

COMMENTARY

# A U.S. ‘Solarium Project’ for China

Eisenhower rethought Soviet strategy upon taking office. The next U.S. president will have to follow his lead.

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U.S. President Barack Obama, left, and Chinese President Xi Jinping shake hands following the conclusion of their joint news conference at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, Wednesday, Nov. 12, 2014. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

*By Aaron Friedberg*

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The Obama administration is evidently divided over how to respond to provocative Chinese actions in cyberspace and the South China Sea. Intelligence community leaders warn that unless the U.S. retaliates, it will continue to face damaging computer network attacks of the sort China appears to have carried out against the Office of Personnel Management. Yet the administration has refused even to identify China as the culprit in the theft of over 20 million sensitive personal files.

Regarding the South China Sea, similarly, the Navy favors taking a tough stance, challenging China’s claims of sovereignty by sending ships and planes close to the artificial “islands” that Beijing has created by dredging sand from the ocean bottom. Fearing a crisis before September’s summit between Barack Obama and Xi Jinping, the White House prefers a lower-key approach.

These disputes involve disagreements over tactics, but they are also the latest indications of an intensifying debate over the future of America’s long-standing, two-part strategy for dealing with Beijing.

For a quarter century successive administrations have sought to engage China through trade and diplomacy. They hoped to give its rulers a stake in the existing liberal international order while reinforcing tendencies—especially the growth of a new middle

class—that could lead to democratizing political reforms. At the same time, Washington has taken steps to preserve a favorable balance of power in East Asia. By strengthening its own forces there and working with friends in the region to deter aggression, the U.S. is trying to counter attempts at coercion and buy time for engagement to work its magic on Beijing.

Engagement and balancing were supposed to work hand in hand, but recent events have begun to raise questions about both halves of this strategy. Thanks in no small measure to its economic ties with the U.S., China has grown far richer and stronger since the end of the Cold War. Instead of liberalizing, however, its politics have become more repressive and more militantly nationalistic.

These tendencies reflect the Chinese leadership's peculiar mix of insecurity and arrogance. Mr. Xi's emergence as the country's top leader in 2012 was followed by a crackdown on dissidents, human rights advocates and nongovernmental organizations, a further tightening of controls over the Internet, and the initiation of an ideological campaign against "subversive" Western ideas and supposed foreign foes who oppose Chinese greatness. China's slowing growth and the recent turbulence in its stock market will likely be accompanied by an even tougher domestic stance.

To help consolidate power at home, the regime has more openly challenged key elements of the existing order in Asia. China's increasingly forceful attempts to assert its claims over most of the waters and resources off its shores are only the most visible manifestation of this tendency.

Beijing has also intensified its opposition to U.S. alliances and begun to build new institutions and infrastructure networks designed to enhance its influence at America's expense. Mr. Xi's declaration that Asia's affairs should be left to "the people of Asia" makes clear his vision for a region in which the U.S. presence has dramatically diminished and in which China will finally be able to emerge as the preponderant power.

Thus U.S. engagement has so far failed to transform China into a liberal democracy or even a "responsible stakeholder" in the existing international system. Meanwhile the dramatic expansion of China's military capabilities has made balancing Beijing ever more costly and challenging. The modernization and expansion of China's nuclear and conventional "anti-access/area-denial" forces is beginning to raise doubts about the ability of the U.S. to defend its allies by projecting power into the Western Pacific.

Beijing's growing air, naval and maritime forces are giving it new options for enforcing

territorial claims.

Only in the past few years have these worrisome tendencies become widely acknowledged. Albeit belatedly, a debate over the adequacy and future of U.S. China strategy has finally commenced. For the moment, however, this discussion is confined largely to the halls of think tanks and the pages of policy journals. Here, free from the responsibilities of power, advocates argue for everything from appeasement (e.g. cutting support for Taiwan) to a renewal of Cold War-style containment.

Yet in the U.S. government decisions are taken on a piecemeal, case-by-case basis with little attempt to take a longer view, reexamine existing assumptions or integrate policy across various domains. High-level attention is fleeting, short-term considerations dominate and marginal adjustments are the order of the day.

Post-Cold War policy toward China has never been the product of a comprehensive strategic planning process or a serious, presidential-level interagency review. The various elements of U.S. strategy emerged separately and evolved independently over time. While the resulting amalgam turned out to be tolerably coherent for some time, this is clearly no longer the case.

Whoever is elected president in 2016 should therefore begin with a frank assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach and conduct an open-minded examination of the potential costs, benefits and risks of available alternatives. This process could be modeled on the 1953 Solarium Project, in which the newly elected Eisenhower administration organized teams of government and private-sector experts to explore the economic, technological, military and diplomatic implications of different approaches toward the Soviet Union.

If history is any guide, the opening months of a new presidency will offer the best opportunity for a thorough strategic review. The alternative is to wait until a crisis sets off a scramble for hastily contrived and potentially ill-considered options.

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