



STRONG EVIDENCE TARGETING CHINA – LASTING CONSTRAINTS ON US ENGAGEMENT

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The breadth and depth of hardening US attitudes toward China is growing, even with debate over the Trump administration's approach to tariffs and trade policy. Mainstream US media and public opinion have reinforced bipartisan whole-of-government criticism of a wide range of China's policies and practices. Joining the effort, think tank and academic specialists have revealed a long list of often hidden or disguised actions by the Chinese government as it seeks greater advantage and influence at US expense while professing positive intentions toward the US, its allies, and partners.

The evidence provided gets close consideration in defining US policy responses. Longer term, the evidence ensures that future US engagement with China will be assessed with a careful eye toward countering Beijing's wide-ranging adverse actions and duplicity. In particular, those Americans supporting restored engagement while playing down negatives posed by Beijing – a common practice in the recent past – face major obstacles now that everyone is much more familiar with and concerned about a wide array of the often disguised Chinese practices targeting the United States.

Categories of challenge and duplicity

Well documented reports criticizing Chinese trade, investment, and other economic practices produced by the US Trade Representative have long been used by government and non-government specialists as indicators of the degree of US concern over Beijing's actions in these areas. The data in the reports get much greater attention in the current administration, supporting tariffs and other measures targeting a wide range of Chinese practices that the USTR views as an existential threat to the US economy. The complaints in the USTR reports receive wide attention in congressional hearings, think tank studies, and in-depth media assessments. Notably, disclosures of China's intention to use "Made in China 2025" to advance China to a controlling position in high technology manufacturing of the future feature prominently; a prevailing judgment is that Beijing is at a stage of economic development where it is a peer of the United States and could surpass the US and dominate fields that will determine economic and security leadership in the years ahead.

The Departments of Justice and Homeland Security are in the lead in publicizing a range of cases involving Chinese economic and military espionage designed to strengthen China and weaken the United States. They disclose overt and covert influence operations, propaganda, and penetration of key sectors of US society that distract and limit opposition to Chinese policies and practices that are contrary to US interests. China's use of such influence operations abroad receives official attention by the FBI but also the Department of Defense, along with US, European, and Australian government and non-government specialists. The Asia Society and the Hoover Institution collaborated on a book-length study on Chinese influence and related operations in the United States and abroad, while the Asia Society and the University of California San Diego produced two major studies that focused in part on the economic practices highlighted in USTR reports.

Chinese using so-called hybrid warfare tactics including political and economic intimidation and coercion as well as enticement and corruption in seeking to advance China's control abroad receive widespread attention. Two major studies by the

Center for Security and Budget Assessments and a major study by the Center for New American Security (CNAS) showed 15 categories and nine instances of Chinese practice with negative implications for US interests.

The Department of Defense, National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) and CNAS assess the network of Chinese Communist Party, media, high technology communications, economic influence, espionage, special payments, and other means that accompany the infrastructure built under the rubric of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While Beijing's reported use of indebtedness to gain greater control of developing countries is a common refrain in criticism of China's BRI, the evidence in these studies shows a range of tools Beijing uses covertly as well as overtly to support its foreign ambitions. The Defense Department gives special attention to Beijing seeking military bases abroad in countries heavily indebted to Chinese lenders.

The CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative is prominent in documenting Beijing's Janus-faced approach to the South China Sea: pledging peace and development, while secretly confronting smaller neighbors disputing China's egregious (and illegal) claims in the South China Sea with the type of crude bullying seen in gangster movies. While NBR's effort to assess what growing China-Russia cooperation means for the US allows some debate on how lasting China-Russia cooperation will be, the extensive cooperation that does occur with ever greater frequency is shown to have one common target – to diminish US international influence.

It is a frequent refrain that China differs from Russia in that Beijing wants to preserve many aspects of the existing US-led international order and use it to its advantage, whereas Russia is a strongly revisionist power seeking to undermine and disrupt the US-led order. In fact, according to studies by the Center for American Progress, NBR, and some leading specialists at the RAND Corporation, Beijing is actively seeking to undermine the US-led order and replace it with elements supportive of authoritarian regimes like Beijing and Moscow.

Constraining US engagement with China

It was only 10 years ago that Chinese leaders seemed successful in persuading Americans that there were few significant differences between the two countries and that China was focused on domestic development in a period of strategic opportunity and was heavily committed to integrating with the US-led world order. Such developments helped foster the close US engagement with China that Beijing used to its advantage. The evidence noted above of Chinese behavior that is contrary to US interests very well might grow as specialists delve deeper into Chinese motives and covert actions. Even if it doesn't, the evidence provided thus far will assure that any proposed return of US engagement with China will undergo extensive scrutiny and constrain that engagement for years to come.

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