

Perhaps the most important policy response of the 2020s besides global heating will be how the West deals with China's expansion abroad and its government's continued repression of its people at home.

Indeed, relations with China will be the key to effective reversal of global heating.

US president Donald Trump's confrontational approach to China is woefully misguided.
Picture: Getty Images

It will require major changes to US thinking, if "thinking" is an appropriate term for what passes as US foreign policy these days.

All the talk of Chinese aggression, expansion and threat do not match reality. Misconception is trumping reality, pardon the pun.

In the past week, the US has engaged in air strikes in Somalia and [killed the head of Iran's elite Quds force in an airstrike at Baghdad's international airport](#). US airstrikes have killed more than 800 Somalis (mostly civilians) in the past three years.

Meanwhile, in the past six months, violent protests have taken place in Hong Kong, part of sovereign China but subject to international agreements about its system of government. The Chinese government and the People's Liberation Army, however, have stayed their hand.

China has not gone to war for more than 40 years, and that was not against a democracy, but a fellow Communist country - Vietnam. It has not used lethal force abroad for more than 30 years.

In those 40 years the US has sent in troops to foreign lands with pitiless rapidity.

Who is posing the threat to world peace here? China has provided more UN peacekeepers than all the other members of the Security Council combined. It is the second-largest contributor to the UN's finances. In the past 20 years it supported 182 of 190 Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions for breaching international rules and norms.

Further, in the past 40 years, China has lifted more people out of poverty than ever before.

Of course, the Chinese government is a nasty, repressive, violent machine whose primary aim is to maintain itself in power. Yes, the Chinese government owns and backs rapacious commercial enterprises and uses them to pursue foreign policy aims with capricious actions against the commercial enterprises of nations who happen to be out of favour.

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And the Chinese government engages in wide-ranging spying and cyber attacks.

But the West has to put this in perspective and ask what is the better path: engagement or confrontation?

Before president Richard Nixon went to China in 1972 and the US recognised the communist regime, China really did pose a threat to world peace. Chairman Mao said publicly a nuclear war that defeated capitalism and imperialism would be worth it, even if it left the world in ruins.

Since then, China has in words and practice given up its aim of world communism, replacing it with a policy that demands that the world respect its sovereignty and territorial integrity and not interfere in its internal affairs.

It may not be a particularly savoury foreign policy because it makes human rights subservient to the will of the Chinese Communist Party, but it is not the threat to world peace that US secretary of state Mike Pompeo and others in the US government would have you believe.

In the past three years, the US has made the terrible mistakes of withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and of starting a tariff war with China.

This unnecessary confrontation is both dangerous and counter-productive. If China had been in the TPP and not been hurt by a tariff war, the US and the West in general would have been in a much better position to use both carrot and stick to persuade China to change its ways on its treatment of religious minorities and its espionage and cyberwar activities.

When the West speaks out, as it should, against human rights abuses or trade and espionage misconduct to a China that has been confronted and cut-off, China will take no notice whatsoever. But an engaged China will be at least somewhat sensitive, even if not immediately.

The even bigger danger from a Cold War with China is that the rest of the world is less likely to get co-operation on global heating and less likely to get China to agree to international monitoring of emissions reductions.

At present, though, the US military-industrial complex seems to have persuaded both political parties and more of the media and public that the Nixon and post-Nixon response to engage with China has been wrong and that China poses both an economic and strategic threat to the US.

This is misguided. China is just doing what it sees is good for China. There is no evidence that has a long-range plan to defeat the US militarily or dominate the world.

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The other part of the equation is US behaviour. The US cannot with any credibility rile against the Chinese "threat" to peace while it continues its decades-long war in the Muslim world.

If the US response to the threat of terrorism is any guide, there can be little hope for a sensible response to the "threat" posed by China.

As Republican president Dwight Eisenhower warned in 1961, the military-industrial complex is usurping government foreign-policy making. It likes a good war and makes a lot of money from them.

When things go wrong with foreign policy, as they manifestly did with the war in Iraq, people ask was it a cock-up or a conspiracy. In Iraq it was both. There was a conspiracy to start the war, duping the public so the likes of military contractor Halliburton could make billions, and the aftermath was a cock-up with no plan for the defeated Iraqi army or for building a new administration.

The people of the US should heed Eisenhower's warning (despite not doing so in the past) and not let the hawks in the government cause unnecessary conflict with China.

The power of the military-industrial complex in the US is best illustrated by the fact that both president Obama and president Trump correctly proclaimed an aim and desire to get the US out of its wars in the Muslim world, but neither were able to do so.

The world should best watch out that the US's mistaken response to terrorism is not replicated with its response to China. If it is, it may become impossible to meet the greatest threat to human security yet: global heating.

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