

Does China really pose a threat to U.S. national security?

China is an authoritarian one-party state that denies its own people the kinds of basic freedoms that Americans and other Westerners take for granted. It's often thought of as a regional bully that provokes its neighbors and ignores the rulings of international tribunals. China routinely breaks the rules of international diplomatic courtesy and military good sense. This time last year it even stole a U.S. drone submarine.

None of that speaks well for China. China is a growing threat to its neighbors, particularly democratic Taiwan (vilified as a renegade province by China), U.S. treaty ally the Philippines, and China's communist rival, Vietnam. But is it a threat to the United States?

The Trump administration certainly thinks so. In its first National Security Strategy (NSS), released Monday, China is paired with Russia as a revisionist power that uses "technology, propaganda, and coercion to shape a world antithetical to [U.S.] interests and values."

What a change an administration makes. The Obama administration in its 2015 National Security Strategy welcomed "the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China." Obama criticized China for failing to "uphold international rules and norms" but emphasized that "the scope of [U.S.] cooperation with China is unprecedented."

The strange thing about the change of tone is that U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping seem to get along quite well. Trump needs Xi's cooperation on North Korea, and he seems to be getting it. Russia means trouble, certainly. But is China really so bad?

The view from Beijing

While the international press has jumped all over Trump's condemnation of China, the People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, shrugged it off. They reported on the NSS but didn't even mention that China had been criticized. That's a far cry from the shrill counterattacks that are China's usual stock-in-trade.

Why is China so complacent in the face of the Trump administration's accusations? It could be because China knows that, unlike smaller countries, the U.S. can't be bullied. Still, that didn't stop China from bullying the Obama administration.

More likely, it's because China doesn't really see itself as a rival to the United States. Most of China's foreign policy establishment was educated in the United States and many of them have internalized American viewpoints as their own. They are ambitious to increase China's power and influence in the world, certainly, but for many of them the whole idea that China could take on the United States is ludicrous.

Remember that more than 300,000 Chinese students are currently studying in the United States, and several million more are alumni of U.S. universities, including the children of many of China's top Communist Party officials. Xi Jinping's own daughter studied at Harvard. Perhaps as many as 100,000 Chinese mothers travel to the U.S. every year to give birth in American hospitals so that their children will become U.S. citizens (no one knows the exact number).

Meanwhile nearly everyone in China uses a mobile phone that runs either iOS or Android. They drink their coffee at Starbucks and learn English by watching The Big Bang Theory. China's elite are not people who dream of conquering America. They are people who dream of succeeding in America's world.

Not really a threat, not quite a partner

The accusations leveled at China in the Trump's 2017 NSS seem fair enough. It is almost certain that China does steal the intellectual property of American companies. China almost certainly does seek to realign the Indo-Pacific region in its favor. China really is investing billions in infrastructure development around the world. But none of this seriously threatens the security of the United States.

On the other side of the balance sheet, China seems to be cooperating with the U.S. on North Korea, China has declined to endorse Russia's annexation of Crimea, and China repeatedly stresses its desire to cooperate with the United States in international affairs. That's not a lot to go on, but it's a much better record than Russia's. It doesn't seem to mark China out as an irreconcilable opponent.

All in all, China's leaders partner with the United States when it is in their interest to do so and push back against the United States when they can. They would love to detach American allies from the U.S. side, and are willing to use both bribery and intimidation to do so. But unlike Russia's leaders, China's leaders want to succeed in the American world-system, not overthrow it. When it comes time to send their kids to college, China's elites will take the Ivy League over Moscow State University every time.

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