

The Death of Engagement

JUNE . 7, 2020



President Nixon holds his chopsticks in the ready position as Premier Zhou Enlai (left) and Shanghai Communist Party leader Zhang Chunqiao reach in front of him for some tidbits at the beginning of the farewell banquet on Feb. 27, 1972.

Credit: Bettmann/Contributor

In 1967, as race riots spread across the United States and as the Vietnam War raged on, an astounding 70 percent of Americans agreed on one thing: the greatest threat to U.S. security was the People's Republic of China. At the time, China was in the throes of one of the most violent, anti-democratic upheavals of the century, The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and Americans feared that the contagion of Mao's "people's war" would spread from Indochina around the world.

So, it was surprising when, against this backdrop, then-presidential candidate Richard Nixon [issued a call for amity in the pages of *Foreign*](#)

Affairs. Still famed for his anti-Communism, he warned Americans that they needed to come to grips with “the reality of China.”

Listen: The Wire’s David Barboza talks with Orville Schell about the end of “engagement” with China.

“Taking the long view,” he wrote, “we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside of the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation.”

Then, he touched on a theme that would only gain relevance two decades later. “The world cannot be safe until China changes,” he continued. “Thus, our aim — to the extent that we influence events — should be to induce change.”

These were the seeds of “engagement,” a policy that has defined U.S.-China relations for almost a half century. It has been embraced by seven presidential administrations — Republican and Democrat — and survived various national emergencies, including the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the Belgrade Chinese embassy bombing in 1999, and the aftershocks of the 2008 financial crisis. I myself have been in Tiananmen Square many times over my almost half a century visiting the PRC and, until recently, have always been filled with some measure of engagement’s hope of “putting aside differences to seek common ground” (求同存异). On my very first trip in 1975 to work on a model agricultural brigade and in a factory, slogans such as “Down With American Imperialism and Its Running Dogs” were still scrawled on walls even as Americans were welcomed with banners

extolling “the friendship between our two great peoples” that suggested a common way forward. This was my first experience being confronted by the submerged contradiction of U.S.-China relations; that despite all of the talk of “friendship” and diplomacy, we Americans remained insoluble in the Chinese Communist Party’s social, political and economic autarky.

Today, as the U.S. faces its most adversarial state with the People’s Republic of China in years, the always fragile policy framework of engagement feels like a burnt-out case. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the relationship was already “decoupling” and the demonstrations in Hong Kong and Beijing’s assault on the “one country, two systems” formula was a *coup de grace*. A [recent Pew poll](#) shows that only 26 percent of Americans view China favorably, the lowest percentage since its surveys began in 2005. Once again, it seems the only thing Americans can agree on is that China is a threat.

All of which begs the question: if engagement has failed as a policy, was it fallacious from the outset? To answer this question and understand how we ended up where we are, we must turn back to the policy’s genesis and follow its evolution through a slice of Sino-U.S. history that has curiously paralleled my own odyssey as a student of China’s often tortured progress to the present.



THE TRIP: RICHARD NIXON, ZHOU ENLAI AND THE BIRTH OF ENGAGEMENT



On February 21, 1972, after more than two decades of Cold War hostility, *The Spirit of 76* taxied up to the small stone building that then served as Capitol Airport’s Beijing terminal. As Richard and Pat Nixon were

enthusiastically greeted by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, America's policy of engagement was born.

Both sides had strategic reasons for this historic trip. The Sino-Soviet rift had deepened in 1969 when Russian and Chinese troops clashed along their 4,000-mile border and as Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi declared, "It is necessary for us to utilize the contradiction between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. in a strategic sense and to pursue Sino-U.S. relations." Zhou believed that, trapped in the quagmire of Vietnam, "the American imperialists have no choice but to improve their relations with China in order to counteract the Soviet imperialists."



During the visit, Nixon thanked Zhou for his "incomparable hospitality." Credit: Byron Schumaker/White House

Sensing a game-changing opportunity, Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Advisor, began cultivating Beijing. He declared that the U.S. has "no permanent enemies" and promised to judge countries like China "on the basis of their actions and not on the basis of their domestic ideology." In

his quest to end U.S.-China estrangement, he insisted “geopolitics trumped other considerations.”

Those other considerations, however, were not lost on the American people — who were hardly ready to accept China’s Maoist system — or Zhou. While Zhou welcomed Nixon to the Great Hall of the People saying that “the gates to friendly contact have finally been opened,” he also reminded his American guests that “the social systems of China and the U.S. are fundamentally different and there exists great differences between the Chinese government and the U.S. government.”

While Zhou stressed that those differences shouldn’t stand in the way of normal state relations, Nixon went a beat further, noting that “If our two people are enemies, the future is dark indeed.” The two countries have, he said, “common interests that transcend those differences.”



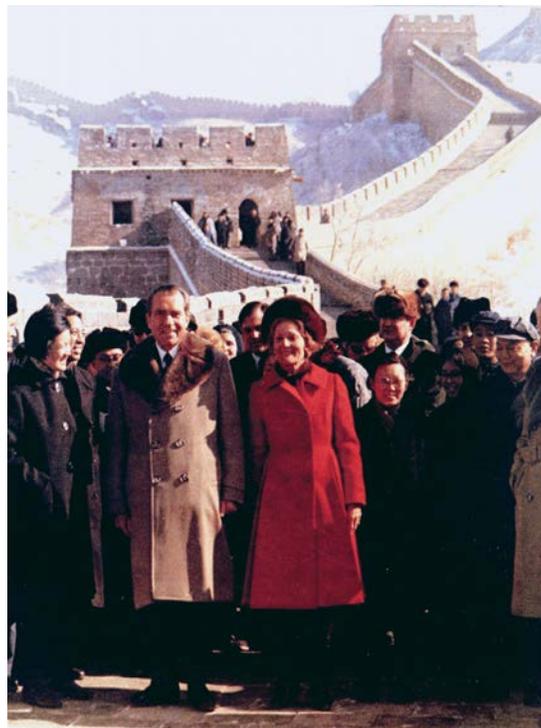
In 1954, John Foster Dulles had refused to shake Premier Zhou Enlai’s hand. But during his secret trips to China, Henry Kissinger found Zhou to be “urbane, infinitely patient, extraordinarily intelligent, [and] subtle.”

Credit: Bettmann/Contributor

“While we cannot close the gulf between us,” Nixon rejoined, “we can try and bridge it so that we may be able to talk across it.”

Nixon's new China policy sought to transcend America's long-standing American antipathy toward Mao and the evils of Communism to recast U.S.-China relations, even the global order. It was a tough sell, but Nixon's intuitive understanding of how to use the power of television as political theater helped him carry the day. He was not only the first U.S. president to visit China, but he'd also [arranged to have the trip televised live around the world via satellite links](#). As he boasted in his opening toast in Beijing, "more people are seeing and hearing what we say here than on any other occasion in the whole history of the world."¹

"If we can find common ground to work together," Nixon hopefully continued, "the chance of world peace is immeasurably increased." Then he dramatically declared, "This is the hour, this is the day for our two peoples to rise to the heights of greatness which can build a new and better world."



On the Great Wall, Nixon said he hoped one result of his trip would be that "the walls that are erected, whether they are walls of ideology or philosophy, will not divide the peoples of the world." Credit: Byron Schumaker/White House

By using TV to take viewers along with him into the enigma of Mao's Communism, Nixon helped them accept the starkness of his policy reversal.

And being able to share the pomp, ceremony, and excitement of his path-breaking trip did more to enable Americans to accept “Red China” than all the high-sounding policy explications and diplomatic communiques put together.

Proudly calling his summit “the week that changed the world,” Nixon proclaimed, “We have demonstrated that nations with deep and fundamental differences can learn to discuss those differences calmly, rationally and frankly without compromising their principles.” But, he cautioned, “our work will require years of patient effort.”

It was not lost on anyone that what had greatly eased the way to this rapprochement was the U.S. side’s willingness to excuse China’s “fundamental differences” in ideology and values as a purely “internal affair,” as Kissinger put it. As the two American leaders assured Mao on a subsequent visit, “what is important is not a nation’s internal philosophy” but “its policy towards the rest of the world and toward us.”

It was a pledge that would lead to dissent both from the U.S. Congress and the American people, but there was no denying that this new beginning had also started to transform the PRC from an implacable enemy and rebel disruptor into a seemingly more digestible, if not yet fully collaborative, partner. Quickly, a whole host of blurry unspoken assumptions and inchoate hopes began to grow out of Nixon’s magical mystery tour. Who knew what wonderous things might follow, especially if the US and China actually began trading, allowing tourism, and engaging in educational exchanges?



No one could deny that something momentous had been set in motion — so momentous, in fact, that Kissinger later boasted that the U.S. and China “have now become tacit allies.” Credit: Byron Schumaker/White House

Nixon and Mao both walked away feeling like winners, the former for his dramatic diplomatic breakthrough and the latter for relieving China of its main adversary. But the euphoria masked myriad unresolved issues — such as the status of Taiwan (which China only grudgingly agreed to set aside after Kissinger made some important compromises) and the stark differences between the political systems and values of the two countries.



THE RODEO: JIMMY CARTER, DENG XIAOPING AND NORMALIZATION



Just as it had taken an ardent anti-Communist to befriend the CCP leadership, it fell to America’s first “human rights president,” Jimmy Carter, to overlook the Party’s manifold rights abuses and take the next big step. Despite the fact that Carter assumed office declaring that his administration “should not ass-kiss [Beijing] the way Nixon and Kissinger did,” his administration ended up agreeing to both cut off formal diplomatic contact with Taiwan (“free China”) and normalize diplomatic relations with Beijing, the world’s most populous Communist state.

So it was that, on a freezing January morning in 1979, I awoke in Washington, D.C., to find the five star crimson flag of the PRC rippling over the south lawn of the White House. [President Carter was about to welcome China's "supreme leader," Deng Xiaoping](#), who had quite counter-intuitively become the toast of Washington society.

“Sino-U.S. relations have arrived at a fresh beginning and the world situation is at a new turning point,” Deng said grandiloquently. “Friendly cooperation between our two peoples is bound to exert a positive and far-reaching influence on the way the world situation evolves.”



Deng Xiaoping, quite counterintuitively, became the toast of Washington, D.C. Credit: U.S. National Archives And Records Administration

After the formalities in the U.S. capital concluded, the 4'11" tall Deng (whom Mao had described as “a pin wrapped in a ball of cotton”) departed for Atlanta and then Houston to tour the Johnson Space Center and enjoy a Texas rodeo. Once again, it was a piece of well-produced political theater that played a latchkey role in advancing the idea that, as different as they

were, the USA and PRC might still find ways to co-exist, even work together.

Indeed, after decades contemplating this unbridgeable divide, I had to pinch myself as I sat — with a paper plate sagging under a mountain of baked beans and barbecued beef in my lap — only a few rows from Deng and his Mao-suited delegation in the Simonton Texas rodeo arena as the *Yellow Rose of Texas* blasted out of the sound system and two young women carrying American and Chinese flags loped over on quarter horses and presented the grinning Deng a Stetson hat. When he appeared a short time later in a horse-drawn stagecoach waving his cowboy hat, as the audience cheered and stomped their feet — it did feel like a new era was being born.



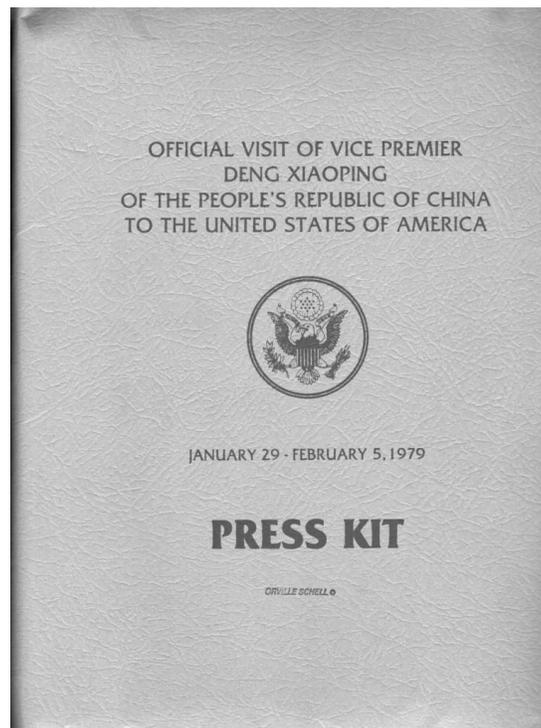
Americans were charmed by Deng's openness, confidence, pragmatism and embrace of Americana.

Credit: AP Photo/File

The rodeo was being televised in China, and by publicly embracing such indelible symbols of Americana, Deng was broadcasting a powerful message of reconciliation back home. But his theatrics helped market the new policy of the U.S. and China “engaging” to Americans as well. As Rep. Bill

Alexander from Arkansas buoyantly proclaimed, “The seeds of democracy are growing in China.” Even Carter dared to imagine that “all the internal affairs of China and dealings with the outside” now had the potential to “be transformed completely.”

Deng was doing something rare in the world of highly scripted, ritualized diplomatic protocol: he was injecting personal sentiment into the narrative in a way that made it possible for both sides to imagine how the two former antagonists might now actually find some convergence. Who could resist smiling when, after Carter chastised Deng for not allowing freedom of emigration, he cheekily replied, “Well, Mr. President, how many Chinese nationals do you want? Ten million? Twenty million? Thirty million?”



Press kit for Deng Xiaoping's visit to the U.S. in 1979. Credit: Courtesy of Orville Schell

But for all his confidence and charm, Deng's visit also glossed over contradictions that troubled many skeptics. Long-time intelligence operative and future ambassador to Beijing James Lilley, saw normalization not only as naïve, but a “bungled, compromised agreement” into which the U.S. had rushed.

“If Peking can manipulate us so easily, how can any Chinese have real respect for us?” he wondered.

What worried him was the way the “two Chinas question” had been kicked down the road. “We were taken to the cleaners on Taiwan,” he lamented in a memorandum to George H. W. Bush. “Peking houses hard-eyed realists... You do not put dilettantes up against pros and come away with favorable results.”

Former Republican Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage was even more dismissive of the way the U.S. had embraced Beijing. In our eagerness to make things work out, he complained, we were “teaching the dog to piss on the rug.”

So eager was Carter to upgrade “the relationship,” he gave Beijing a pass on the human rights question.² In historian John Pomfret’s view, Carter’s anxiety to reassure Beijing prevented him from realizing just “how much Deng Xiaoping needed the U.S. to execute his ambitious plan to modernize China.” American officials, he wrote, seemed “oblivious to their leverage.” This view was also shared by George H. W. Bush, who believed “China needs us more than we need them.”

Whatever one’s assessment, these two opening acts in the drama of U.S.-China “engagement” in the 1970s had set the two once estranged countries on a friendly glide path. So much so, in fact, that by the time of the negotiation on the Hong Kong hand-over began in the early 1980s, Premier Zhao Ziyang could credibly proclaim, “It is self-evident that Hong Kong will be run democratically.”



THE MASSACRE: GEORGE H. W. BUSH, DENG AND U.S. DEFERENCE



To stand atop the fabled Gate of Heavenly Peace, as I did in May of 1989, and see a million people gathered in protest against the Chinese Communist Party was to behold a scene Mao could not have imagined, except in a nightmare.

It was impossible to walk through the Square among so many ecstatic, banner-waving youths and not feel a sense of exhilaration, for this political springtime allowed one to imagine that a more democratic, less adversarial China might finally be arriving.



Hundreds of thousands of people filled Beijing's central Tiananmen Square on May 17, 1989, in the biggest popular upheaval in China since the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Credit: Reuters/Ed Nachtrieb

But where American liberals saw reform and hope, CCP stalwarts saw conspiracy, peril, and “peaceful evolution,” a toxic cocktail of foreign machinations aimed at undermining the Party’s “dictatorship of the proletariat.”³ As far as stalwarts were concerned, political reform, if left unconstrained, would threaten one-party rule, so it was hardly surprising when, after initial PLA efforts to clear the Square were thwarted by protesters, a determined Deng reassembled fresh units with new orders to

“recover the Square at any cost.” As troops again swept into Beijing, this time behind armored vehicles, not only were thousands of dead and wounded soon littering the streets, but the protest movement and its hopes for meaningful political reform were over.

The Beijing massacre also left the logic of engagement in critical condition. For without reform there could be no convergence, and without any promise of convergence, engagement made no sense. And no argument was able to explain away the barbarity of what viewers around the world had seen on their TV screens. Suddenly conservatives who'd never really believed friendly relations could be forged with a Maoist regime gained new currency. As a columnist in the *Austin American Statesman* disparagingly concluded, “Deng Xiaoping ain't worthy of his cowboy hat no more.”



When asked why he was being so deferential to Beijing, Bush said it would be “a tragedy for all” if the U.S. broke off relations. Then, he raised a new theme: that commercial incentives would make democracy in China inevitable.

Credit: *Still from C-SPAN video*

As the world reeled from the massacre, President Bush expressed fears that an “overly emotional” reaction might lead to “a total break” and “throw China back into the hands of the Soviet Union.” [At a press conference on June 5, he warned](#) that this was the time for a “reasoned, careful action that takes into account our long-term interest and recognition of a complex internal situation in China.” The U.S. needed, he stressed, “time to look

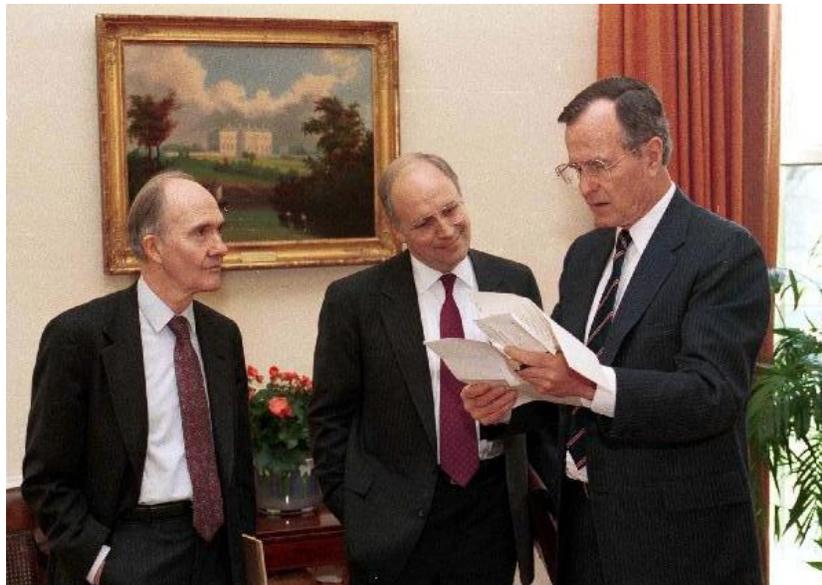
beyond the moment to the important and enduring aspects of this vital relationship.”

When asked why he was being so deferential to Beijing, Bush replied, “It would only be a tragedy for all if China were to pull back to its pre-1972 era of isolation and repression.” Then, he raised a new theme: “I think, as people have commercial incentives, whether it’s in China or other totalitarian systems, the move to democracy becomes inexorable.”

He would stop short of breaking relations with China, he said, in order to encourage the Chinese “to continue their change.”

Bush had tried to call Deng, but failing to get through, wrote a letter “from the heart.”

“We both do more for world peace, if we can get our relationship back on track,” he pleaded. Then, defying the national mood of censure, he dispatched his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, to Beijing on a trip so secret that not even the U.S. ambassador was notified.



Bush sent Scowcroft (left) on a secret trip to Beijing following the June 4th massacre to smooth over diplomatic relations, but Deng accused the U.S. of “[interfering] in China’s internal affairs.”

Credit: George Bush Presidential Library and Museum

Even then, Deng was not remorseful. Blaming the U.S. for “rumor mongering” and being “too deeply involved” in what he called “an earth-shattering event for China,” he accused Washington of having “impugned China’s interests” and “hurt China’s dignity.” He warned that if the U.S. did not summon up a more “objective and honest reaction” toward what he termed China’s “counter-revolutionary rebellion,” Sino-U.S. relations would fall into a “dangerous state.”

“I would like to tell you, Mr. Scowcroft,” he chided icily, “we will never allow any people to interfere in China’s internal affairs.”

During this tongue lashing, Scowcroft remained surprisingly contrite. “Rightly or wrongly,” Americans had been outraged, he tried to explain, as if the outrage felt by so many back home had no particular moral charge. Then, he pleaded for Deng to recognize the long distance he’d come as conveying the “symbolic importance” President Bush placed on the U.S.-China relationship and demonstrative of “the efforts he is prepared to make to preserve it.” Alluding to the fact that Bush had just vetoed legislation sanctioning China, even though it had passed the U.S. House of Representatives by a 418-0 vote, Scowcroft told Deng how “deeply appreciative” he was of “your willingness to receive us to explain the dilemma in which [President Bush] finds himself. That’s a message from a true friend of the Chinese government and the people of China.”

Read: Deng Xiaoping and Brent Scowcroft’s July 2, 1989 meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing

“There is no force whatsoever which can substitute for the PRC represented by the CCP,” countered Deng imperiously. “Let me just repeat, we have to see what kind of remarks and what kind of actions the U.S. will take,” he

concluded, throwing responsibility for the breakdown back onto Scowcroft and Washington.

The Washington Post called the trip “a placatory concession to a repressive and bloodstained Chinese government.” *The Wall Street Journal* savaged it as “one of the great tin-ear exercises of our time.” But Michel Oksenberg, a senior staff member on the National Security Council under the Carter administration, praised it as “an act of courageous leadership.” Whatever else it was, Scowcroft’s trip was a demonstration of how important the U.S.-China relationship had now become to Washington.

For those of us who had been on the ground during the seven-week protest movement, what was most striking about the Scowcroft trip was how roles had gotten reversed. Instead of Deng, who’d just tarnished his country’s reputation by massacring his own people, seeking Scowcroft’s forgiveness and help in keeping the U.S.-China relationship on track, Scowcroft somehow ended up beseeching Deng to forgive the outrage felt by Americans. Equally important was the way Scowcroft’s deference set a future precedent: Henceforth, when crises hit “the relationship,” it would be the U.S. that would be expected to bear primary responsibility for remaining flexible enough to keep it together.

Some thought Bush’s solicitude grew out of a nostalgia for his days at the Beijing Liaison Office in the mid-1970s and the personal relationships he’d established with China’s leaders as America’s first official diplomatic representative to Beijing. But his belief in the importance of American leadership in helping transform China into a more responsible participant in the existing global order, a conceit that Bush came to refer to as his “comprehensive policy of engagement,” also played an important role in his deference. After announcing his intention to resume Export-Import and World Bank lending to China, a significant concession in its own right,

Bush dispatched Scowcroft to Beijing a second time. Then, in 1991 his Secretary of State James Baker went, as well, and did extract some concessions on the Chinese sale of missiles to rogue regimes. But, gaining this modest victory was, he complained, like getting “your annual physical, the unpleasant part.”



Secretary of State James Baker traveled to China to negotiate further with the Chinese leadership. Credit: George Bush Presidential Library and Museum

Bush’s policy also exposed a disparity with the U.S.’s intolerance for the political persecution of dissidents in other countries like the Soviet Union. Whereas Russia was still viewed as a Communist tyranny, Deng’s China had now won a deferment from such totalistic judgements. As James Mann later observed, the unspoken, operating principle had become: “The engager will not let the behavior of the Chinese regime, however, reprehensible, get in the way of continued business with China.”

Deng, for his part, surprised everyone when he did not foreclose the possibility of further engagement following the massacre. After praising military commanders for putting down the “turmoil,” (动乱), he

rhetorically asked them, “Is our basic concept of reform and openness wrong? ... No! Without reform how could we have what we have today?”

Crucially, however, what Deng was recommitting to was not “political reform and opening up,” but “economic reform.”

It was a sage maneuver, for as one U.S. president after another came under the sway of engagement, Beijing escaped more active Washington opposition. In fact, as engagement became an ever more deeply rooted article of American faith, China was also able to garner support from other segments of U.S. society, such as academia, the philanthropic community, civil society, and business, as well. By offering Beijing a “no fault China” policy, the U.S. commitment to engagement proved an enormous providence for Beijing: It could focus on economic growth and augment its wealth and power in an unchallenged environment.



When Bill Clinton unapologetically attacked his predecessor’s accommodationist policy towards China at the Democratic National Convention in 1992, he promised a “covenant with America” that “will not coddle tyrants from Baghdad to Beijing.”

As he told *The New York Times*, “one day [the PRC] will go the way of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union,” so the U.S. “must do what it can to encourage that process.” And when Bush had extended China’s Most Favored Nation trading status without conditions, Clinton had disparaged the move as “unconscionable” and “another sad chapter in this administration’s history of putting America on the wrong side

of human rights and democracy.” Now the prospect of his victory seemed likely to push U.S.-China policy in a far more antagonistic direction.

When he won and China’s economic rise appeared ever more inexorable, Clinton too underwent an alchemic change.

But, when he won and China’s economic rise appeared ever more inexorable, Clinton, too, underwent an alchemic change. As he later wrote, he came to believe that even without ongoing U.S. pressure, China would still “be forced by the imperatives of modern society to become more open.” (Ironically, this very line ended up being excised by censors from the Chinese language translation of his book put out in Beijing).

It was at a White House press briefing in 1994 that Clinton completed his rebirth as an “engager.” He declared that he’d come to believe “we can best support human rights in China and advance our other very significant issues... by engaging the Chinese” and “delink[ing] human rights from the annual extension of Most Favored Nation status for China.”

It was quite an about-face, but maintaining the U.S.’s post-1989 massacre, pro-human rights policy was becoming untenable, especially as American businessmen — eager for a piece of the growing China market — began lobbying against it. Some businessmen, admitted Winston Lord, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, were “not only not supporting us, but were undercutting us with the Chinese.”



Jiang Zemin, Kissinger remembered, “behaved like an affable family member. He was warm and informal. He smiled, laughed and told anecdotes and touched his interlocutors to establish a bond...Jiang was the least Middle Kingdom-type of personality that I encountered among Chinese leaders.”

Credit: Joyce Naltchayan/AFP via Getty Images

As China gained more and more economic power, the terms of the game were changing, and Clinton recognized he would have to rebalance the linkage between rights and commercial interests. As James Mann bluntly put it, commerce had become “the dominant motivating force behind American policy.” With its new commercial power, China was beginning to understand they could resist U.S. pressure and, if they only held out long enough when crises arose, Washington would yield. Indeed, on May 26, 1994, Clinton finally did grant China unconditional MFN status.

“We’ve reached the end of the usefulness of that policy,” he said to justify his flip-flop. “It’s time to take a new path.”

The reprise of a slogan that Deng had launched in the 1980s — “Hide one’s abilities and bide one’s time” (韬光养晦 等待时机) — helped ease the way for Clinton. By suggesting that as it rose, China would resist displays of muscular nationalism and military belligerence, he made China’s rise appear less threatening. At the same time, a growing eagerness among American

businessmen to profit from China's low labor costs and the potential of its enormous markets dovetailed with the logic of a new American bromide: "Open markets lead to open societies." Such slogans helped Clinton conclude that a more open marketplace would ineluctably "increase the spirit of liberty," so that even without MFN pressure "over time" China would open "just as inevitably as the Berlin Wall fell." It was a beguiling dream, and by the end of his first term a full-blown policy of engagement had taken form around it.

Clinton fleshed out his new policy, called "comprehensive engagement," which toned down ostracism of China in favor of high-level interaction, even agreeing to meet with Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin at the 1993 Seattle Asian leaders summit. By July 1996, despite two provocative PRC missile firings in the Taiwan Straits, Clinton had concluded that "the nature of the changes going on in China and the way [the Chinese leadership] looked at the world and us" had rendered his previous views "simply not right."

The same U.S. goals, he declared, could be better attained by embracing, rather than opposing, China. Like Carter, he had reversed rudders, and by 1997 his administration was touting the idea of building a "constructive strategic partnership" with Beijing, one that David M. Lampton described as a mixture of "positive inducement, dialogue, and closed-door diplomacy." The virtues of engaging China would become one of the best-branded and most deeply rooted bipartisan strategies in the annals of recent American foreign policy history.

For anyone who'd experienced the events of 1989, it was surreal to be standing on the steps leading up to the Great Hall of the People awaiting the arrival of president Bill Clinton on a spring day in 1998. For it was less than a decade since protesting students had knelt right here to proffer a petition

of grievances to their leaders. And it was down these same steps that PLA troops had spilled on June 4th to deliver one of the most humiliating self-inflicted wounds of the twentieth century as the “People’s Liberation Army” fired on its own “people.” At the time, I’d found it impossible to imagine the CCP ever exorcising such ghosts, ones that had [provoked Clinton himself to blithely declare](#) that the Chinese Government “was on the wrong side of history,” as if history had some ineluctable democratic forward motion that Americans alone divined. Yet, here we were back in Tiananmen Square on a bright sunny day, with two smiling presidents greeting each other as if nothing had happened in this most symbolic of Chinese places.

What is more, even though the choreography was highly ritualized, it was abundantly evident from the way Jiang Zemin took Clinton’s arm as he stepped from his limo that both were enjoying each other’s company. Eager to let bygones be bygones, they strode down a red carpet past an honor guard and stood at attention as their national anthems were played. Then, as officials and the press corps filed into the Great Hall, an astonishing announcement was circulated: Jiang would allow the press conference (complete with an unscripted question and answer period) to be broadcast live on both radio and television across China. This meant that if the two leaders strayed into sensitive political territory, there would be no last-minute way for censors to sanitize the record. It was a dramatic gesture of Jiang’s eagerness to interact with Clinton as an equal.

Indeed, so animated did Clinton’s good-old-boy Arkansas bonhomie make Jiang that, once the press conference began, he displayed a degree of extemporaneity rarely seen in official China. Turbo-charged with the challenge of holding his own with this American master of give-and-take, even when the conversation veered into the sensitive issue of human rights, Jiang gamely plowed on to defend China’s record. And then when things

might have ended, he cheerfully piped up, “I’d like to know whether President Clinton will have anything more to add?” He did.

“If you are so afraid of personal freedom because of the abuses that you limit people’s freedom too much, then you pay,” Clinton continued, clearly relishing the way the exchange was developing. And, he added, “I believe, an even greater price [will be paid] in a world where the whole economy is based on ideas and information.”

“I am sorry to have to take up an additional five minutes,” Jiang interjected, seeming to enjoy the back-and-forth despite the controversial nature of their subjects. “I’d like to say a few words on the Dalai Lama.” Jaws dropped. Tibet and its exiled religious leader were not topics Chinese leaders welcomed, especially with Americans before live TV cameras. Nonetheless, Jiang went on, “During my visit to the U.S. last year, I found that although education in science and technology has developed to a very high level and people are now enjoying modern civilization, still quite a number believe in Lamaism [Tibetan Buddhism]. I want to find out the reason why.”

Known for singing “Home on the Range” and reciting bits of the Gettysburg Address at diplomatic gatherings, Jiang sometimes bordered on flamboyance, even clownishness. But he was also disarming, the perfect engagement partner for a glad-handing Clinton. Alas, he would be the last such Chinese leader.

Back home, after dismissively comparing the yearly congressional MFN review process to “fly-paper” that “accumulated frustrations of people about things in the world they don’t like very much,” in 2000 Clinton approved Permanent Normal Trade Relations status for China. Then he facilitated its accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO) the following year. Both moves bolstered hopes that China’s inclusion in the American-led

global trading system would not only lower bilateral trade deficits but encourage further political reform.

As Clinton [lectured students at Johns Hopkins University](#), “By joining the WTO, China is not simply agreeing to import more of our products, it is agreeing to import one of democracy’s most cherished values, economic freedom. The more China liberalizes its economy, the more fully it will liberate the potential of its people — their initiative, their imagination, their remarkable spirit of enterprise... [and] the genie of freedom will not go back into the bottle.”



Madeleine Albright, who served as Bill Clinton’s Secretary of State during his second term, hoped that social and economic engagement with China would have “a liberalizing effect on political and human rights practices.” But she also added, “Given the nature of China’s government, that progress will be gradual, at best, and by no means inevitable.”

Credit: NARA

His Secretary of State Madeleine Albright also hope “that the trend toward greater economic and social integration of China will have a liberalizing effect on political and human rights practices.” But she also sagely added, “Given the nature of China’s government, that progress will be gradual, at best, and by no means inevitable.”

With the threat of the USSR gone, Clinton was endowing U.S.-China policy with a new core logic: open markets will promote a more equal and liberal society. “Imagine how [the Internet] could change China,” he evangelically asked an audience in 2000 as he hailed this new era. “China’s been trying to crack down on the Internet,” he continued rhapsodically. “Good luck! That’s sort of like trying to [nail jello to the wall.](#)”



A PEACEFUL RISE: GEORGE W. BUSH, HU JINTAO AND HUBRIS



The dream that through greater interaction with the outside world, China would slowly emerge from its revolutionary Maoist chrysalis until it fledged as a reborn constructive participant — if not a more open and democratic society — in the existing liberal democratic world order had taken such deep root in America’s policy circles that, by the time George W. Bush began campaigning for the presidency in 1999, he quite naturally took up where Clinton left off: touting the positive effects of more bilateral trade.



U.S. President George W. Bush (L) meets with China’s Premier Wen Jiabao at the Zhongnanhai Compound in Beijing August 10, 2008. Credit: REUTERS/Jason Lee/Pool (CHINA)

“The case for trade is not just monetary, but moral,” he preached.

“Economic freedom creates the habits of liberty, and habits of liberty create expectations of democracy... Trade freely with China and time is on our side.”

By 2005, Bush was propounding an even more roseate vision. At a press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koichi, he explained, “As China reforms its economy, its leaders are finding that once the door to freedom is opened even a crack, it cannot be closed.”

A new U.S.-China compact was being forged not around fears of Soviet adventurism or just the economic benefits of more trade, but around the promise that more interaction would bring salutary political change. As columnist Nick Kristof, a former *New York Times* Beijing bureau chief, optimistically wrote, “After the Chinese could watch Eddie Murphy wear tight pink dresses, and struggle over what to order at Starbucks, the revolution was finished” because “no middle class is content with more choices of coffee than candidates on a ballot.”⁴

To help reassure the world that its growing “wealth and power” (富强) was not a threat, a Chinese *White Paper* [promised](#) that “a prosperous and developing China, a democratic, harmonious and stable country under the rule of law, will make more contribution to the world.” And, by 2005, Party General Secretary Hu Jintao was incanting the notion of a “Peaceful rise” (和平崛起), a rhetorical inspiration concocted by the former head of the Central Communist Party School, Zheng Bijian, who vectored this slogan to the world via *Foreign Affairs*.



"After the Chinese...struggle over what to order at Starbucks," Nick Kristof wrote, "the revolution was finished" because "no middle class is content with more choices of coffee than candidates on a ballot."

Credit: REUTERS

But such sloganeering masked as much as it revealed. As a leading Chinese propagandist, the head of the State Council's Information Office, Zhao Qizheng, cynically explained, "The 'peaceful' is for the foreigners, and the 'rise' is for us."

Such soothing rhetoric was calculated, wrote Kissinger, "to transcend the traditional ways for great powers to emerge, one that can be achieved through incremental reforms and the democratization of international relations." Such nostrums gave Americans hope that it was only a matter of time before China not only became a more capitalist, more responsible global actor, but also a more open society. "Just stay the course," this logic implied. Keep trading and continue interacting and the tonic effects of engagement will slowly make China more convergent with the existing liberal democratic order.

This was an optimism best limned by Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which he wrote that with "the total

exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism,” the world was experiencing a “triumph of the Western ideal.” The counter-scenario — namely that China’s Leninist, one-party state did not see itself as part of this grand global metamorphosis — hardly seemed credible to engagement proponents who viewed “the West” as possessing the magic keys to history’s very intention and direction.

Lulled by such rhetoric and a relatively sedate Chinese leadership, Pres. George W. Bush mandated his Secretary of Treasury, Hank Paulson, to establish the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue⁵, which was designed to resolve disruptive tensions between the U.S. and China while prodding Beijing into becoming a “responsible stakeholder.”

“Closed politics cannot be a permanent feature of Chinese society,” Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick later opined. “It is simply not sustainable. As economic growth continues, better-off Chinese will want a greater say in the future and pressure builds for political reform.”



At Bush’s request, Secretary of Treasury Hank Paulson established the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, which inspired optimism about the future of the U.S.-China economic relationship — before the 2008 financial crisis hit.

Credit: Chris Greenberg / White House

At an early S.E.D. in Washington that I attended, some opinion makers even believed that a more democratic landfall for China was already on the horizon. John L. Thornton, then Board Chairman of the Brookings Institution, optimistically wrote in 2008, “The debate in China is no longer about whether to have democracy...but about when and how.”

Encouraged by such predictions, the Bush administration continued emphasizing engagement as a way to goad Beijing into acting more responsibly. As it became economically more powerful and globally more important, seeking to guide China’s progress in positive ways did make sense. But there was a problem: as engagement proceeded, Sino-U.S. relations showed a growing deficit of reciprocity and balance, and the concessions necessary to keep the relationship functional kept falling disproportionately on U.S. shoulders even as the playing field grew more and more out of level.

Then came the 2008 U.S. financial crisis. As America’s economy spun into crisis while China’s economic growth rates remained high, a wave of exuberant hubris swept Chinese leadership circles and a new element was injected into the bi-lateral equation: Party leaders in Beijing began imagining that “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (有中国特色的社会主义) was possibly equal, if not superior, to the American model. With the U.S. seemingly in decline, Chinese leaders became even less inclined to level the playing field and adopt a more reciprocal approach.

Barack Obama assumed office as the “[first pacific president](#)” and, like his predecessors, spent his first term frozen in the aspic of engagement.

He became the first president to shelve a visit with the Dalai Lama to mollify Beijing. Then his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, went to Beijing [where she declared that U.S. support for contentious issues like human](#)

rights would not be allowed to “interfere with the search for solutions to other such important issues as the recent economic crisis and the global climate-change crisis.” Although “some believe that a rising China was by definition an adversary,” she declared, “the United States and China can benefit from and contribute to each other’s successes.”



Hillary Clinton famously advocated for human rights at the 1995 Beijing Women’s Conference, but as Obama’s Secretary of State, she said human rights would not be allowed to “interfere with the search for solutions.”

Credit: William J. Clinton Presidential Library

Despite his administration’s efforts to respectfully signal that the U.S. was looking to establish a more friendly, responsive and reciprocal relationship, when President Obama visited China in April 2009, he was treated with a confusing coolness. As I watched his summit with Hu Jintao unfold, what was striking was that there was no friendly banter at a joint press conference, no university speech with an open question and answers period, and none of the bonhomie or warmth that had animated the Nixon, Carter and Clinton summits. The lack of solicitude shown by Beijing was perhaps a result of the growing conviction that if the U.S. was now in decline, and China was rising, Chinese leaders no longer needed to show deference. As Kissinger observed, they “no longer felt constrained by a sense of apprenticeship to Western technology and institutions.” Instead, they now felt “confident

enough to reject, and even on occasion subtly mock, American lectures on reform.”

This attitude was manifested by a new arrogance in the South China Sea where China’s Navy, Coast Guard, and even fishing fleet were being deployed to enforce China’s extensive and controversial maritime claims and to provocatively challenge neighbors as well as the U.S. 7th Fleet. One PLA general explained China’s changed demeanor and new muscular posture this way: “We were weak. Now we are strong.”

But while China seemed to see little need, and less dignity, in making concessions, issues such as the North Korean nuclear threat, global pandemics, and the global challenge of climate⁶ prompted the Obama administration to soldier on in their quest to remain “engaged.”



When Obama met with Hu Jintao, he was shown little of the warmth that had been offered to previous presidents. Credit: Pete Souza/White House

“We welcome China’s rise,” Obama kept insisting “I absolutely believe that China’s peaceful rise is good for the world, and it’s good for America.”

Accepting a “rising” China “as a prosperous and successful power” was also part of his Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg’s hope chest. “Strategic assurances” were, in his view, the best way to convince Chinese leaders that their rise need “not come at the expense of the security and well-being of others.” Despite China’s frosty responses, he remained committed to forging what he described as a new “core, if tacit bargain.”

Even when Obama generously (some say foolishly) finally recognized China’s own “core interests” (核心利益) — including their claim to the entire South China Sea and other non-negotiable territorial claims to Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Macau and Hong Kong — Beijing did not temper its increasingly aggressive nationalism. As Liu Mingfu, author of the 2010 *China Dream*, bluntly put it, Beijing’s “grand goal” was “to become number one in the world” and displace the U.S.

Such grand plans were exacerbating imbalances, inequities and anxieties in the bilateral relationship. General Keith Alexander, director of the National Security Agency and head of U.S. Cyber Command, was soon [assessing the theft of U.S. intellectual property](#) as “the greatest transfer of wealth in human history.”

When Xi Jinping ascended the throne in 2012, he called for the realization of his globally ambitious “China Dream” (中国梦). By 2014, he was also declaring that it was time for some “great power diplomacy” (大国外交) to make “China’s voice heard.”



At a 2015 meeting at the White House, Xi Jinping promised Obama he would not militarize newly built islands in the South China Sea. Credit: Gary Cameron/Reuters

With Xi being more assertive and demonstrating less flexibility and collegiality towards American counterparts than even Hu, a critical interpersonal lubricant that had allowed previous leaders to bond went missing. The resulting lack of trust and friction did not go unnoticed. In 2015, for instance, Xi promised Obama in the White House Rose Garden not to militarize newly built islands in the South China Sea — then, right away, did exactly that.

Now that China felt less restrained by economic and military weakness, the bilateral relationship entered a new era. It was hardly surprising that an ever-broadening spectrum of American stakeholders began complaining about a playing field that was more and more unlevel. At one point, even President Obama was reported to have asked two of his senior advisers, Lawrence H. Summers and Jeffrey A. Bader, “Did you guys give away too much?”

Growing American frustration was brought home to me personally one afternoon in 2012 when I received an unexpected call from Secretary of

State Hillary Clinton. With both exasperation and bewilderment, she asked, “Why can’t I get any traction with my Chinese counterpart, State Councilor Dai Bingguo? I’ve been trying to find the reset button with him, but I keep hitting a wall. What do they want?”

“Opening gave the Chinese leverage over us,” reflected former Secretary of State George Schultz. “Much of the history of Sino-U.S. relations since the normalization in 1978 was “a series of Chinese defined ‘obstacles’... that the U.S. has been tasked to overcome in order to preserve the overall relationship.”



The Obama Administration was increasingly frustrated that they weren’t making sufficient headway with China’s leadership as the years passed. Here, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrives for a meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in Beijing February 21, 2009.

Credit: REUTERS/Oliver Weiken/Pool (CHINA)

It was hardly surprising when the Obama administration finally began its “pivot to East Asia”⁷ and called for a redeployment of some 60 percent of the U.S. Navy’s maritime forces to the Asia region. But, lest Chinese officials retaliate and completely capsize the notion of engagement, Obama continued to insist that “a thriving China is good for America.” As late as 2016, he was reiterating, “I’ve been very explicit in saying that we have more to fear from a weakened, threatened China than a successful, rising China.”

For such an argument to remain convincing, however, the promise of ongoing Chinese political reform — which implied a certain quotient of liberalization, if not democratization — had to be in the mix. But, with Xi moving in an increasingly autocratic and pugnacious direction and with many of his fellow Party leaders viewing engagement as a covert strategy to engender “peaceful evolution,” even regime change, U.S. engagers found themselves drifting in increasingly compass-less waters.

In Beijing’s defense, it must be said that their reaction was not pure paranoia. For there was an insoluble contradiction at the heart of the vision of engagement: If getting along with America meant making money, the Party was fine. But, if it also meant democratizing, and possibly putting itself out of business, the Party was an unwilling player. Engagement may have been “a good strategy initially,” notes China analyst Tanner Greer, but because Xi came to view the policy as designed to politically change one-party rule in China, it “terrified” the Party and “they took action to defeat it.”

Despite repeated efforts by frustrated Obama administration officials to find the magic key to making relations more balanced and reciprocal⁸, Beijing failed to respond in a meaningful enough way. It took the victory of Donald Trump and his anti-China Sancho Panzas — Steve “[These are two systems that are incompatible](#)” Bannon and Peter “[Death by China](#)” Navarro — to call out China.

“We have an enemy of incalculable power and they’re not a strategic partner,” proclaimed Bannon.

“One side is going to win, one side is going to lose,” warned Navarro.

Such voices were extreme, but they accurately described an interaction that had become less and less in America’s interest.

To find myself standing under Mao's gaze on the steps of the Great Hall of the People once again, this time waiting with President Xi for President Trump to arrive, was surreal.

When Trump moved into the White House in 2017, he and his "base" were strangely reminiscent of Mao Zedong himself and his populist peasant movement occupying the imperial Zhongnanhai complex near the Forbidden City in 1949. Indeed, if Trump was a reader, he might have found some of Mao's writings agreeable, especially his famous dictum, "Without destruction there can be no construction" (不破不立). For like Mao, Trump had an innate predilection for wanting to "overturn" (翻身) established structures.

A banquet in the Forbidden City, an honor guard, and a 21-gun salute in the Square promised all the pageantry of a big-budget film. But if the sets were grand, the performances were surprisingly flat. When he finally arrived, Trump was predictably preening and vain while Xi was characteristically supercilious and undemonstrative. Even though Trump had boasted after their Mar-a-Lago meeting that he and Xi were "great friends," neither now evinced any more genuine sentiment than Mao's dour Mona Lisa-like portrait hanging on Tiananmen Gate.



Trump and Xi Jinping pose for a photo ahead of their bilateral meeting during the G20 leaders summit in Osaka, Japan, June 29, 2019. Credit: Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

While Xi had been propagandizing for his “China Dream” and a “China rejuvenation” (中国复兴), Trump had been extolling his “Make America Great Again” fantasy in which one key element was “leveling the U.S.-China playing field.” Alas, Xi’s roadmap for rebirth, meanwhile, had no place for China to submissively integrate itself into the pre-existing liberal, American-led global order. Instead, he saw a muscular China now prosperous and powerful enough to act out unapologetically and unilaterally on the world stage. The more benign part of Xi’s dream envisioned Chinese influence expanding globally through an ambitious master plan of interlocking global projects such as the BRICs Bank, The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

But there was also a darker side to Xi’s grand ambitions that grew out of his paranoid fixation on the idea of “hostile foreign forces” (外国敌对势力) perennially and covertly arrayed against China. Xi’s vision was one that seemed bent on fomenting a latter-day “clash of civilizations.” He insisted

that “history and reality have told us that only with socialism can we save China,” and that “the eventual demise of capitalism and the ultimate victory of socialism would be a long historical process, a struggle between our two social systems.” China, he’d begun proclaiming, was “blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization.”

“The U.S. needs to recognize that Xi Jinping’s Third Revolution presents a new model of Chinese behavior at home and adjust its expectations and policies accordingly,” warned the Council on Foreign Relations’s Elizabeth Economy.

“Not only has China become wealthier and more powerful, but less willing to hide its disdain for its critic’s views,” observed the Australian Lowy Institute China specialist Richard McGregor. “Xi has articulated a willingness to leverage Beijing’s elevated power to press the ruling communist party’s ambitions with a force and coherence that his predecessors lacked.”

But, he concluded, “Beijing cannot bully its way to superpower status without engendering a strong pushback from other countries, which is exactly what is happening.”

A relationship between China and the United States rooted in “engagement” crumbled under Trump and Xi Jinping.

Credit: Shealah Craighead

While Trump may be a proverbial bull in a China shop, it was not him who initially and unilaterally abrogated engagement’s tacit compact. Nor was it China’s economic rise that voided it in a neo-Thucydides trap. Instead, it was Hu Jintao’s inattention to the growing imbalances in the relationship and Xi Jinping’s increasingly belligerent refusal to make any concessionary adjustments and be more reciprocal that finally over-burdened it. With Xi’s

abandonment of the notion of a “peaceful rise,” his accelerated military modernization, eschewal of market reforms, and his increasingly unyielding posture in the South and East China Seas, the Taiwan Straits, and Hong Kong, the Trump administration finally acknowledged that engagement was no longer working in U.S. interests and instead declared China a “strategic competitor” and a “rival power.”



Chinese forces lined up as Trump boarded Air Force One to depart from China after his 2017 trip. After a lackluster meeting, the relationship between the United States and China continued to deteriorate.
Shealah Craighead/White House

Then, in 2018, Vice President Mike Pence [delivered a major policy speech](#) that dramatically reset the terms of the new game: “Previous administrations made this choice [to engage China] in the hope that freedom in China would expand in all of its forms — not just economically, but politically, with a newfound respect for classical liberal principles, private property, personal liberty, religious freedom — the entire family of human rights,” said Pence. “That hope has gone unfulfilled.”

His talk led to a debate on the need to “decouple” aspects of our now intimately intertwined economies, even the close relationships that our universities and civil society organizations have forged with Chinese counterparts.



THE POST-MORTEM



If a mourner was to erect a tombstone to engagement, the epitaph might read:

Engagement: Born 1972, Died Tragically of Neglect, 2020.

In making my own genuflection before such a monument to the policy that had been the North Star of my life as a China watcher, I'd rue engagement's loss as a completely unnecessary tragedy. I also wonder: What possessed Chinese Party leaders, and then Trump, to so recklessly kill a policy that had not only kept the peace for five decades, but allowed China to undergo just the kind of economic development and national rejuvenation that its people have dreamed of for decades? Xi's muscular approach may be propitiating certain ultra-nationalists at home, but it was also pulling down the keystone of the global archway that upheld China's integration into the world and antagonizing so many once collaborative foreign partners. Was this really in China's future interest? In short, what compelling Chinese national interest was served by undermining engagement?

In the end, engagement's end could not be blamed on any lack of American commitment or effort. It seems to me that the U.S. has shown unprecedented creativity, first by entertaining a vision of peaceful transformation of a once militant, Marxists-Leninist state and then by showing remarkable diplomatic leadership — and patience — in shepherding that vision through so many presidential administrations. As Kissinger recently put it, “our hope was that the values of the two sides would come closer together.”

To many, it had become evident that the relationship between the United States and China was unbalanced.

Such a hope may now seem almost naïve. However, the alternative in 1972 was an on-going Cold War, perhaps even a hot war. Engagement was a chance worth taking and there were many inflection points during its twisted progress when things might have worked out very differently. (One thinks of 1989.) That they didn't was not due to a lack of U.S. strategic thinking, diplomatic effort, or willingness to be flexible. Engagement failed because of the CCP's deep ambivalence about the way engaging in a truly meaningful way might lead to demands for more reform and change and its ultimate demise.

Without political reform and the promise of China transitioning to become more soluble in the existing world order, engagement no longer has a logic for the U.S. Beijing's inability to reform, evolve, and make the bilateral relationship more reciprocal, open and level finally rendered the policy inoperable. Because Xi Jinping viewed just such changes threatening his one-party rule, there came to be an irreconcilable contradiction at the heart of engagement that killed it.

So, what happens now? Is it too late to arrest our slide and devise a new post-engagement policy of engagement to guide ourselves out of the present downward spiral that Kissinger has described as putting us in "the foothills" of a new Cold War, with consequences that are potentially more disastrous than World War I?"

The two presidents should declare a state of urgency, appoint trusted high-level plenipotentiaries and mandate them to form teams of specialists from business, policy, and academia to formulate a set of possible scenarios for lowering the temperature in each of the most important realms of the bilateral relationship. Once both national teams have designed their own

roadmaps for getting out of our present impasse, they should convene jointly to hammer out several mutually acceptable possibilities, and present them to their respective presidents. The presidents should then convene an emergency special summit dedicated to finding an off-ramp.

Whether the two current presidents are up to such a challenge is far from certain, because the leadership skills required — creativity, flexibility, reciprocity, openness, transparency, and boldness — are precisely those they lack. The CCP's rigid commitment to a one-party system and fear that flexibility will be perceived as weakness makes it allergic to exactly the kind of give-and-take necessary to bridge such a wide divide. And even though Trump has not misjudged China's intentions, he is so erratic, uninformed and thin-skinned it is hard to imagine him being able to bring about a breakthrough between our two countries that are no longer divided just by trade issues, but by a far wider set of discontinuities and contradictions that are made more irreconcilable by our two opposing political systems and value sets.

But for those tempted to wait for a new administration, it is worth pointing out that neither Trump nor Xi have yet attacked the other in an ad hominem way, thus leaving the door still ajar for a one-on-one interaction. But because antagonisms are escalating rapidly, time is very short. For such a plan to be successful, Washington would have to be ready to acknowledge it will not be able to resolve the most fundamental systemic issues dividing Beijing from Washington and forgo regime change as an end game. Beijing would have to be willing to set its paranoia and victimization narrative aside and then temper its global belligerence to focus on areas where common interest still prevails. Right now, the kind of grand hopes of convergence that once animated earlier iterations of engagement are unrealistic. We must settle instead for a far more minimalist agenda, one that would allow us to pragmatically work together on those issues — public health, trade, climate

change, and nuclear proliferation — where the mutual interest is obvious and urgent.

Nixon told the world that his trip to China “demonstrated that nations with deep and fundamental differences can learn to discuss those differences calmly, rationally and frankly without compromising their principles.”

Credit: Oliver F. Atkins

Finally, both sides would have to recognize that even in times of deep division there are still issues of critical common interest that can be jointly addressed. It is helpful to remind ourselves that the U.S. and China have squared this circle before, and it is here that the Nixon-Kissinger breakthrough in 1972 is worth re-studying. As Nixon then observed to Premier Zhou, “we have common interests that transcend those differences” and “while we cannot close the gulf between us, we can try and bridge it so that we may be able to talk across it.”

Such a meager vision is enough to make one nostalgic for the grandness of scale and optimism, if naiveté, of our old engagement dream. But perhaps the best we can now hope for, is to find enough common ground to keep tension in “the foothills” rather than allowing them to escalate and ascend into the alpine peaks of a new cold war.

Orville Schell is the Arthur Ross Director of the Center on U.S.-China Relations at Asia Society in New York. He is a former professor and Dean at the University of California, Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. The timeline below highlights some of the mementos and photos from Schell’s 45 years covering China.

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