

Trump yet to play the ultimate card

Written by Joseph Bosco

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When US Vice President Mike Pence addressed the recent APEC summit, he criticized China for its myriad breaches of international norms. The US and the world have lost patience, he said, adding: “Things must change.”

He spoke these words 51 years after then-US president Richard Nixon issued the first urgent “China must change” message. In a Foreign Affairs article previewing the course he would follow in his historic opening to China, Nixon portrayed in stark terms the alternative course of history with an unchanged China:

“Taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors,” Nixon said.

Integrating China into the international community would bring about reform in its economic and political systems, Nixon said.

More importantly for the cause of regional and global peace, engagement was the only way to ensure that a future China would moderate its innate hostility toward the West and let go of its historical grievances — real, imagined and contrived.

Every subsequent administration took measures to integrate China more fully in the international system, always with the same rationale: It would help China change for the better. Unfortunately, neither the Nixon administration nor any of its successors — including US President Donald Trump’s administration — bothered to assign any kind of normative metrics to judge how, or whether, China’s communist ideology was moderating its attitude toward either its own people or the outside world.

Instead, most China-watchers, in and out of government, focused on the dramatic openings in its economy and comfortably presumed that political reform and a more benign worldview would inevitably follow. Some who prospered as China rose did not fret about whether China was becoming a normal member of the family of nations as long as business was good.

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However, former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), author of the economic changes, brought the reality of the Chinese communist system crashing home long before Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) arrived on the scene. On June 4, 1989, he said no to the call for political change and turned the army against the Chinese people, slaughtering hundreds, if not thousands, who had shared optimistic assumptions about change.

In his message to the Chinese Communist Party in 1990, Deng provided an important clue to China's future relationship with the West.

Responding to the post-Tiananmen backlash and the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes, he told his colleagues to “hide our capabilities and bide our time.”

The line was much quoted in the West, but little attention was paid to its ominous meaning and important questions were rarely asked.

Why did China have to hide anything from the world, and was it hiding not only its capacities, but also its intentions? Was this part of the Chinese tradition of political and diplomatic deception, perfected to a crude high art under its communist regime? And, most significantly, for what was Beijing biding its time? What would come next when the time was right?

Since grasping power, Xi has provided answers to these questions — and they boil down to a truth that was there all along, since the creation of the People's Republic of China: its perception that the West, led by the US, is the mortal enemy.

Despite the ups and downs with passing individual personalities, the waxing and waning of schools of communist thought and the vying among them, it has all been done within the framework of Mao Zedong's (毛泽东) interpretation of Marxism-Leninism: “Power comes from the barrel of a gun.”

The underlying, irreducible tenet of that ideology is that the economic and political systems of the West — rule of law, democracy and freedom of expression — and the international institutions that have flowed from them are fundamentally incompatible, over the long run, with

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the party's conception of how societies, and ultimately the world, are to be organized and governed.

The Trump administration has said goodbye to all that. Its intention to challenge Beijing's hegemonic and expansionist initiatives were made clear in the US National Security Strategy, the US National Defense Strategy and presidential statements and actions on trade, Taiwan, the South China Sea and North Korea.

In his groundbreaking talk last month, Pence captured the essence of the administration's fresh thinking when he said that China has been waging "a new Cold War" against the US.

With his follow-on speeches in Asia last week, Pence signaled that the US' new China policy would not be transactional, transitory or temporary — as he, Trump and other administration officials have stated, the US' commitment to challenge China's hostility and deception will be sustained over the long term.

On fair trade, freedom of navigation, Taiwan's democratic security, North Korean denuclearization, human rights and freedom, Pence said: "China knows where we stand... We will not change course."

He also emphasized that the issue is far larger than the fate of an artificial island in the South China Sea or the level of bilateral trade. It is about the US' core national interests. While China likes to remind us of its red lines, it needs to be reminded that the US has what might be called its red, white and blue lines — and crossing them is no longer advisable in China's own interest.

Pence's message to Beijing was firm and clear: "The United States... will not change course until China changes its ways."

That resolve is about to be tested with Trump meeting Xi for trade talks at the G20 conference in Argentina.

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Will personal chemistry, real or feigned, and the allure of a “successful” short-term deal once again allow Beijing to slip loose from accountability for its lawless actions? The future of US-China relations is in the hands of Trump.

He has yet to play his ultimate card: the need for either change in China’s policies, or a change of the regime.

As Pence said: “[The] story of progress in the Indo-Pacific [is that] dictatorships have fallen and democracies have risen in their place.”

Joseph Bosco served as China country director in the office of the US secretary of defense and taught a graduate seminar on US-China-Taiwan relations at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. He is a fellow at the Institute for Taiwan-American Studies.

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