



Kissi



Abstract

With the deterioration of US-China relations in recent years, America's engagement policy toward China has been heavily criticized for failing to change China into a liberal democracy and turning Beijing into a peer competitor of Washington instead. However, a more balanced history of engagement shows that engagement has served American interests quite well. During the 1970s, American officials and the broader foreign policy public forged a new perception of China as a "frustrated modernizer." The priority of China was not to spread communism abroad but to turn the country into a first-class industrial power. However, China failed to modernize under communism, with the Sino-Soviet split further threatening China's national security. America's engagement policy was conceived as a realistic response to those changes. Engagement successfully turned China into America's tacit partner against the Soviet Union, helped Washington to end its war in Vietnam, moderated China's radical foreign policy, and contributed to the end of the Cold War. While the desire to change China into a liberal democracy loomed large in the background, that desire was only pursued as a long-term goal and no American administration ever set a firm timetable to turn it into reality. A balanced assessment of engagement can help us to forge a realistic strategy by aligning means with ends. America must realize many of the factors that will shape China's future are beyond American control. A more realistic goal for US China policy is to shape China's choices so that it will abide by the rules-based international order with or without political reforms. Washington should consistently convince Beijing that America does not seek to contain China's rise if China can truly become a responsible stakeholder.

Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

- America should achieve a balanced assessment of the US-China engagement before abandoning it. Engagement was conceived as a realistic strategy that served America's interests well since the 1970s. Regime change has never been the main aspiration of engagement. To hope that China will eventually move toward liberal democracy is not the same as setting a time-table and assuming that America has the capabilities to achieve that goal. A balanced assessment of engagement

can help us to forge a realistic strategy by aligning means with ends. A more realistic goal of America's future China policy is to shape China's choices so that it will abide by the rules-based international order with or without political reforms.

- Washington should consistently convince Beijing that America does

matter. Even if there is no substantial change of policy, a more balanced narrative is likely to alleviate concerns among US allies and smooth relations with Beijing.

- Continued engagement is the practical policy toward China. Engagement is not appeasement, and the alternatives carry more risks than benefits. A new Cold War aimed at containing China cannot work, given the high degree of China's integration into the world. Plus, few nations are willing to choose side between America and China. A shooting war between the two nations is unimaginable.

While “rapprochement” and “normalization” suggest a narrower and more-or-less manageable policy agenda, “engagement” runs the risk of misinterpreting America’s past China policy by confusing long-term policy goals with short-term ones. During the long 1970s, America’s China policy was gradual and had phased goals. While the desire to change China into a liberal democracy loomed large in the background of America’s policy toward China, that desire was only pursued as a long-term goal and no American administration ever set a firm timetable to turn it into reality. Moreover, Washington often put that long-term goal on the back burner in favor of pursuing other goals that served America’s national interests. Before rejecting engagement as a complete failure, therefore, it is necessary to examine why and how the policy of engagement was developed and what it has achieved since the long 1970s.

The Cognitive Foundation of Engagement: China as a Frustrated Modernizer, 1966–69

Policy and reality mutually reinforce each other. On the one hand, policy reflects reality and derives from decision-makers’ perceptions of reality. On the other hand, policy also shapes reality by creating the discursive context of reality, analyzing reality selectively, or misinterpreting reality. America’s engagement policy toward China is subject to the same policy-reality dynamics. While policy and reality mutually shape each other, the key link connecting the two, the perception of reality, is equally important. The historical origin of America’s engagement policy toward China, therefore, can be found in the changed perception of China during the long 1970s.

During the early Cold War period, Washington primarily perceived the Beijing regime as a “Red menace” bent on “continuous revolution” at home and exporting communism globally. As a result, so often in politics, however, the

debate over China thus emerged, first initiated by members of the US Congress and prominent scholars on China. They successfully reconstructed America's perception of China by examining China's modernization under communism. As a result, China came to be primarily perceived as a "frustrated modernizer," a country that failed to become a first-rate industrial power and establish modern economic sectors under communism. Promoters of this perception argued that new policies toward China were not only conceivable but also highly feasible, because the Beijing regime, with all its weaknesses and vulnerabilities, would eventually change its foreign policy if America would take advantage of China's failed modernization to exert the right kind of pressure.

The "frustrated modernizer" image was first brought sharply into focus when J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, launched three weeks of congressional hearings on US-China relations in March 1966. To Fulbright, the war in Vietnam was a result of America's misunderstanding of China: "China is not judged to be aggressive because of her actions; she is judged to be aggressive because she is communist." Revolutions, Fulbright argued, shared a common feature: "their principal purpose in any case is to modernize rather than democratize and they are more interested in material results than in abstract ideas." The Chinese Communist Revolution was the latest stage of the Chinese effort to modernize their country and to become equal with the West.

The best way to deal with China, Fulbright argued, was not to pursue a rigid containment policy but to bring China into the international community. By engaging China, America could moderate China's behavior and make Beijing realize that a healthy relationship with the West was indispensable to the modernization of China. Fulbright's 523A46 understanding of the Beijing regime through the lens of Chimere Ityoing regzag Chis

perceived to be a long-term policy that should be pursued gradually with phased goals. For many, trade was the least sensitive and low-risk tool of diplomacy. Senator Henry M. Jackson, a key figure on the Armed Services Committee, openly called for the development of "a livable relationship with the Chinese Communists." Jackson urged to establish trade relations to ac

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frustrated modernizer, the report argued that “gaining access to the US market should be particularly attractive to the Chinese...Our long-term problem may well be how to ensure that, as containment succeeds, China will turn toward the free world rather than toward the Soviet Union.” To make this happen, American policy would follow two directions. On the one hand, “we should try to draw China into activities on the broader world scene where, through exposure to outside reality and successful assumption of international responsibility, she might gain a degree of status and respect which could substitute in part for the unattainable goals of regional domination and super-power status.” On the other hand, by gradually softening America’s military containment of China, “we might ease the tension between China and ourselves, thereby facilitating a decision that Chinese interests were better served by normalizing relations with us rather than risking another betrayal at the hands of Russia’s.”

During the late 1960s, therefore, the perception of China as a “frustrated modernizer” became the cognitive foundation of America’s engagement policy toward China. While American analysts can be seen as

interests with the US. "History brought us together," Nixon told Mao, "e

greater extent than I realized, common concerns about the USSR drove the US and PRC together in 1971,” Brzezinski told Carter, “In sum, the Sino-American relationship helped stabilize our East Asian situation after twenty-five years of confrontation. Brzezinski worried that stalled normalization would damage America credibility in the eyes of Beijing, a concern shared by the Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown.

The “frustrated modernizer” perception played an even bigger role in the Carter administration’s China policy. The death of Mao, the downfall of the “Gang of Four,” and the rise of Deng Xiaoping played a major role in the

announced a new policy of Reform and Opening Up. America's engagement policy appeared to bear fruit after the long 1970s. "One of the best ways to put roots deep into the Chinese political system is to expose his people to the advantages of a relationship with Japan and the US," Vance reflected on Deng's visit. "The rapidly expanding relationships are important because they draw the Chinese further into involvement with us and the rest of the world. To the extent that the Chinese become part of the community of primarily non-Communist nations at this time in their development, so will our ties with China be more enduring when and if they are later tested by strategic or political strains³."

Engagement in Retrospect: A Bottle Half-Empty or Half-Full?

The effectiveness of a given policy should be measured against the results it expects to achieve. In this regard, engagement has successfully achieved its goals. As China became America's partner against the Soviet Union served

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overshadowed by strategic needs such as unfair trade practices are bound to emerge as prominent problems. On the other hand, the rise of China as a major economic and military power has challenged American dominance of the global order. Instead of perceiving China as a frustrated modernizer, Washington increasingly treats China as a peer competitor and threat. In 2017, the Trump administration labeled China as a strategic competitor and revisionist power bent on undermining American security, eroding the rules-based international order, and challenging American power. Although China was not called an enemy, it was deemed more dangerous than Russia.²² In October 2018, Vice President Mike Pence accused Beijing

for example, argued that China's progress toward liberal political and human rights practices "will be gradual, at best, and is by no means inevitable."

Accusing China of being a revisionist power bent on undermining the rules-based order also exaggerates the China challenge and oversimplifies reality. As some analysts have convincingly argued, a singular US-dominated liberal world order has never existed in the post-WWII era. Rather, states interact with each other around "'issue-specific orders' where the key norms and institutions that regulate state behavior today vary depending on the issues at hand.²⁷ Nor is China the only power that abides by this order selectively. America too often operates outside the rules of this order.

A closer examination of China's behavior related to the issue-specific orders reveals that engagement has successfully integrated China, at least partially, into the US-led world order since the 1990s. China joined the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. It signed treaties pertinent to the control of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, and signed the Paris Climate Agreement in 2016. Between 2000 and 2018, China supported 182 of 190 UN Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions on countries breaking international rules. China has also deployed more peacekeepers than the other Permanent Security Council members combined. China's actions during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis were widely applauded as responsible and compared

Xi Jinping has contributed to the current estranged relationship. Xi's China appeared to have abandoned the Deng era's "low profile" foreign policy. A dazzling assortment of political slogans such as Wolf Warrior diplomacy, the China Dream, and Made in China 2025, combined with more assertive foreign policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative and island building in the South China Sea, make China's neighbors increasingly nervous. In the economic area, many believed that Xi reversed the liberal reforms under Deng by strengthening state control of the economy and increasing barriers for foreign business in China. The result was that China managed to alienate a wide range of American constituencies who had supported engagement. Americans, in return, lost their patience with China. And the perception of China as a threat resurfaced to dislodge the "frustrated modernizer" perception.

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Engagement or Cold War 2.0: A Time for Philosophical Questions Again

When President Xi Jinping met with President Donald Trump during the 2019 G20 Summit in Japan, the two nations had been locked in “an epic trade war” for over a year. Instead of hammering out a plan to end the trade war, Xi wanted to talk about what kind of a relationship the two nations wanted to have.⁴ Like Mao who wanted to discuss philosophical questions with Nixon, Xi wanted to discuss philosophical questions too with Trump after 50 years of US-China engagement.

Indeed, it is time to discuss philosophical questions again. We need to think about the overall trajectory of the relationship: how to assess the challenges posed by China, how to prevent possible military conflicts with China, and how to align America’s strategic goals with its capabilities. We should focus on the big picture and decide what kind of relations we want to have with China in the next few decades.

For starters, we should have a clear-eyed assessment of China’s capabilities and intention instead of believing in the inevitability of the so-called Thucydides Trap. China, in many ways, is still a “frustrated modernizer.” It is true that China’s power has grown rapidly in the past decades. As the second largest economic power, China is even projected by some analysts to surpass

those challenges requires a stable international environment and global cooperation. America should convince China that its own interests can be best served by behaving responsibly on the world stage. As a “frustrated modernizer,” China is more a challenge that requires skillful management than a threat that America needs to confront at all costs. Plus, in the age of social media, efforts by a democratic government trying too hard to shape a narrative often backfire.

The question of China’s intention, however, is harder to answer. While China’s influence is growing globally, it is too early to assert that China wants to replace America and become the dominant hegemon of the world. That aspiration may be harbored by China’s ultra-nationalists, but it is not a realistic goal pursued by the Chinese government. China’s intention, in essence, is Xi Jinping’s call for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which is not necessarily to be achieved by disrupting the US-led international order. China understands that its rise, if not properly managed, can make the Thucydides Trap a self-fulfilling prophecy. That’s why China coined the term “peaceful rising,” and then changed it to “peaceful development” when the word “rising” was considered provocative. China has become more assertive under Xi Jinping, but the official line continues to warn against a new Cold War and promise that China will not seek hegemonic power.

To achieve a balanced view of the national rejuvenation thesis requires a more balanced view of Chinese nationalism. The rise of Chinese nationalism since the 1990s can be best understood in light of the “frustrated modernizer” image. While China has clearly become a global economic powerhouse, the downsides of its development model are serious. New social problems have brought about a “left turn” in Chinese politics. Marginalized groups came to share the belief that “the Communist Party was abandoning socialism and embracing economic growth at all costs...to the benefit of an elite few and at the expense of the majority.” Major groups have urged the CCP to revive certain policies during the age of Mao Zedong, when the Chinese society was supposed to be more egalitarian. The tightened state control of the economy and the intensified ideological struggle under Xi, which are perceived in the West as reversing China’s liberal reforms, are the CCP’s efforts

holder. Engagement from Nixon and Obama produced a more or less stable

raise its suspicions about American intentions, and ironically reinforce the nationalists' argument that America is in decline. China has now frequently

Chinese assertiveness is the belief that the West, including and especially Japan, is unwilling to address China's past sufferings at the hands of imperialist powers. America and its major allies' policies toward China, from the Chinese perspective, are still based on the notion that might makes right. The US-China trade war, therefore, is widely interpreted in China as America bullying. It is difficult to establish strategic trust if China believes that America wants to keep it down indefinitely.

Finally, the White House should play a more forceful role in shaping a

Notes

1. Michael R. Pompeo, "Communist China and the Free World's Future," 23 July 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future-2/index.html>
2. In this article, the term engagement is used to refer to the overall US-China relations. This term is used in a generic way without assuming regime change as a necessary component.
3. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2001).
4. For full texts of the hearings, see Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *US Policy with Respect to Mainland China* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966).
5. J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 152, p. 69, pp. 139–173, Italics original.
6. The witnesses were: A. Doak Barnett (Columbia University), Alexander Eckstein (University of Michigan), John Fairbank (Harvard University), Samuel Griffith (retired General), Morton Halperin (Harvard University), Harold Hinton (George Washington University), Walter Judd (former member of the House), John Lindbeck (Harvard University), Hans Morgenthau (University of Chicago), David Rowe (Yale University), Benjamin Schwartz (Harvard University), Robert Scalapino (UC Berkeley), George Taylor (University of Washington), and Donald Zagoria (Columbia University). They were either prominent China

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42. Ibid., pp. 47–48.
43. The term was first coined by Mei Yuxin, a researcher associated with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, and quickly went viral. https://finance.ifeng.com/a/20180404/16058513_0.shtml
44. Bob Davis and Lingling Wu, *Superpower Showdown: How the Battle Between Trump and Xi Reopens a New Cold War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), p. 347.
45. See, for example, Anne F. Thurston, *Engaging China: Fifty Years of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
46. See, for example, Thomas Finger and Jean C. O'Rourke, *Critical Decisions: Choices that Will Shape China's Future* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).
47. Jude Blanchette, *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 66.
48. Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).
49. Global Times, Weibo Post, 28 November 28, 2019, <https://weibo.com/1974576991/lilUUf7lw>
50. George Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 6th edition, 2012), p. 70
51. Jake Sullivan, "Remarks," 27 April 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/04/27/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-renewing-american-economic-leadership-at-the-brookings-institution/>
52. Guancha, "Did Deng Say, 'Countries following America all grew rich?'" https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=126725&s=fwzx_bt

