US-China Relations in Danger:
A Call for Wise and Courageous Leaders

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U.S.-China relations are on a slippery slope with few obvious ways to slow our descent or change our trajectory.

We urgently need wise and courageous leaders to engage seriously with positive intent to avoid dangerous confrontations – including military – and debilitating spending of resources which should instead be spent on improvement of citizens’ lives.

Each country harbors "grievances," senses opportunity, and feels danger.

The View from Beijing

China continues to grow and to exercise its global ambitions, led by a devoted Communist Party believer and authoritarian. Xi Jinping acts to retain control of the Party and 1.4 billion people. He knows that historically Chinese emperors were confronted with the governance challenge of keeping a large empire together; eventually the country weakens and divides. Xi fears "containment" by the US -- and believes it has already begun. At some point he will push back harder in ways subtle or obvious and potentially dangerous.
China will not be easily deterred in its plans for internal and external development. Too much is at stake: seizing an historic opportunity to regain a rightful, pre-eminent place in the world; China’s self-respect and memories of foreign domination; the imperatives of sustaining economic growth; its decision to lessen reliance on foreign technology and food imports (Xi recently re-introduced the Mao-era idea of “self-reliance”; its continuing military investments and a desire to expand its influence in the western Pacific, South China Sea and beyond; and its desire to promote its hoped-for soft power as a beacon to others, including US allies.

**But its march is not inexorable.** It faces mammoth problems of effective political and economic governance of a large country with a history of internal division; pushback from citizens and elites to Xi’s schemes of control; uneven economic development; environmental degradation and serious risk from climate change; widespread corruption; a declining labor force; the need to invest massively in medical, educational, and retirement systems; and facing countries that will not bend easily to China’s will. To name a few.

A full-on confrontation with the United States would undermine China’s growth and introduce unpredictable dangers.

**The View from Washington**

On the US side, Vice President Pence’s broadside against China on October 3 was surprising in pouring out all our grievances, real and off-the-mark, while suggesting we won’t settle for anything less than significant change in China’s system of government and society. It’s good the administration has spoken out on the need for improved Chinese practices, but by including even the “kitchen sink,” we run the risk that China stonewalls across-the-board and refuses to engage seriously.

**A great danger is that the Trump administration does not have a coherent set of policies for what it wants our relationship to look like over 5-10-20 years and**
how to get there. How do we work with and protect our allies? How do we avoid driving China further toward other authoritarian regimes? What are the incentives and disincentives for both countries? We need to set negotiating priorities and create some sense of working with China toward shared ends. Otherwise the relationship will further drift in dangerous ways for both countries and the world.

The administration does not acknowledge the depth and breadth of our two countries’ relationship and the many positives for both countries (including avoiding war). While it has identified serious issues, it now is floundering with a divided cabinet and ad hoc, transactional approaches. Tariffs get Beijing's attention; they are a tactic, not an answer. Flirting with changing our relationship with Taiwan is dangerous because the PRC's future relationship with Taiwan is a "core" security issue. And now the administration asserts the need for many new nuclear weapons and missiles.

We should also be concerned that Beijing at some point might well offer "concessions" which are unlikely to make for fundamental improvement but which Trump might seize and claim as a great negotiating success. The result? Difficult grievances would continue to fester and cause further anger and distrust on both sides in coming years.

**What are the Right US approaches to Dealing with China?**

The most effective long-run approach is to present a united United States that speaks and acts confidently, and carefully, in building its relations with others.

Is it possible to imagine two confident powers that could eventually reach some kind of informal, cooperative “entente” where each respects interests/alliances of the other and works to resolve pressing world problems?
Chinese leaders respect strength and unity. Currently, they conclude the United States is weak because of our internal political divisions, partisanship, and gridlock. They point to our inability to deal effectively with such critical issues as investment in infrastructure and point to their own successes in building new cities, high speed trains, a stronger military, rapid economic growth, and security for their citizens.

Chinese leaders also are aware of America’s historic ability to pull itself together, draw on its strengths, and do what needs to be done. Hence their wariness of what we might do in the future. The president’s mercurial approach to foreign policy increases their reluctance to engage or commit.

There are many other things we can do, including setting clear goals and priorities of what we realistically hope for in the relationship, clear and consistent messages, maintaining strong relations with allies and friends who can be “force multipliers,” blocking attempts to divide Americans or to divide us from our allies, a calmer negotiating environment eschewing harsher words, talk of confrontation or demonization of Chinese or Chinese Americans, use of soft power to highlight our values, use of hard power to hit back at cyber attacks and in collaboration with allies maintain a strong forward defense posture, and aggressive use of CFIUS, WTO and other authorities.

Finding ways to work with China in solving problems they have at home could provide inducements for productive exchange. Perhaps New York, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and St. Petersburg could cooperate on how to cope with the rise in sea levels.

The more we use scattershot or ad hoc attempts to bludgeon or strong arm China, particularly publicly, the more China’s leaders will hold back and refuse to engage.

Importantly, we must recognize that long-term building of bridges that will serve our interests will require flexible use of strategies, steadiness, and courage.
What is the Fundamental Danger?

Here is the fundamental problem as we drift closer to ensnarement by the Thucydides Trap. Each administration, comprising only a handful of leaders in Beijing and Washington, wants to be the dominant Big Kahuna on the world stage. I use the word "administration" deliberately. I don’t believe either the American or Chinese people are prepared to knowingly support significant, harmful confrontations let alone armed force. Nor would they support an all-of-society mobilization to strive for the dubious title of Biggest Kahuna.

And yet the Trump administration is already acting as if China needs to be weakened and contained. **Be very careful what one hopes for. The stakes and the risks could be world-shattering.**

Is the trajectory toward fatal confrontation inevitable? In a word, I believe the answer is “no.” But we urgently need courageous and wise leaders who are willing to take risks for the betterment of their people and for everyone else around the world.

Stay tuned.

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