

China strategy options for the US

Written by Joseph Bosco
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Whether the next US president is incumbent President Donald Trump or former vice president Joe Biden, he will confront the greatest existential challenge communist China has ever presented to the US. There are four possible strategic responses:

Strategy A: Return to the comprehensive engagement and passive containment policy of previous Republican and Democratic administrations.

Strategy B: Directly challenge China militarily by destroying its illegal bases in the South China Sea, helping the Philippines recover seized land features in the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands, 南沙群岛) and repelling with force, if necessary, China's violations of the territorial seas, airspace and sovereignty of Japan and Taiwan.

Strategy C: Continue the Trump administration's active containment strategy by reacting non-kinetically, but more vigorously than prior administrations to China's transgressions on trade, human rights, maritime freedoms and Taiwan.

Strategy D: Conduct an informational and financial plan of regime delegitimization that could lead to a peaceful regime change and democratization, and self-determination for Hong Kong, Tibet, Mongolia and East Turkestan/Xinjiang.

All of these options contain the risk of military conflict with China, but Strategy A is the most likely also to lead to moral and ideological defeat of the West through peaceful means. It would represent the ultimate success of the Sun Tzu (孙子) strategy of "winning without fighting" as applied and honed by the communist techniques of political warfare, deception and disinformation.

Yet, most critics of the Trump administration's disruptive approach recommend reverting to the engagement policy, albeit tempered with a chastened sense of realism.

That view appears in a Foreign Affairs article authored by Michael Green and Evan Medeiros,

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who held senior Asia policy positions in the administrations of former US presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, respectively. In it, the authors lament Hong Kong's fate, but despair at the lack of Western recourse.

"China's new law is a profound tragedy for the people of Hong Kong, but unfortunately, there is little the international community can do to halt its implementation. The Trump administration has suggested that it will dial up pressure on Hong Kong's government. But doing so risks hurting Hong Kong's economy more than Beijing's and accelerating the territory's absorption into southern China," Green and Medeiros wrote.

The argument reflects the same sense of impotence that has paralyzed US administrations for four decades. When even unacceptable behavior is ultimately accepted, China is encouraged to continue pressing the limits.

Green and Medeiros recognize the precedential danger for Taiwan of inaction on Hong Kong.

"Unless the United States demonstrates the resolve and ability to resist Chinese coercion and aggression, China's leaders may conclude that the risks and costs of future military action against Taiwan are low — or at least tolerable," they wrote.

Yet even when acknowledging the need to deter "creeping irredentism," the authors temporize on the appropriate response.

"Targeted sanctions won't be cost-free for US-Chinese relations or for the people of Hong Kong, but the United States can limit the collateral damage by implementing them incrementally, proportionately, and in concert with other powers," Green and Medeiros wrote.

However, the state of US-China relations is not "collateral damage" — it is the secondary target of the sanctions. The China dynamic that has prevailed for decades is truly unacceptable for the Trump administration and a near-unanimous US Congress.

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Moreover, limiting the collateral damage in Hong Kong also limits the direct damage to the primary targets: Chinese and Hong Kong officials who oppress the citizens crying for US support.

Deferring full sanctions allows time for Beijing to adjust and work around them. Doing it proportionately — a time-worn just war principle — leaves the initiative with Beijing to decide how much pain it is prepared to endure in pursuit of its objective.

A disproportionate response has greater impact and shock value — the technique the Trump administration used to good effect in the China trade war and its “maximum pressure” campaign against North Korea.

Working collaboratively with friends and allies is laudable, if lowest common denominator consensus does not induce political paralysis, as often happens with ASEAN and the UN.

No, sanctions are not cost-free, but the cost is exponentially lower than the military conflict that looms under two of the other potential approaches.

Strategy B can be characterized as a limited rollback and was actually advocated by Trump’s first US secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, during his confirmation hearing.

Asked about US policy in the South and East China seas, he said: “China’s activity in this area is extremely worrisome and ... a failure of a response has allowed them just to keep pushing the envelope on this.”

Asked by US Senator Cory Gardner if he would “support a more aggressive posture in the South China Sea,” Tillerson said: “We’re going to have to send China a clear signal that first, the island-building stops, and second, your access to those islands also [is] not going to be allowed.”

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The next day, a New York Times headline read: “Rex Tillerson’s South China Sea Remarks Foreshadow Possible Foreign Policy Crisis.”

“Mr. Tillerson’s comments, with the possible implication that the United States might use its armed forces to deny the Chinese access to the islands, garnered reactions including confusion, disbelief and warlike threats from analysts in China,” the Times said.

Neither Tillerson nor any other administration official again mentioned the rollback possibility with China. Yet, it is the entire basis of US policy toward North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. It should be revived as a credible possibility to offset Beijing’s constant threats over maritime issues and Taiwan.

Instead, Trump and his national security team appear to have settled on a strategy that can be described as active containment to prevent further Chinese expansion or encroachment. It applies to Hong Kong, Taiwan and the maritime domain, and to the nationalities and groups within China over which the regime is tightening its totalitarian grip.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s unprecedented statement that Washington rejects China’s illegal claims in the South China Sea does not necessarily indicate a shift to a rollback strategy, but it is a step in the right direction.

Yet, since the approach angers Beijing as much as if Washington were conducting either the kinetic limited rollback strategy or non-kinetic regime change, the administration should seriously pursue Strategy D to achieve peacefully the changed China that then-US president Richard Nixon contemplated.

It would be an open campaign to undermine the communist regime, just as it covertly and blatantly attacks and subverts the world’s democracies.

Its components would be economic and financial: additional tariffs for Beijing’s failure to implement “phase one” of the trade deal; all the available sanctions for China’s human rights violations in Hong Kong, East Turkestan and Tibet; secondary sanctions for undermining

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primary sanctions on North Korea and Iran; and exclusion of Chinese companies from US securities markets.

Those measures would reduce Beijing's capacity for domestic oppression and international aggression. It also would pave the way for a vigorous information campaign by the revitalized US broadcast agencies to bring liberating truth about their communist rulers to the Chinese.

It would be the West, then, that would win "Cold War II" without fighting.

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