



## THE NEW US DIPLOMACY WITH CHINA: ‘KEEP YOUR PROMISES’

BY SUNGMIN CHO

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“If one day China should change her color and turn into a superpower, if she too should play the tyrant in the world, and everywhere subject others to her bullying, aggression, and exploitation, the people of the world should identify her as social-imperialism, expose it, oppose it and work together with the Chinese people to overthrow it.”

So said Deng Xiaoping in [a speech](#) to the United Nations in 1974. As if responding to Deng’s call, there has been [discussion](#) about the feasibility of an American strategy to create distance between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese people. No wonder Beijing has [responded furiously](#) to this idea, including by criticizing the [“longer telegram.”](#) In fact, the author of the “longer telegram” claims that “it would be extremely hazardous for US strategies ... to make the ‘overthrow of the Communist Party’ the nation’s declared objective.” The Trump administration’s document on the US strategic approach toward China also states that “US policies are not premised on an attempt to change the PRC’s domestic governance model.” Nevertheless, the idea that the US should urge the Chinese people to overthrow the CCP continues to [attract attention](#).

The idea of creating political division within China deserves further scrutiny, given its potential impacts

on the US-China relationship. What is the logic behind this idea? What are the problems? A critical review of the strategy suggests a different approach: Washington should instead focus on pressing China to live up to its own promises and obligations.

There are at least two arguments in support of “creating division” within China. First, China experts have [found](#) that Beijing has compromised in international disputes when the CCP faced internal threats, including crises in legitimacy. Therefore, hawks would argue that division within China is beneficial for US national security. But CCP failure to maintain political stability is one thing; the US attempting to engineer a political division is quite another. Chinese people will more likely link a US effort to the memory of national humiliation, when Western powers carved their own spheres of influence into the country in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They will also readily agree to the CCP’s narrative that the US seeks to divide China to contain the rise of a peer competitor.

Second, liberals would [argue](#) that the US should support the Chinese people precisely because the US respects their democratic aspirations. However, several surveys conducted by American scholars in China have consistently [found](#) that Chinese citizens are highly satisfied with their government’s performance. More importantly, Chinese people think that China has been “democratized” over time: the [2020 annual survey](#) of Democracy Perception Index found that 73% of Chinese respondents consider China democratic—just 49% of Americans believe the same about the US. By contrast, given the widespread perception of rising racism and McCarthyism targeting Chinese scholars and students in the US, efforts to inspire the Chinese people to challenge the CCP would only stimulate [anti-American nationalism](#); the more the US tries to create division within China, the more Chinese people will unite against the US.

However, the assessment that the CCP is already significantly divided over Xi’s leadership remains valid. As the author of the “longer telegram” rightly observes, Xi Jinping’s abrasive foreign policy, over-centralization of power, and illiberal policies have generated widespread frustration among Chinese

elites. According to a former Central Party School professor's [testimony](#), published by *Foreign Affairs* in 2020, there was hope for the expansion of political reform when Xi took power in 2013. Indeed, during his final press briefing in 2012, former premier Wen Jiabao [insisted](#) that China "must press ahead with both economic reform and political structural reform, especially reform in the leadership system of our party and country." Xi was expected to further open up China's political system, but instead shattered such expectations; Xi even removed presidential term limits from the constitution in 2018. There are unfulfilled promises by previous leaders Xi has failed to carry out.

The US should ask the Xi regime to live up to China's promises and obligations. US officials can collect all the statements by Chinese leaders before Xi about the autonomy of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang and the exact wording on civil rights and liberty, as codified in the Chinese constitution. As Ralph Cossa has [summarized](#): "It's unreasonable to ask them to be like us; it's not unreasonable to ask them to follow their own promises." This approach would be effective because there is a [human psychology](#) that people feel most pressed when demanded to honor their own words. Likewise, international relations scholars have [found](#) that political rhetoric and commitments, if repeatedly made, carry a coercive power over national leaders.

By extension, US officials should be familiar with words of wisdom from Chinese intellectuals and great thinkers officially acknowledged by the Chinese state. A good example is the [speech](#) by Matthew Pottinger, the former deputy national security advisor, in May 2020. Speaking in fluent Mandarin Chinese, Pottinger quoted Lu Xun, China's most celebrated modern writer, to make his point on the problems of censorship in China. He also [drew on](#) the iconic student protests on May 4, 1919 to argue that China did its best when it listened to the diverse opinions of average citizens. In another speech, also in Chinese, he even [cited Confucius](#) to make his point about the need for candid conversation between the US and China. Chinese officials and scholars [criticized](#) Pottinger's speeches, but the unusually severe [censorship](#) that followed also reflects how Xi did not

want Chinese citizens to discuss what the Chinese philosophers and intellectuals have said about open society and free thinking in China.

No doubt Chinese officials will continue to be creative in rebuttal. They may make the usual case that Americans do not understand the unique history or culture of China. They may be more candid, arguing that past promises are irrelevant because situations have changed. But it would not be difficult for Washington to retort that the US is not imposing its own values or visions, but simply asking China to keep its word. For example, Deng Xiaoping once [said](#) "after China resumes the exercise of its sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997, Hong Kong's current social and economic systems will remain unchanged, its legal system will remain basically unchanged, its way of life ... will remain unchanged. ... Beijing will not assign officials to the government of the Hong Kong ... Our policies with regard to Hong Kong will remain unchanged for 50 years, and we mean this." These promises were imbedded in a legally binding treaty between China and the UK registered with the United Nations. Washington can present the evidence of all the changes made in defiance of Hong Kong's autonomy, including the [national security law](#).

The CCP would likely [criticize](#) the US with the rhetoric of "what about all those problems in the US?" or "mind your own failure to keep promises." If China presses the US to live up to its own words, US officials should welcome the suggestion. The need for domestic renewal is something American citizens can agree on. If the standard of competition is about who fulfills their promises faster and more faithfully carries out all the positive promises their leaders have made for their people and the world, there would be no better form of great power competition.

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