobia, it should be resisted. But to the extent it is also driven by fear-based phenomena, like economic loss and insecurity, it should be heeded.

At the same time, the Covid-19 outbreak highlights the need for cooperation to tackle challenges that show no respect for borders. As Stewart Patrick argued in his WPR column this week, that could even require fundamentally **rethinking how we conceive of sovereignty** when it comes to addressing existential planetary crises like climate change and environmental degradation. But even for more prosaic challenges, there is nothing Pollyannaish about multilateralism and international cooperation. To the contrary, in many cases they offer a more clear-eyed and realistic approach than strategic competition.

The difficulty is in navigating a world characterized by both competition and cooperation, and that will be **a central challenge in the U.S.-China relationship** moving forward. It was indeed shortsighted to expect that a nation as vast and complex as China, with its long history and lofty aspirations, would meekly accept America's expectations for it as it became a global power in its own right. But it is just as shortsighted to frame China exclusively as a strategic competitor to be contained, at the cost of valuable cooperation when and where it is necessary.

Advocates of a new Cold War posture toward China should also be careful what they wish for. It is very likely that an effort by the U.S. to thwart China's rise is doomed to failure. It comes too late in the game. But the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic shows that, as worrisome as a China that succeeds might be, a China that fails might be worse.

Also in his WPR column last week, Howard French cited the famous Winston Churchill quotation: “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” Hopefully leaders in both Washington and Beijing will heed that advice, not to widen the growing divides between the two countries, but to bridge them.

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# BEWARE OF CHINA'S CORONAVIRUS PROPAGANDA

FRIDA GHITIS | MARCH 2020

The war of words between Chinese officials and President Donald Trump has been furious in recent days, as each side tries to push its own agenda amid the coronavirus pandemic. It would be a mistake, however, to view this crossfire as mutually retaliatory. These are two separate messaging campaigns, each pursuing different, self-interested objectives.

China, where the novel coronavirus outbreak started months ago and spread rapidly before it turned into a global pandemic, is engaged in a multiprong effort to rewrite history and emerge empowered from this global crisis. Draconian lockdown measures in Wuhan and its surrounding province appear to have snuffed out much of the virus's ability to multiply within the Chinese population. Official figures show only a trickle of new cases now, even as the rest of the world struggles with a tsunami of coronavirus infections that is overwhelming hospitals. The stage is set for China to project a triumphant air and get to work on crafting its public relations message for both domestic and international consumption.

China's leader, Xi Jinping, aims to use the coronavirus crisis to strengthen his personal standing at home, along with the Communist Party's hold on power. Xi's message to the Chinese people is that **they are fortunate to have such a strong and wise leader** and such an efficient and unified system. His message to the rest of the world is that China is the power of the future—its system worth emulating and clearly superior to the democratic alternative, especially as countries from the U.S. to Italy scramble to get a

handle on the pandemic, often under flailing leadership and with hundreds of millions of people enduring stay-at-home orders.

It is a message that demands a response from the West. Normally, Washington would be the one articulating it most forcefully, but that isn't happening.

Instead, Trump launches rhetorical fusillades against China during his daily coronavirus briefings. It would be a mistake to view these comments as a defense of democracy. Trump's insistence on calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus" is a domestic propaganda push with purely political objectives in a reelection year. He is resorting to old-fashioned jingoism with xenophobic overtones, trying to excite patriotic sentiments and protect himself from the fallout of his disastrous initial response to the pandemic. Trump needs to rally his supporters and try to persuade anyone who is listening to the actual experts, who say his early dismissive statements about the threat of an outbreak contributed to the currently unfolding disaster. Trump is especially desperate since his claims that his administration had everything under control with the coronavirus have proven disastrously wrong, just as he prepares to mount his reelection campaign.

In an interview with Fox News earlier this week, **Trump abruptly declared** that he would stop calling it "the Chinese

**BELOW** A member of a Chinese honor guard wears a face mask at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Feb. 4, 2020 (AP photo by Mark Schiefelbein).





virus”—for now, at least. “Look, everyone knows it came out of China, but I decided we shouldn’t make any more of a big deal out of it,” he said. We’ll see how long that lasts.

Trump is, however, counteracting Chinese propaganda in one way. He is correct in noting that Beijing was slow to let the word out after the virus started in China. That Trump is using that fact to protect himself from accusations of incompetence does not make it any less true. **Chinese officials have been promoting conspiracy theories** about the origin of the virus, claiming that the illness now known as COVID-19 already existed in the United States before it appeared in China, and that American military personnel brought it to Wuhan.

But the story China is telling the world is not just about where the virus started. Its government-controlled media have explicitly declared the Chinese system superior, noting how political parties in the U.S. have sparred over how to respond, while pointing to other flaws in the U.S. and the West at large. The message is not just one of superpower competition as China works to overtake the United States. It is also a defense of authoritarianism as a system better suited to meet the challenge of a major crisis.

In order to craft that argument, China has to suppress the well-documented—and damning—facts about the outbreak. The authorities in Beijing **worked feverishly to keep a mysterious contagion in Wuhan secret**. Doctors who tried to get the word out were silenced and detained. **Critical journalists “disappeared.”** And Chinese labs conducting tests to examine the new pathogen were **ordered stop their tests and destroy their samples**.

In other words, it is precisely China’s authoritarian practices that allowed an outbreak in Wuhan to turn into a pandemic around the world. It is also a fact that other democracies, such as South Korea and Taiwan, managed to contain their own coronavirus outbreaks without **the sometimes-brutal measures taken in China**.

China’s aggressive coronavirus propaganda campaign is taking place on many fronts. There are ostentatious, highly

publicized displays of Beijing's generosity to countries enduring the worst of the pandemic—with **Chinese aircraft delivering pallets filled with medical supplies**, dutifully and extensively covered by Chinese media. Not coincidentally, **Russia has also joined in**, touting its supposed success at thwarting the virus and also sending out planeloads of medical supplies.

As others have noted, it's good to see Russian planes delivering humanitarian aid in Italy **instead of dropping bombs in Syria**. But whether the aid comes from Beijing or Moscow, there is no question that, however welcome, its intention is not purely humanitarian.

When this crisis ends, China will have made major gains over the West in geopolitical influence, unless the West responds quickly to clear up the misinformation coming out of Beijing. It's unrealistic to expect Trump to lead that effort. But other Americans officials and institutions should join with European partners to take it on. Europe should set aside its anger at Trump's crass handling of the pandemic, ignoring his many slights against America's allies, including the ones during this crisis, and debunk Beijing's flimsy anti-West narrative.

China's claim that it did an admirable job tackling the coronavirus, while democracies are not equipped to dealing with it, is simply a lie. The epidemic spread precisely because Beijing responded to it like an authoritarian regime. No amount of Chinese aid to countries now suffering from the pandemic should obscure this fact.

Yet Trump's response to China's rhetoric is its own form of misinformation, and mostly self-serving to boot. It also does little to undercut China's dangerous claim that autocracies are better than democracies at handling crises. It is up to others, in Washington and beyond, to counteract Beijing's propaganda about this pandemic.

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# COVID-19 COULD REIGNITE TRUMP'S TRADE WAR WITH CHINA

KIMBERLY ANN ELLIOTT | APRIL 2020

The relationship between the United States and China has waxed and waned over the years, but it has felt more like a roller coaster ride under President Donald Trump. China-bashing was a centerpiece of his election campaign, yet once in office, Trump hailed his first meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, at Trump's Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago, [saying they had "great chemistry."](#) More than two years later, after Trump had launched his damaging trade war with China and with no deal to resolve it in sight, [Trump called Xi an enemy and "ordered" American firms to leave China.](#) By January of this year, [Xi was back to being a "very, very good friend"](#) as Trump finally signed his heavily hyped "phase-one" trade agreement.

Just three months after celebrating that deal, Trump's rapport with Xi—and the agreement itself—is looking more fragile than ever. In the midst of a troubled reelection campaign, the president is casting about for someone to blame for the pandemic that has already killed more than 56,000 Americans and sent the economy into free fall. The administration has at times referred to the "China virus" or the "Wuhan virus," but Trump in recent days [focused his ire more on failures at the World Health Organization](#) than directly at Beijing. But if China is unable to deliver on its commitments to import more from the U.S., which seems likely given the devastating economic impact of COVID-19, things could get nasty.

The Trump-Xi friendship was always odd. [On the campaign trail in 2016](#), Trump said that China had committed "the greatest



**ABOVE** President Donald Trump shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan, June 29, 2019 (AP photo by Susan Walsh).

theft in the history of the world,” and that “we can’t continue to allow China to rape our country.” When he got to the White House, he appointed Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro, two noted China trade hawks, as U.S. trade representative and special White House adviser, respectively.

Yet the warm overtures from Mar-a-Lago mostly continued throughout 2018 and 2019, even as they became increasingly disconnected from actual policy. Trump launched his trade war against China in April 2018, but then tweeted that he and Xi “**will always be friends, no matter what happens with our dispute on trade.**” After signing the phase-one deal in mid-January, and even as the novel coronavirus was spreading rapidly, Trump kept up his praise for Xi and China. Politico documented 15 times between late January and the end of February when **Trump touted Beijing’s efforts to contain the virus.**

Things seem to be changing with political pressure rising over Trump's obvious failures in managing the response to the pandemic and a sudden economic crisis that is only getting worse. Yet even now, the signals out of the White House are muddled. A recent campaign ad attacked former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, as weak and untrustworthy when it comes to China. A number of Republicans have blamed the coronavirus's spread globally and in the U.S. [on early missteps by China](#). But while Trump has recently been more critical of Beijing's response, his only action so far has been to announce the suspension of U.S. funding to the World Health Organization for its failure to press Beijing harder for transparency and cooperation in the early days of the outbreak in Wuhan.

Perhaps Trump's hesitation to directly criticize Beijing reflects his affinity for authoritarian leaders from Russia's Vladimir Putin to North Korea's Kim Jong Un. Or maybe he is trying to preserve his cherished phase-one trade deal, [even if it doesn't deliver anything close to what Trump promised](#). Recall that the centerpiece of the deal—at least from Trump's perspective—wasn't significant reform of Chinese industrial policies, as many in Washington have wanted. Instead, it was a series of commitments from China to purchase significantly more American goods and services that Trump could trumpet to his supporters in the agriculture, manufacturing and energy sectors.

Even before the current crisis, trade experts regarded the goal of increasing U.S. exports to China by almost \$80 billion over 2017 levels as unrealistic. If the commitment were met, it would only be by [diverting trade from other exporters](#). Now, those pledges are almost certainly out of reach. [According to the latest numbers](#), China's economy contracted by nearly 7 percent in the first quarter, and its growth rate for the year is projected to be the lowest since the 1970s. While food demand—and therefore U.S. agricultural exports—could recover to some degree, energy and important services exports are likely to lag.

Under the phase-one deal, China agreed to import \$18.5 billion more in crude oil, liquified natural gas and other energy

## IF CHINA IS UNABLE TO DELIVER ON ITS COMMITMENTS TO IMPORT MORE FROM THE U.S., WHICH SEEMS LIKELY GIVEN THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19, THINGS COULD GET NASTY.

products from the U.S. The American petroleum industry recently called on the administration to ensure that Beijing meets that commitment. China is a major importer of crude oil, and plunging demand early in the year was a factor in the historic crash in oil prices. China's liquefied natural gas imports were down 6 percent in January and February, and the China National Offshore Oil Corp.

reportedly invoked a force majeure clause in one contract allowing it to reduce previously agreed purchases due to the impact of COVID-19. Despite depressed

demand, the president of the American Petroleum Institute, Michael Sommers, recently suggested in a letter to Lighthizer, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette that it was still possible for China to deliver on its pledge of \$18.5 billion in additional purchases. "This amount, in today's markets, could translate into significant export quantities, but still not equal the full extent of China's overall domestic energy demand," he wrote. The implicit suggestion is that China should meet its commitment even if it means diverting trade from other exporters.

The phase-one deal's target for increased services exports to China this year, almost \$13 billion, is almost certainly out of reach. Travelers for business, leisure and education account for half of U.S. services exports to China. Moreover, foreign students, of which China is the largest source, are a significant source of revenues for American higher education institutions because they typically pay full tuition. Who knows how long it will be before the administration lifts travel restrictions from China, or when colleges and universities might be able to open. Even then, Chinese tourists and students may feel unwelcome and stay away, given the increasingly hostile political environment.

Retaliating with more tariffs if China fails to fulfill the targets of the phase-one deal would be crazy in the midst of what is looking like the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. But Trump has so far done little to indicate that he understands that. The White House announced a delay in the payment of some normal tariffs to boost the economy, and it has exempted some Chinese exports of medical supplies from the higher tariffs that remained even after the “historic agreement” in January. Most of the tariffs imposed as part of the trade war remain in place, however.

A key feature of Trump’s 2016 campaign was the claim that only he could “fix it,” whatever “it” might be. As it becomes abundantly clear that he can’t fix the pandemic with a miracle cure like hydroxychloroquine or by ingesting disinfectant, don’t be surprised if he tries to look tough by restarting the trade war with his old friend Xi Jinping.

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