

ARGUMENT

An expert's point of view on a current event.

China Is Pushing Disengagement With the United States Hard

Beijing paints Washington as an implacable and inevitable opponent.

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As talk of a new Cold War with the People's Republic of China (PRC) becomes ever more normal in the United States, a common discussion point in foreign policy circles has been that Washington was wrong to engage with Beijing over the past few decades. Critics point out that China has not, as Americans hoped, transformed from an authoritarian country into a like-minded democracy. Instead, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has become stronger and more autocratic, China's economy has gained more international leverage, and the People's Liberation Army has developed into the United States' top military competitor.

To rectify what they see as the United States' mistaken policy of engagement, U.S. commentators and politicians now regularly call for Washington to work with its allies and partners to contain China's rise. Some analysts have taken exception to this new geopolitical consensus in Washington and urged the United States not to abandon engagement with China on areas of shared concern, at the very least to avoid a military or climate catastrophe.

Yet any attempt to find common ground with China will have to confront the fact that there are plenty of advocates of disengagement in Beijing itself. A little under a decade ago, a frequent refrain in Chinese foreign policy circles was that Beijing was not ready to be a global leader and still had much to learn from the United States, and should continue to engage with the country. And when Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, this sort of talk did not immediately disappear. During my last trip to China in 2019, several scholars in Shanghai still downplayed the PRC's capability to lead globally and stressed the need to cooperate with and study the United States.

But generally, under Xi, China's propaganda apparatus appears determined to tell "a good China story" that lauds how CCP rule, and especially Xi's leadership, has generated a plethora of domestic accomplishments and raised China's global clout. In recent years, Chinese state media has also worked hard to put to rest the idea that the PRC should take the United States as a model to emulate. Every day, Chinese media pumps out enormous volumes of content about why the United States is failing as a global leader.

Criticisms of the United States are nothing new in Chinese discourse. They have in fact been a media staple since the PRC's establishment in 1949. However, during the height of U.S.-Chinese engagement in the 1990s and 2000s, Beijing tempered talk about U.S. imperialism and directed public attention more toward Japanese aggression in China during World War II.

After the 2008 financial crisis, CCP elites began to think that the United States' global hegemony was in decline, and that China had a strategic opportunity to employ its expanding geopolitical power and mold the international environment to align with its national interests.

The Trump administration's confrontational handling of international institutions and Washington's partners buttressed the CCP's view that China's chance to act as a global leader had arrived—and that Beijing had to be more assertive in shaping global discourse, as Trump's team made restraining China's rise a top foreign-policy objective. The Biden administration's sustained pressure on Beijing reinforced the CCP's determination to convince audiences both in and outside China that, as a recent Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs report declared, U.S. hegemony is a danger to the world. Chinese state media argues that the solution to the U.S. threat to international stability and security is the PRC—which putatively has no intention of using its growing power to dominate or destabilize other countries, but rather strives to realize “the shared interests of mankind” and advance “peaceful development” worldwide.

China's Global Security Initiative, announced in 2022, positions the PRC as rejecting U.S. efforts to split the world into hostile regional blocs and make “the law of the jungle” the only rule of international affairs. The Chinese state press advocates for thinking of the world as a “global village” and constantly lionizes Beijing for promoting economic development—the most important vehicle for realizing global peace and progress—with the Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, and Global Development Initiative, started in 2021. Citing these initiatives, Chinese media proclaims that humanity can move away from the current United States-led international order, which it claims only enhances developed countries' “capacity to exploit the rest.”

Under Beijing's leadership, the world will allegedly instead shift toward a new era based on international solidarity and cooperation, in which all people will enjoy the fruits of just and sustainable global development. International relations will transition from a unipolar system centered on the United States to a multipolar order in which developing countries are “better represented and ... heard on the international

stage.” Beijing contends it is well-suited to cooperating with developing countries to create this fairer global economy because of its recent experience overcoming colonialism and underdevelopment and its long history of prioritizing world peace and harmony.

The United States, on the other hand, is only concerned about its own interests, according to China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From Beijing’s perspective, when U.S. officials speak about protecting a rules-based international order, they are not referring to a global system that countries have freely chosen. Rather, the United States has imposed its will and standards on other nations, forcing them to accept an “international order designed to serve the [United States’] own interests and perpetuate its hegemony.”

Beijing’s Foreign Affairs Ministry additionally asserts that people all over the world should not trust the United States to advance global peace since, as it claims, Washington is currently the “largest source of disruption” in the world and frequently abuses its military primacy to “pave the way for expansionist objectives.” To back up this assertion, Chinese propaganda focuses public awareness on how the U.S. military-industrial complex incites Americans’ fear of global enemies to line its pockets. It shines a spotlight on civilian casualties, property damage, and other humanitarian consequences caused by U.S. interventions abroad, from the Korean War to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Beijing charges that despite Washington’s talk about increasing global economic growth, the United States’ primary goal is to continue to dominate supply chains, monopolize intellectual property, and coerce countries into siding with the United States in a new cold war against China in order to maintain technological hegemony. China argues that while Beijing is working to expand global trade, Washington is making countries reject Chinese economic opportunities, while also not giving those countries significant tariff reductions or increased access to U.S. markets.

Sanctions are a particular object of ire because Washington uses them, from Beijing's point of view, as a geopolitical weapon to ensure China does not economically surpass the United States. The PRC's Foreign Affairs Ministry has even branded America as the "United States of Sanctions" for routinely using its state power to suppress economic competitors and impede other countries' "economic development and people's wellbeing."

Chinese propaganda also regularly points out flaws in U.S. domestic politics. China's Foreign Ministry maintains that the United States has "a government of the one percent, by the one percent, [and] for the one percent," in which politicians "serve the interests of their financial backers ... rather than the ordinary people." As the Soviet Union once did, Chinese state media frequently highlights racial tensions in the United States, asserting that non-white people all over the world should not put their stock in U.S. global leadership because white supremacy continues to find expression in the United States' "inhuman treatment" of immigrants, systemic discrimination against minorities, and "deep-rooted hate and discrimination against Asian Americans."

The CCP's decision to ramp up negative portrayals of the United States is reminiscent of its attitudes in the early years of the Soviet-era Cold War. After the PRC's founding, the CCP sought to suppress positive thoughts and feelings in China about the United States, a necessary action as many urban Chinese elites had studied abroad in the United States, consumed American popular culture, and regarded the country to be a beacon of modernity. As Cold War battle lines hardened with the Korean War, Mao Zedong and his colleagues pushed China's propaganda machine into overdrive promoting antipathy toward the United States and casting Americans as China's mortal enemy. Under Xi, the CCP is once again marshaling its

considerable media resources to make the Chinese public see disengagement with the United States as the best policy to defend China's national interests and rising global influence.

Seemingly only by quashing Chinese sympathy for the United States do contemporary CCP leaders think they can fulfill their longstanding political mission of overcoming China's century of humiliation after the Opium Wars and return China to a position of international greatness. With the United States brought low in the domestic public eye, no longer will any nation stand above China in the national imagination. Instead, the Chinese people will stand proud, tall, and confident that their country is finally again second to no one, knowing the CCP can and will lead China to even greater heights.

Until Chinese leaders move away from their current policy of fueling Chinese nationalism with a steady diet of anti-Americanism, any U.S. efforts to mend fences with Beijing will run into the CCP's determination to convince the Chinese people that there is little to learn from or like about the United States, and much to loathe, lambast, and look down upon.

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