

China, Foreign Affairs, and the Anti-Ideology Delusion

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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The China challenge has revived an old and often arid quarrel about the relationship in foreign affairs between ideas and interests. Reconsidering that quarrel in light of the ideas that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) professes and the interests the People's Republic of China (PRC) pursues provides a fresh understanding of the threats that China poses to freedom.

The extreme form of the debate is generally confined to the domain of political science professors in the field of international relations. On one side stand the so-called realists.

They maintain that the distribution of power within the international system -- including the logic of, and the interests inherent in, countries' particular geopolitical circumstances -- drives nation-state conduct. On the other side stand those classified as idealists. They contend that a country's ideas -- government officials' leading principles and favored doctrines, the people's customary opinions and perspectives, and the habits of heart and mind of both -- provide the key to nation-state conduct. These pure views appear among commentators and policymakers in watered-down form as dominant intellectual tendencies.

The case of the CCP and of the Chinese nation that it despotically governs proves the wisdom of the common-sense view: as with individuals so too with nation-states, ideas and interests are inextricably connected. The ideas to which the CCP is committed -- a distinctive blend of dogmatic Marxism-Leninism and extreme Chinese nationalism -- undergird the regime's dictatorial rule at home. These ideas also fuel the party's ambition to bring under Beijing's sovereign control formerly free and democratic Hong Kong, still free and democratic Taiwan, and areas of the South China Sea far beyond China's internationally recognized territorial waters; animate the party's schemes to lure nations around the world into relations of economic dependence; and drive the CCP's plan to reshape international organizations so that they conform to the principles of socialism as the party has decreed them.

Last month in an important article in *Foreign Affairs*, Elbridge Colby and Robert D. Kaplan appeared at times to take exception to the common-sense view. In "[The Ideology Delusion.](#)" they offer salutary warnings about the wrong way to connect ideas and interests. Unfortunately, their well-taken points about the excesses of ideologically oriented foreign policy occasionally slide into the extravagant claim that the very attempt to understand state conduct and great-power competition in light of leaders' and peoples' ideas about politics and international relations reflects the delusion that ideas are pertinent to foreign affairs.

The high-stakes competition between China and the United States makes clearing up the confusion about ideas and interests a priority. To refine the mix of international cooperation, containment, and deterrence necessary to meet the China challenge, the United States must distinguish the respects in which competition with China is *not* about ideas and doctrines, and the respects in which it *is* and cannot help but be.

Colby is a principal at the Marathon Initiative and served as U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development from 2017 to 2018; Kaplan is a prolific and best-selling author on foreign affairs and holds a chair in geopolitics at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Astute observers and incisive analysts, they affirm, consistent with the “wide agreement forming across the political spectrum,” that “China is an oppressive one-party state, governed by a Marxist-Leninist cadre, whose leader, Xi Jinping, has amassed more personal power than anyone in Beijing since Mao Zedong.” They report Beijing’s “execrable human rights record, which includes, among other brutalities, putting a million Uighur Muslims in concentration camps.” They call attention to the CCP’s incorporation of free-market elements into China’s state-driven economy and to the party’s reliance upon a massive surveillance apparatus. And they soberly warn that by drawing other countries into its authoritarian orbit, China may pose a greater threat to the United States than did the Soviet Union.

“The United States,” the authors summarize, “is indeed in an exceptionally serious competition with China that requires it to take a hard line on many fronts.” Maintaining that hard line, they rightly underscore, involves a moral component: “Washington should never shy away from its unabashed embrace of republican government and respect for human dignity.”

Nevertheless, Colby and Kaplan insist that ideology “does not lie at the root of the matter between the United States and China -- even if elements in China’s Marxist-Leninist elite think it does.” What counts, they argue, are China’s geopolitical circumstances. “The very scale of China’s economy, population, and landmass and its consequent power would cause profound concern for U.S. policymakers even if the country were a democracy,” the authors write. “Seeing this competition as primarily ideological will misconstrue its nature -- with potentially catastrophic results.”

For Colby and Kaplan, the acquisition of power to advance the nation’s interests -- but not also the realization of a certain vision of society, economy, political regime, and international order -- drives China’s conduct, as it drives the conduct of all states. The PRC’s principal goal in foreign affairs is, according to the authors, “to establish a position of hegemony over Asia, now the world’s largest market.” While they acknowledge that the CCP “is more ideological than many admit,” the authors claim that “Beijing’s motivations in pursuing” hegemony in its region “are largely not ideological.”

The authors’ analysis, however, revolves around portentous Chinese actions -- in international trade, in security, and in maintaining domestic legitimacy -- whose significance can only be fully understood in light of CCP ideas whose importance Colby and Kaplan discount.

“China very likely seeks to form a regional trade area favorable to its economy -- a modern-day analog to the tribute system that placed China at the heart of East Asia from the fourteenth to the

nineteenth century,” they write. “In a world now defined by rising barriers to trade, China would gain enormous advantage in shaping a large market area that conforms to its standards and benefits its workers and companies.”

The authors’ assessment is correct but incomplete. The structure and operation of the CCP’s contemporary version of China’s traditional tributary system are inseparable from traditional ideas embraced by the CCP about the Chinese nation’s rightful place at the center of world affairs, and about the specific forms of power, particularly economic power, that suit the CCP’s preferred conception of empire. Moreover, the “standards” to which the authors acknowledge China would compel the Asian market to submit matter greatly. They are not those of freedom, democracy, national sovereignty, human rights and the rule of law, but rather, according to CCP leaders’ authoritative speeches and writings, “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

China’s “drive for hegemony also has a strategic purpose,” the authors assert. “China has long felt fenced in by U.S. allies and by other rivals. Now it intends to compel neighboring states to take their security cues from Beijing.” Fair enough: Countries routinely see vital national security interests at stake along their borders, and great powers like China have the wherewithal to enforce arrangements to their liking.

Yet China feels fenced in by U.S. allies in a way that, say, democratic India does not. That is in significant measure because of the CCP’s determination to bring the free and open Indo-Pacific under its authoritarian sway. Beyond its sense of constraint, moreover, China is bent on imposing its direct sovereign rule on only certain neighboring territory and territorial waters. The CCP believes China is entitled to exercise sovereignty over Hong Kong, Taiwan, and vast expanses of the South China Sea based on beliefs bound up with the party’s understanding of Chinese history and destiny and the urgency of “national rejuvenation.”

Colby and Kaplan recognize that “after a ‘[century of humiliation](#),’ China is eager to stand tall, asserting its power in Asia and beyond.” But what counts as humiliation and what counts as standing tall are determined by beliefs. By drawing on Marxist-Leninist ideas and nationalist sentiments, the CCP has manipulated the sense of national shame arising from Britain’s defeat of China in the 19th-century Opium Wars to foment fear and loathing of the West.

Furthermore, while silently revising a formulation earlier in their article that suggested that China’s quest for hegemony was restricted to Asia, the authors only slightly improve matters in their comments on China’s “century of humiliation” through passing mention of the CCP’s ambition to assert power beyond Asia. In fact, China’s brazen schemes of influence and control in every region of the world and its efforts to transform international institutions from within show that it seeks global preeminence. The CCP’s self-proclaimed intentions in authoritative speeches and writings emphasize the socialist framework through which China aspires to exercise power internationally.

Because they discount the variety of ways in which the CCP’s ideas direct China’s exercise of power, Colby and Kaplan overlook or misinterpret crucial features of China’s conduct. The root problem is the authors’ conflation of two distinct senses in which ideas can be taken seriously. The first sense calls for grasping the major assumption and beliefs -- social, economic, political,

philosophical, and religious -- that shape a nation-state's actions. The second involves a nation-state's adopting as a goal of foreign policy the imposition on other countries of alternative ideas.

In criticizing "an excessively ideological view" of the China challenge, the authors primarily have in mind the second sense. For example, they reasonably caution, "Construing the competition as principally ideological tends to turn every disturbance in another country into a test of which political system is superior." And they soundly advise, "The United States will find it hard, if not impossible, to work with less liberal or nondemocratic states if it sees things primarily through an ideological prism."

The example of the Truman Doctrine shows that the prudent conduct of foreign affairs that Colby and Kaplan counsel is not only consistent with but requires close attention to ideas as well as interests. In March 1947, President Harry S. Truman [proclaimed](#) to a joint session of Congress "that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." Although inspired by the principles of freedom and opposition to communist totalitarianism, the policy was not captive to stark ideological litmus tests: By 1955, under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the post-World War II alliance system that Truman launched to defend the free world included semi-authoritarian Greece, authoritarian Turkey, indisputably authoritarian Portugal, and exceptionally authoritarian Spain. At the same time, ideas mattered decisively to the architects of the United States' successful Cold War strategy: Because they looked at the world through the lens of freedom, both Democrats and Republicans made common cause with a variety of regimes to oppose Soviet totalitarianism.

In highlighting the dangers of "an excessively ideological view," the authors adopt an excessively narrow view about the connection between ideas and interests. Forthrightly acknowledging and carefully examining the ideas that shape China's conduct neither require the United States to base foreign policy decisions exclusively on the character of other countries' regimes nor prevent the United States from organizing various groups and partnerships that include imperfect democracies and non-democracies to achieve the proper mix of cooperation, containment, and deterrence in relations with China. As the [report](#) of the State Department's Commission on Unalienable Rights argued, principle and interest impel the United States to champion human rights, but in a complex and dangerous world human rights can never be the sole concern of a responsible foreign policy. Reconciling the imperatives of power and the claims of justice is one aspect of the indissoluble link in foreign affairs between ideas and interest.

Grasping the intricate interplay of ideas and interests that shapes China's conduct -- and that which propels our own -- is crucial to America's efforts to secure freedom.

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