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Getting Real About China

Wesley Clark: To Manage China, Fix America First

By WESLEY K. CLARK OCT. 10, 2014

China's harsh suppression of political dissent, from Hong Kong to Xinjiang, and its close ties to Russia, Iran and North Korea, have finally laid to rest the dream many Western leaders have had since the 1990s: that "constructive engagement" would eventually, inevitably lead to more openness and democracy.

Instead, the opposite has occurred: China is more confident, more assertive, and also more closed. Thirty-five years after Deng Xiaoping freed up the economy, the Communist Party is using material prosperity and nationalist ideology to maintain its legitimacy in the face of the wrenching social tensions. It has rejected both the move toward democracy and the acceptance of human and civil rights that Americans had hoped would emerge from China's astonishing economic rise. Even more worrisome, China's foreign policy relies on keenly calculated self-interest, at the expense of the international institutions, standards and obligations the United States has sought to champion. It increasingly views the United States as a rival and potential adversary.

What went wrong?

In the late 1970s, when the United States and China fully normalized relations, Beijing sought a strategic partnership with Washington, to deter a perceived Soviet threat. By the late 1980s, China was unconcerned about the Soviets, though willing to listen and learn from the United States military. The Chinese were especially impressed by our prowess in the 1991 Persian Gulf war. All the while, China built its agricultural, industrial and technological strength; military modernization was a second-tier priority. As late as 2005, China's

admiration for the United States — and awareness of its own rising power — were such that a young, well-connected Communist Party leader told me, “China knows that you and Britain were best friends, and Britain gave you leadership of the world; China wants to be America’s best friend, so you will give us leadership of the world.”

If there was a turning point in China’s assessment of America, it could be found in the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath. While still respectful of our military might, China began to see the United States as a failing system, with a debt-saddled economy and a dysfunctional government, vulnerable to being replaced as the world’s leader. In 2011, a well-placed Chinese associate told me that the country’s new leadership intended to dominate the South China Sea; that its regional rivals, like Vietnam, would bow to its ambitions or “be taught a lesson”; and that if the United States interfered, our assets would be targeted.

By 2013, this associate’s warnings had become even more ominous: “We can see your stealth aircraft”; “we have our own GPS and can shoot down yours”; “we know your technologies from all your companies and from NASA, because Chinese scientists work these for you”; “you will not have any military relations with the Philippines unless we allow it, because China provides them $3.5 billion per month in remittances through Hong Kong”; “Chinese shipyards are working 24 hours a day, seven days a week”; “more than 30 ships were launched between October 2012 and April 2013”; “by 2019 China will have four aircraft carriers deployed.”

China doesn’t seek conflict — it can achieve most of its goals by adroitly combining traditional diplomacy with its vast economic power. But neither will it avoid conflict. It has in the past used its military “pre-emptively” rather than defensively. A danger is that an ascendant China seeking recognition of its power and rights, will, whether deliberately or through miscalculation, spark conflict.

But the deeper strategic problem for America is China’s more fundamental challenge to the global architecture of trade, law and peaceful resolution of disputes that the United States and its allies created after World War II. China’s strategic rise — patient, nuanced and farsighted — threatens all of this. Just as the United States has sought the worldwide adoption of democratic values and

American norms for international behavior, China will seek structures and relationships that support Communist Party rule at home, and its policy that countries should not intervene in one another's affairs.

The ascendancy of naked and direct self-interest as an organizing principle would mean a fundamental weakening of Western institutions and values, including the rule of law. This would be a step backward, toward 19th-century ideas of the balance of power and spheres of influence. The question, as Henry A. Kissinger has framed it, is "whether China can work with us to create an international structure in which, perhaps for the first time in history, a rising state has been incorporated into an international system and strengthened peace and progress."

In analyzing China, the United States must look beyond historical parallels. In scale, China's economic growth, and the challenge it presents, is vastly greater than that of Japan in the 1980s. A century ago, Germany was an ascending power willing to wage war, but it never had the population or industrial capacity of the United States, or, until the 1930s, the leadership of a single political party, above the rule of law. Nor is China like the Soviet Union, economically isolated from the larger world. There is no historical precedent.

For over two decades, the American strategy toward China has balanced between "engagement" and "containment," a version of American policy toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, announced in late 2011, was perceived as being directed against China, a shift toward containment. The United States has not only shifted forces but also updated defense treaties as part of this pivot. The United States is negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership, an effort to create a large free-trade zone encompassing 11 other countries, but not China.

As China presses its territorial claims on the South China Sea and East China Sea more forcefully — including even a claim, in some quarters, of jurisdiction over Okinawa, where American forces are based — the United States is being drawn into regional controversies. In the past few years we have found ourselves courted by Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines and other countries in the region, which are anxious for reassurance and support against

China's new assertiveness, but also wary of provoking it. It will be in China's interest to force us progressively to choose, on issue after issue, between China and the interests of our allies in the region.

The United States will emphasize multilateral forums for resolving disputes through international law, and fulfill our commitments to allies. China, in contrast, views this international order and these formalized obligations as being heavily tilted against it.

We should be under no illusions about the difficult road ahead. China operates on a long-term vision, driven by its own interests. By some estimates, China's gross domestic product could surpass that of the United States sometime in the next decade. By then, Chinese military strength — including aircraft carriers, land-based aviation, submarines, and ballistic missile technologies, all of which could be directed against American aircraft carriers in the East and South China Seas — will be formidable. Even without any military confrontation, the balance of power in the western Pacific will shape the Chinese predisposition to push, threaten or compromise.

The Chinese must understand that their expanding military capabilities have consequences. For example, the United States must not rule out the need to strengthen its ballistic missile defense system, as China rattles its intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities. We should be very candid in explaining this to the Chinese. China is closely observing events in Ukraine, and what our statements and actions there may mean for Asia. We must help China understand that a closer, more assertive alignment with Russia will only provoke the United States and our allies. The pivot to Asia makes sense, but must not come at the expense of our obligations to our allies in Europe and elsewhere.

Even more important, America must work to persuade China that its interests lie not in narrow self-aggrandizement, like expanding its territorial reach, but in assuming shared responsibility for global leadership, commensurate with its wealth and power. The institutions of global governance — the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the like — have not been perfect, but they remain the best framework for securing peace and prosperity around the world. A China that turns its back on these

institutions will find itself isolated and defensive, no matter how great its economic and military might.

While Americans should hope that China embraces democracy and human rights in the long term, in the short run, we must accept that China has a right to its own system of government and its own standards for political legitimacy and social justice. The United States should insist that China, like every other member of the United Nations, abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We must help China see a distinction between its principle of "noninterference in internal matters of other states" and respect for basic human rights and dignity. (For our part, we must also demonstrate our own acceptance of the responsibilities of global leadership by, for example, joining the International Criminal Court and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.) But we cannot assume that political development in China will happen as quickly as Americans would like.

The view, increasingly prevalent in China, that it will inevitably replace the United States as the world's leading power is far from assured. Our natural resources, the rule of law, our entrepreneurial culture, and our vast head start in higher education and science are strong factors in our favor. People from all over the world want to live and work in the United States — including wealthy Chinese. They seek the protection of our laws and the individual freedoms they find here. China does not provide these attractions.

If we are to retain our global leadership, and be a constructive, countervailing force as China rises, America needs a long-term strategic vision of our own: a strong, growing economy built on a foundation of energy independence; a vibrant, effective democracy; assertive, patient diplomacy backed by supportive allies; and a military capable of standing toe to toe with China in a crisis. With these pieces in place, we can succeed in helping China assume its rightful place as a global leader, and perhaps an equal of the United States, in a manner that promotes global prosperity and stability. Perhaps then China's leaders will feel secure enough to grant real democracy to its people. But it will be a long journey.

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