FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Case Against the China Consensus

Why the Next American President Must Steer Toward a Better Future

BY JESSICA CHEN WEISS **September 16, 2024**

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Washington faces growing criticism for pursuing open-ended competition with China without defining what success would look like. Even as China's coercive capabilities and threatening behavior have rightly focused U.S. attention on the risks to American interests, the absence of clear metrics for success leaves the door open for partisan aspersions of the Biden administration's approach. The administration's defenders, meanwhile, rebuff these attacks by pointing out that its policies align with a broad consensus about the challenge China poses and the steps necessary to counter it.

To be sure, both Democratic and Republican politicians have engaged in the typical campaign ploy of sounding tough on China. During their recent debate, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris accused former President Donald Trump of selling out American interests and praising Chinese leader Xi Jinping, and Trump erroneously claimed that "China was paying us hundreds of billions of dollars" under his administration's tariffs (which the Biden administration has expanded). Meanwhile, the drumbeat of hyperbolic rhetoric and congressional hearings on the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party has blurred the line between legitimate commercial, scientific, and educational pursuits involving Chinese entities and those that pose unacceptable security risks or invite other vulnerabilities. Fearing that what might have been welcome yesterday could be deemed disloyal today, companies, researchers, and students have pulled back from many of the activities that have underpinned U.S. economic and scientific leadership.

Yet beneath this charged atmosphere, ample space for debate and discernment remains. The apparent hardening of a U.S. consensus on China is shallower and wobblier than it appears. In this fluid environment, there is an opportunity for the next presidential administration to develop a more affirmative, less reactive approach, one that dials down the heat and focuses on reducing the risks while preserving the benefits of the vast web of ties that connect the United States and China.

U.S. policymakers should seek a more durable basis for coexistence, striking a careful balance to ensure that efforts to address the real threats from China do not undermine the very values and interests they aim to protect. Deterrence, particularly in the Taiwan Strait, can be achieved only with the backing of strong diplomacy that combines credible threats and credible assurances. And both deterrence and prosperity require some degree of economic integration and technological interdependence. If policymakers overplay competition with Beijing, they risk more than raising the likelihood of war and jeopardizing efforts to address the many transnational challenges that threaten both the United States and China. They also risk setting the United States on a path to what could become a

pyrrhic victory, in which the country undermines its own long-term interests and values in the name of thwarting its rival.

REFLEXIVE HOSTILITY

Prominent Republicans have accused the Biden administration of weakening the United States' position by prioritizing diplomatic engagement over more confrontational measures designed to undermine the Chinese government. They portray China as an existential threat and at the same time claim that an expanded U.S. military presence and more confrontational measures would somehow lead Beijing to capitulate to American power. But this is even less likely to succeed than the current approach. The Trump administration adopted a hostile posture in its last months, calling publicly for the Chinese people to choose a different form of government, running covert operations to undermine the Chinese Communist Party, and discarding norms of unofficial interaction between Taipei and Washington, which raised tensions across the Taiwan Strait to a point where the Chinese government began to prepare for a surprise attack by the U.S. military. Resuming a similarly confrontational policy today would only raise the specter of a shooting war with China and aggravate the very allies the United States would want by its side in a fight.

The Biden administration, by contrast, has rightly invoked a sense of shared purpose, underlining the urgency of defending an international order in which might does not make right and working with governments of different persuasions to tackle problems that respect no borders or walls.

But in the broader U.S. public and policy conversation, the impulse to thwart China often overwhelms efforts to work toward common objectives and advance U.S. interests. Rhetoric about winning the twenty-first century reinforces the idea that competition is zero-sum, accelerating a rush on both sides of the Pacific to prepare for conflict and making it all too easy for critics in both societies to deride ordinary forms of diplomatic, commercial, and scientific interaction as naive at best and appeasement at worst.

This emphasis on preparing for worst-case scenarios prevails in both countries. Beijing's and Washington's steps to reduce their exposure to coercion and subversion dominate the public and policy conversation, shrinking the space for efforts to consider bounds on competition that could underpin a more stable and productive coexistence. Any coexistence would be uneasy, built not primarily on trust but on credible threats and assurances—deterrence paired with steps toward a modus vivendi that both countries and peoples could live with and prosper within.

Unfortunately, the current mix of policies in Beijing and in Washington is leading in the opposite direction. Despite renewed diplomacy, and even though disciplined U.S. officials may refrain from using the term "adversary" or "enemy" to describe China, the characterization of Beijing as a competitor that Washington needs to beat bleeds into almost every domain of the bilateral relationship. U.S. officials, researchers, and businesses have legitimate reasons to interact with their Chinese counterparts, at the very least to gain insight into what Chinese scientists and other innovators are working on. Yet even mutually beneficial exchanges become hard to justify when the United States has defined China as the principal challenge to its national interests (and China has done the same with the United States). And pragmatic assessments of the cost of sweeping tariffs to U.S. pocketbooks or how restrictions on doing business with Chinese biotech companies could limit access to lifesaving drugs have not stopped such proposals from gaining momentum.

In China, the situation is worse. Xi has spoken of stabilizing the relationship and promoting people-to-people ties, but rhetoric about

"winning the future" and leapfrogging the United States to dominate frontier technologies has hardened perceptions of Beijing's intentions and undermines its assurances that China does not seek to replace or displace the United States. China's actions have compounded these fears. To prepare for a potential conflict with the United States, China has accelerated efforts to reduce its own reliance on key technological imports, embed vulnerabilities in critical U.S. infrastructure, expand its nuclear arsenal, and bolster ties with Russia—all of which deepen the spiral of enmity and suspicion. Meanwhile, Beijing's exit bans (which have prevented the family members of individuals involved in legal disputes from leaving the country), cumbersome strictures on international exchanges and visits, and restrictions on foreign journalists and media organizations have hindered ordinary interactions between American and Chinese people.

Both countries' zero-sum rhetoric and preparations for conflict are furthering a gradual descent into hostility and estrangement, reinforcing fears of a worst-case scenario and undermining the credibility of tactical assurances. Restoring high-level contacts and summits is necessary but insufficient to halt the slide, especially given the imminent leadership turnover in the United States. Diplomacy can help correct the most exaggerated misperceptions, but it can do only so much to stabilize the relationship without both sides investing more in a principled coexistence.

THE UPSIDE OF INTEGRATION

To halt this spiral, Beijing and Washington will need to identify the outcomes they wish to see, avoiding measures of success that are defined by slowing down or one-upping the other. Pursuing resilience and deterrence, not primacy or hegemony, would set them on a more stable course. Post–Cold War U.S. unipolarity in global politics was the exception, not the rule. Today, neither China nor the United States can aspire to dominance across every sector and every technology.

The nature of technological development makes it impossible to foresee precisely how new and emerging technologies will reshape both daily life and the battlefield. It is therefore imperative that China and the United States maintain a degree of integration in order to detect and learn from new advances. If the technological leaders in a given sector are Chinese, Washington should want U.S. firms to have access to the latest innovation. Right now, Chinese manufacturers are far in front in solar, battery, and electric vehicle production. Licensing Chinese technology to construct an electric vehicle factory in the United States, for example, would build domestic expertise and help U.S. automakers transition more quickly with top-of-the-line technology. Opposition to such moves on the unsubstantiated grounds that renewable technology could be a Trojan horse for communist influence is both misguided and counterproductive to U.S. interests.

Diversification is healthy, but the United States needs to establish limits on decoupling and "de-risking." Rewiring international supply chains comes with inflationary costs. Washington also derives strategic benefits from economic integration. China's entanglement in the global economy and its dependence on international technology, investment, and markets are important deterrents to aggression because they make clear what Beijing has to lose from military conflict. And U.S. efforts to restrict the access of Chinese companies to advanced technology can backfire. Such measures can hinder the ability of firms in developed democracies to innovate and remain competitive, as well as incentivize firms in China to rely more heavily on the Chinese government and domestic suppliers than they would otherwise—a combination that could create the very juggernaut that the initial restrictions were designed to stymie.

Balancing the risks and benefits of economic and technological integration is a hugely complex task, one that is already underway as the Biden administration evaluates and updates the parameters of its "small

yard, high fence." Export controls and other restrictions can protect strategic sectors, but they can also slow technological progress. The process of calibrating these tools therefore requires a rigorous assessment of tradeoffs. By bringing in more perspectives from industry and the research community, the U.S. government can better forecast the long-term effect of restrictive measures on American innovation and economic vitality.

STRIKING A BALANCE

Structural forces are at play in the power dynamic between China and the United States, but the future is still unwritten. To a large degree, it rests on choices made in Beijing and Washington. Arresting the slide toward conflict may seem impossible under the current Chinese leadership, but Beijing's preoccupation with economic and political stability gives it a reason to explore ways to ease tensions. At the same time, nothing about adjusting Washington's approach assumes that Beijing's intentions are somehow benign or nonthreatening. The Chinese Communist Party's stated interests and values are clearly in conflict with a lot—although not all—of what the United States seeks at home and in the world. Still, U.S. analysts and policymakers should not reflexively assume that China's objectives are maximalist and unchanging without rigorous examination and debate.

Some objectives, such as Beijing's ambition to absorb or "reunify" with Taiwan, may be immutable. But the time and manner—peaceful or otherwise—of action in service of that goal are not fixed. There is no credible evidence that Xi has set a deadline to resolve the situation once and for all. Although some hawkish voices in China appear eager to anticipate a use of force, most experts agree that Xi still sees a military conflict over Taiwan as a crisis to be avoided rather than an opportunity to be exploited.

This is not an argument for reflexive accommodation. On the contrary, to get to a modus vivendi the United States will need to improve deterrence, which will involve more than just issuing threats and bolstering military capabilities. As Bonnie Glaser, Thomas Christensen, and I wrote in *Foreign Affairs* last year, the United States can and should make clear that its threats are conditional on China's behavior, not efforts to shift the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. Such assurances are not the same as concessions. Assurances would sharpen Beijing's choices by conveying Washington's intent to inflict harm only if China chooses escalation over restraint; unilateral concessions, such as Trump's suggestion that the United States has little role to play in the Taiwan Strait, would risk inviting Chinese adventurism.

Many in Washington have concluded that rather than trying to slow China down, the United States should run faster. As the political scientist Amy Zegart has written in *Foreign Affairs*, "simply thwarting China will do nothing to spur the long-term innovation the United States needs to ensure its future security and prosperity." To retain the country's position as a hub for global talent and innovation, U.S. policymakers should encourage international students and researchers—including those from China—to come, stay, and contribute to scientific progress in the United States. Efforts to prevent research conducted in the United States from being used to undermine U.S. economic and national security must be carefully tailored to avoid smothering the very asset they aim to safeguard. Guidelines released by the Biden administration's Office of Science and Technology Policy in July, for example, cite the need to balance research security with "preserving the openness that has long enabled U.S. R&D leadership throughout the world and without exacerbating xenophobia, prejudice, or discrimination."

GETTING CHINA RIGHT

The transition to a new presidential administration provides an opportunity for a necessary recalibration that moves U.S.-Chinese relations toward a more stable and productive footing. U.S. partners and allies would welcome the shift, as most of them seek constructive relationships with China and do not want to take sides in a contest between Washington and Beijing. Domestically, a bipartisan majority of Americans surveyed in 2023 by the nonprofit organizations National Security Action and Foreign Policy for America said that avoiding war and reducing tensions with China was a very important goal—more important than preparing for a potential conflict. These polls suggest that there is political space to debate and refine policies on China. Expected political costs of appearing soft on China have often not materialized; Trump's praise of Xi's governing style and commitment to "saving TikTok" (which is owned by a Chinese company) from attempts by some U.S. politicians to ban it has not dampened his public support. Meanwhile, protectionism has not delivered the anticipated political benefits; the leader of the Teamsters, one of the United States' largest labor unions, joined the Republican National Convention even though the Biden administration expanded on Trump-era tariffs on imports from China. And the Trump campaign has taken contradictory positions on Chinese investment in the United States, first welcoming it and then opposing it, without apparent repercussions.

The prospect of a political transition and the absence of solidified public attitudes in the United States create a window for policymakers to refine their assumptions about what is driving China's activities, how great a threat those activities pose to U.S. interests, and what responses are warranted. If they lean into fear and expediency, they will fall victim to the kinds of binary thinking that equate diplomacy with appeasement and the mere presence of Chinese-born individuals in the United States (or Americans in China) with duplicity. That mentality is dangerous and self-defeating. Diplomacy is not appeasement; it is an indispensable tool for communicating the threats and assurances that are necessary for effective deterrence. And countering Beijing's efforts to extend its extraterritorial control is crucial to defending American liberties. But people born in China or of Chinese descent should not be categorically treated as a fifth column in the United States; the diaspora has been a hotbed for resistance, which is precisely why the Chinese Communist Party is so bent on monitoring and intimidating it. And if the United States were to go so far as to enact bans or visa restrictions on the basis of national origin, it would compromise the very principles of nondiscrimination and equality before the law that embody the American ideal.

The United States faces real challenges in addressing China's espionage, cyberattacks, and other illicit and nonmarket practices. But policies to combat these threats must not undermine the strengths they are meant to protect. Right now, much of the U.S. public and policy conversation is consumed by how to counter China and defend American workers, infrastructure, technology, and intellectual property against foreign threats. This focus downplays the domestic harms that measures ostensibly aimed at strengthening U.S. national security can have on the health and vibrancy of the United States' democracy, society, and innovation ecosystem. Getting China right is critical to the United States' success, both under the next president and for years beyond.