

Getting China Right

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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The primary purpose of President Richard Nixon's historic 1972 visit to the People's Republic of China was to counterbalance against the Soviet threat. Nixon's "opening to China" culminated in 1979 under President Jimmy Carter with the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the world's only free and democratic superpower and the world's most populous communist nation-state. Since then and continuing through the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, U.S. government officials of both parties and left-leaning and right-leaning public-policy specialists have embraced the policy of engagement. The experts assured the American people that through diplomacy, trade and investment, and educational, cultural, and scientific ties, as well as by integrating Beijing into the international system, the United States would stimulate political and economic liberalization in China.

That bipartisan assurance, as the Trump administration highlighted and as the Biden administration has accepted, was mistaken. Despite incorporating free market elements into its socialist economic system in the late 1970s and 1980s, the Chinese Communist Party today operates the world's most comprehensive and intrusive surveillance state while singling out religious and ethnic minorities for special persecution, the most egregious instance of which is the internment and brutalization of the Uyghurs in northwest China.

The CCP routinely defies the basic norms of fairness and reciprocity in commercial relations with other nations. The CCP leads the world by far in carbon emissions. The CCP militarized the South China Sea in contravention of international law and, contrary to its international obligations, in June

2020 imposed a new national security law on Hong Kong that effectively outlawed dissent. In late 2019 and early 2020 during the critical early months of the COVID-19 outbreak, the CCP covered up the character and extent of the novel coronavirus, depriving the world of precious time to take precautions against a global pandemic. The CCP has stepped up menacing military actions in the Taiwan Strait, threatening to upend security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. And the CCP has demonstrated through its conduct and explained in authoritative speeches and writings that its overarching aim is to bend the world system toward authoritarianism and reorient it around Beijing.

In “Getting China Wrong,” Aaron Friedberg throws into sharp relief the flawed reasoning that justified the failed decades-long policy of engagement. He also clarifies those elements of China’s conduct and its intellectual sources to which attention must be paid in getting China right.

A Princeton University professor of politics and international affairs, Friedberg has over the course of a distinguished career produced a steady output of books and articles that have done as much as any scholar’s writings to inform about the China challenge. In his new book, Friedberg underscores – consistent with Ian Easton’s “The Final Struggle: Inside China’s Global Strategy” (2022), Rush Doshi’s [argument](#) in “The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order” (2021), and the State Department Policy Planning Staff’s 2020 unclassified paper, “[The Elements of the China Challenge](#)” – that China’s assertive statements and aggressive actions under CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping do not principally stem from his temperament and predilections and do not represent a break with the party. Rather, Xi’s China reflects “a continuation of trends that have become unmistakable over the course of the last two decades.”

The political expression of those trends changed strikingly as China grew in wealth, power, and self-confidence. Due to China’s breathtaking economic growth, which was boosted in no small measure by U.S. engagement, the PRC has gone in four decades from a struggling developing country to a great power possessing the world’s second largest economy and the world’s largest active military.

“As their assessments of China’s relative strength have grown more positive,” writes Friedberg, “its leaders have pushed harder and more openly to reshape the world in ways intended to insure the longevity of their regime, first by reestablishing their country as the dominant state in eastern Eurasia, and ultimately by displacing the United States as the preponderant global power.”

Most American government officials and scholars continued to paint a rosy picture of engagement’s benefits long after it should have become clear that the CCP not only had no intention of liberalizing and embracing the international status quo but regarded the United States as a principal threat precisely because it championed freedom, democracy, and human rights. The experts’ “[p]ersistent illusions about the depths of the regime’s determination, the extent of its capacity for brutality, and the scope of its ambitions,” Friedberg argues, derived from the sometimes naïve, sometimes lazy American propensity to see the rest of the world in our own image. On the unexamined assumption that CCP leaders would find irresistible the universal principles to which the United States is devoted, American observers in and out of government overlooked the tenacity of the CCP’s commitment to Leninist tenets of ruthless one-party government at home, the party’s dedication to central economic planning, and its nationalist goal to establish China at the center of world order.

Mao’s successors starting with Deng Xiaoping have been acutely aware of American hopes to wean China from socialism. Accordingly, shows Friedberg, the CCP “developed and refined a counter-strategy designed to exploit the benefits of engagement with the West while neutralizing its potential peril.”

Maintaining political control came first. Through the 1980s, the CCP relied on economic growth “to quell dissent, sustain popular support, and fend off challenges to its authority.” Following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the party stepped up repression and resorted increasingly to indoctrination of hyper-nationalist beliefs. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the party experimented with limited reforms but soon returned to repression as the preferred approach to social and political

unrest. Since his ascent to the position of general secretary in 2012, Xi has consolidated the party's grip on power through a potent ideological synthesis. "With his elevation of the 'China Dream' of achieving 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,'" Friedberg writes, "Xi has harnessed the Party's powerful Leninist machinery to an emotionally evocative nationalist goal."

As in politics, so too in economics, the CCP sought to take advantage of engagement while holding fast to Leninist fundamentals. The "highly successful experiments in private ownership and 'bottom-up,' market-driven growth" of the 1980s were followed by the party's reassertion of control over the economy. Xi has gone further, "directing massive additional investments to spur 'indigenous innovation' and promote greater technological self-reliance."

In foreign affairs and strategy, the CCP has also remained true to its Leninist and hyper-nationalist colors. Convinced that the purpose of U.S. engagement is to defeat and destroy socialism in China, the CCP has undertaken to counter the United States and its free and democratic principles. When China was weak in the 1980s, Friedberg explains, Deng counseled that China must "hide its capabilities and bide its time." With the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, then-General Secretary Hu Jintao asserted that the time had come to "get some things done," which meant exercising greater authority within the Indo-Pacific. Under Xi, the watchword is "striving for achievement." That signals, Friedberg maintains, the CCP's determination, in the name of a "socialism with Chinese characteristics," to not merely compete with the United States for preeminence beyond the Indo-Pacific and around the world but to restructure international order.

To address the China challenge, Friedman sketches imperatives of an American foreign policy that takes seriously the CCP's Leninism and hyper-nationalist convictions and its world-encompassing ambitions. First, the U.S. must mobilize the nation for competition with China while firmly distinguishing between the dictatorial CCP and the Chinese people. Second, while decoupling neatly and cleanly from China's enormous economy is unfeasible, the United States must seek

opportunities for “partial disengagement,” beginning with blocking CCP efforts to build other nations’ digital and physical infrastructure; thwarting China’s prodigious theft of intellectual property; fostering education, innovation, and basic research domestically; and devising incentives to encourage America and its partners to take more responsibility for vital supply chains and production of crucial goods. Third, the U.S. must revise and fortify its alliance system to counterbalance against China in the Indo-Pacific. Fourth, the U.S. must ramp up public diplomacy, not least by finding “leaders who believe in and can explain the virtues of liberal democracy” which, “despite its imperfections,” is “practically as well as morally superior to the alternatives.”

The last one is the most essential imperative to the execution of a foreign policy that gets China right. That’s because at this turbulent moment accomplishing all the other imperatives depends on finding leaders capable of explaining – at home as well as abroad – the merits of liberal democracy in America.

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