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Behold China

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For decades, various Chinese officials and outsiders have reassured the world that the country's Communist Party leadership eventually planned to open up its one-party political system. The regime would undertake major political reforms and liberalization, it was said, to accompany the economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in the late '70s. It was merely a question of choosing the right time. Writing in Foreign Affairs two years ago, John L. Thornton, the chairman of the Brookings Institution, who has extensive high-level contacts in Beijing, reported that a senior Communist Party official told him "the debate in China is no longer about whether to have democracy ... but about when and how."

Over the years, a variety of short-term explanations have been offered for why the Chinese leadership's supposed plans for political change have been deferred. The Chinese leadership is too new on the job to launch reforms. Or, perhaps, it's been around too long. No, it can't loosen up right before a Communist Party Congress, the big gathering held every five years. Nor can it do anything in a year that ends in a nine (too many sensitive anniversaries fall during these years, including the Tiananmen Square crackdown of 1989). It couldn't risk reform before the Beijing Olympics. And certainly not in a period of recession or sluggish growth--nor, for that matter, during high growth or inflation.

If you took seriously all of these past justifications for short-term delay, the perfect time for the Chinese regime to proceed with opening up its political system might be right about now. The touchy year that ends with a nine is over, the Beijing Olympics long gone. President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have been in their jobs together for seven years already, and the next Party Congress is still two years off. There may be a few financial jitters, like a real-estate bubble, but, generally speaking, the Chinese economy is doing fine--neither in recession nor frighteningly overheated.

Yet there is no sign of political liberalization. In fact, over the past year or so, President Hu Jintao and his aides have seemed to be, if anything, moving in the opposite direction--tightening control of organized political opposition and even the lawyers who represent dissenters.

In December, Chinese authorities formally charged Liu Xiaobo, a leader of the Charter 08 movement--which is pushing freedom of expression and free elections--with "incitement to subvert state power." Liu was tried, convicted, and sentenced to eleven years in prison, despite appeals from the European Union and the United States for his release. Meanwhile, Gao Zhisheng, a prominent lawyer who had represented coal miners, underground Christians, and members of the Falun Gong movement in seeking redress from the Chinese government, vanished from his home on February 4, 2009. Chinese authorities said nothing about him for nearly a year and then only added that Gao is "where he should be." Last month, Chinese officials said Gao was off working in the remote Xinjiang Province; his own wife has not been allowed to speak with him. In February, Tan Zuoren, a Chinese environmental activist, was sentenced to five years in jail on charges of inciting subversion after he compiled a list of children killed in the Sichuan earthquake. These prominent cases are part of a larger pattern. "The ongoing arrests of not only prominent government critics but also peaceful protestors, journalists, people trying to find redress for poisoned milk formula or shoddily-constructed schools which killed their children, and even foreign businessmen suggests that the Chinese government is showing no signs of respecting some of the most fundamental human rights," argues Sophie Richardson, the Asia advocacy director for Human Rights Watch.

China has gone through periods of internal crackdown in the past without concurrent changes in its foreign relations. This time, however, the tough line on domestic dissent has gone hand-in-hand with a distinct hardening of its positions on a series of international issues. At the U.N. Security Council, China has emerged as the principal obstacle to

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multilateral efforts to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. China has pursued essentially mercantilist policies by maintaining an undervalued currency, despite repeated appeals from the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. By most accounts, China helped lead the way in preventing any serious action against climate change in Copenhagen last December. After tightly circumscribing Barack Obama's visit last November, China has taken tougher positions than it had in the past toward U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and a visit to Washington by the Dalai Lama. But it isn't just the United States: The Europeans, the British, and the Indians have all run up against what seems like a new Chinese assertiveness, too.

What accounts for the regime's recent behavior? The most obvious explanation, and the one most frequently put forward, is that China has finally recognized its own growing power. Particularly since the financial crisis of 2008 and the spiral of U.S. budget deficits, the Chinese leadership has--so this theory goes--realized it has the economic clout to be more demanding, to insist on changes in the status quo, and, generally, to tell everyone to buzz off. And so, we are said to be witnessing China's retaliation against the West for humiliations dating back to the Opium Wars.

The problem is that this explanation doesn't quite add up. Yes, China has a recent, well-founded perception of its own economic strength compared to other countries--but it doesn't necessarily follow that this should lead to the sort of edgy obstreperousness the regime has recently displayed. In fact, there have been occasions in the past when a sense of strength produced in Chinese leaders a very different reaction--an august serenity toward the outside world. (This attitude was epitomized by the Emperor Qianlong's famous riposte to the British emissary Lord Macartney's entreaties to open up China to trade: "We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures.") The most powerful of Chinese leaders have displayed a sense of humility, however artificial, in dealing with outsiders. When Richard Nixon met Mao Zedong for the first time, he told Mao his writings had moved China and changed the world. Mao demurred: "I haven't been able to change it," he said. "I've only been able to change a few places in the vicinity of Beijing." Flaunting power, in other words, is hardly a consistent and unbroken Chinese tradition.

In fact, China's recent assertiveness sometimes seems counterproductive, in ways that China's foreign policy usually is not. More commonly, China has been skilled at flexible, soft-shoed diplomacy; the aim has been to keep other major powers divided and, where possible, competing with one another for influence in Beijing. But China's recent policies on human rights, on maintaining the low value of its currency, and on climate change have all tended to remind Americans and Europeans of their shared values and interests in dealing with China.

If Chinese foreign policy has been (on many levels) counterproductive, that may be because its intended audience isn't in Washington or Brussels. That is, its international strategy is increasingly driven by undercurrents at home. The Chinese leadership seems uneasy about losing control. For the past several years, it has worried about the development of a popular movement comparable to the ones that produced the "color revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia. Over the last year, China has also watched the growth of the Green Movement in Iran. To an outsider, the comparisons seem preposterous; the two countries could not be more different. Iran has had various forms of middle-class movements (not to mention elections) for decades.

Yet there has been a surprising interplay between recent developments in Iran and in China. Immediately after Iran's tumultuous election last June, the Chinese foreign ministry voiced support for Ahmadinejad and said it hoped Iran could maintain "stability and solidarity." When riots broke out in China's western Xinjiang Province last July, only weeks after the Iranian elections, President Hu Jintao cut short a trip to Europe and rushed home to take charge. China quickly cut off Internet service throughout the entire region. A couple of months ago, the People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, warned of the role played by the Internet in Iran and specifically linked it to the United States: "How did the constant chaos after the election in Iran come about? That was a cyberwar initiated by the U.S., where on YouTube and Twitter, it spread rumors, created splits, provoked and sowed discord."

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Meanwhile, the Chinese leadership struggles with a domestic political problem from a different direction, one of its own making: an ever more strident Chinese nationalism. The regime has stoked this nationalism as a replacement for the old Communist values that few in China believe in anymore. Indeed, more than 60 years after Chiang Kai-shek fled the Chinese mainland for Taiwan, the Communist regime that defeated him is managing to produce its own new Nationalist China, with a good deal of the corruption of the old one. But the more the leadership encourages nationalism, the more it has to worry about being itself accused of caving to foreigners. It allowed anti-American demonstrations to swell after U.S. bombs hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. It allowed anti-Japanese protests a few years later. In both cases, the regime had to rein in what was happening on the streets after the protests threatened to spin out of control. The ultimate fear is that, some day, nationalism could turn against the leadership itself.

In short, China is on its way to becoming a durable authoritarian regime. However, it's not quite there yet. There is still, for now, the worry about nascent opposition at home, whether it might develop on the streets or online. The consequences seem clear: China isn't opening up its political system to far-reaching reform in the way that outsiders have for years hoped and predicted, and it is ever less willing to do anything overseas that might make it look weak.

In the United States and Europe, the reaction to this hardening has been one of angst. What we are witnessing now, in fact, is the gradual disintegration of America's post-cold war vision and strategy for China. One veteran China hand, David Shambaugh, recently described the current intellectual predicament in a succinct if understated fashion: "Analysts who have argued that the country is moving inexorably towards greater openness and reform are beginning to reexamine long-held assumptions."

America's strategy for dealing with Beijing has been based for nearly two decades on the idea of using trade and economic ties to bring China into the existing international system and gradually nudge it toward political liberalization--as Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has put it, "to integrate China into a U.S.-led world order."

It took some time for that strategy to gel. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, America's China policy was based primarily on the idea of a cold war partnership against the Soviet Union. There was little talk then of prodding China's political system, although some in Washington believed that Deng would follow up his economic reforms with a comparable drive for political change.

After the upheavals of 1989--the Tiananmen demonstrations and the bloody crackdown, the fall of the Berlin Wall later that year--American leaders struggled to come up with a new basis for dealing with China. The initial formulation came from President George H.W. Bush. Seeking to explain America's continuing ties with a regime that had so recently opened fire on its own citizenry, Bush settled on the idea of "engagement." It was a curious choice of words. The phrase "constructive engagement" had been used by the Reagan administration a few years earlier as justification for its friendly policy toward South Africa in the face of a congressional effort to impose economic sanctions against the apartheid regime. Nevertheless, as applied to China, the word "engagement" took hold--to such a remarkable extent, in fact, that it has been used, over the past two decades, to describe contacts not just with Beijing but with other repressive regimes around the world, from Burma to Sudan to Iran.

Still, as even many of its proponents acknowledged, "engagement" was itself merely a tactic, an agreement to go to meetings, and not a strategy. It was left to the Clinton administration to come up with that. The United States hoped to open up the Chinese political system. The means for accomplishing that change would be trade and investment. Economic prosperity, the strategy predicted, would lead eventually to political liberalization. In this analysis, China would follow the same political path as its Asian neighbors, South Korea and Taiwan, both of which had

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moved from authoritarianism to democracy during the 1980s.

“You’re on the wrong side of history,” Clinton informed Chinese President Jiang Zemin at one 1997 Washington press conference--thus adopting, with some modifications, Francis Fukuyama’s post-cold war view of history’s inexorable drive toward liberalism. Clinton spoke of political change in China as “inevitable, just as inevitably the Berlin Wall fell.”

There was nothing particularly Democratic or Republican, nothing liberal or conservative, about this triumphal American vision for changing China. Clinton’s successor, George W. Bush, proclaimed, “Trade freely with China, and time is on our side.” (After China began to accuse the United States of carrying out a strategy of “peaceful evolution” to undermine Communist Party rule, American officials, high and low, often confessed privately, with bemusement, that they were indeed believers in peaceful evolution.)

Predictions that China was destined for some sort of political change were simply part of the intellectual landscape of the years after the end of the cold war. In 1996, at a Stanford University conference called to sketch out what China might be like in the year 2010, the late Michel Oksenberg, one of the best and most illustrious of all American Sinologists, hazarded a prediction. “I am tempted to suggest that China’s paramount leader will (by 2010) have either been directly elected or selected via an elected, multi-party national parliament,” he said. “The outside world and the porousness of China’s borders will make it difficult for China’s leaders to resist those trends.”

The centerpiece of the strategy of integration, in policy terms, was the successful effort to bring China into the World Trade Organization (WTO). In doing so, the U.S. government ended the annual process (an impassioned debate in the early ’90s, ultimately a hollow ritual) in which Congress voted to extend China’s trade privileges in the United States.

In the process of arguing for China’s WTO membership, the Clinton administration told the American public about the political impact it would have inside China. These claims were carefully worded, but clear enough. “Bringing China into the WTO doesn’t guarantee that it will choose political reform,” said Bill Clinton in 2000. “But accelerating the progress, the process of economic change, will force China to confront that choice sooner, and it will make the imperative for the right choice stronger. ... I understand that this [bringing China into the WTO] is not, in and of itself, a human rights problem. But, still, it is likely to have a profound impact on human rights and political liberty.”

A decade later, it appears that this strategy of changing China through trade has backfired. To be sure, China’s membership in the WTO had an enormous economic impact. For those who wanted to invest in China, or to outsource manufacturing to China, WTO membership brought long-term stability and predictability to doing business. Companies had the protections of the WTO; they didn’t have to worry about annual congressional reviews affecting whether they could continue to operate.

But the extensive economic changes have not hastened China’s decision to launch political reform, as Clinton and many others had forecast. Instead, they have set back any such decision. WTO membership helped fuel high rates of economic growth and increasing prosperity for an urban elite with an ever-greater stake in the existing political order. Individual Chinese have greater personal autonomy than they did a decade ago (in the sense of lifestyles, clothes, and travel), but any organized dissent or opposition to the regime is suppressed at least as thoroughly as it was ten years ago. >From the standpoint of the Chinese leadership, the economic changes of the past decade have meant steadily increasing foreign-exchange reserves and thus ever-greater leverage in dealing with other countries. Why do anything to rock this boat?

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In recent months, China's old friends overseas, who have argued for years in favor of greater understanding of the leadership, are now giving voice to a strikingly more pessimistic view. In one January speech, Chas W. Freeman Jr., the veteran diplomat who took part in the Nixon opening to China, said the current regime "stands for no credible values, neither trusts nor is trusted by those it rules, suffers from a high level of corruption, and has no clear vision for self-improvement." He concluded: "Despite its economic successes and growing defense capabilities, China's international influence will remain limited as long as it fails to evolve an attractive political system. It is not impossible that it may do so, but there is no evidence at present to suggest that it will."

Enter Barack Obama. In talking about China, Obama has been noticeably different from his predecessors, both Bush and Clinton. In public statements, Obama generally does not say that trade and investment will lead to political liberalization or that China's own growing prosperity will produce a popular desire for change in its one-party system. He does not embrace the triumphal view that history is on America's side. "I believe that each country must chart its own course," Obama said during a speech in Shanghai.

Instead, the Obama administration's portrayal of China's political future is decidedly less hopeful: We can't change China, but we still have to deal with it somehow, because it is important to our diplomacy (think Iran and North Korea) and our economy (think Treasury bonds). When conflicts arise, the reigning new cliché is that the United States and China have a "mature relationship." So, the two countries continue to meet and talk with one another about important issues, but at the same time have strong disagreements. (By this same definition, the Obama administration also has a "mature relationship" with John Boehner and Mitch McConnell.)

The idea of the powerful United States bringing China into the existing system is fading. Obama possesses, if anything, an exaggerated sense of China's strength. When he visited China last November, he accepted restrictions on his events and his ability to speak to the Chinese people that were considerably beyond those Bill Clinton endured more than a decade ago. He also agreed to a long, formal "joint statement" with China whose vague wording set off some jitters overseas. In it, the United States and China promised to respect each other's "core interests," a phrase that China has itself defined to include Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. The administration maintains that this statement represents nothing new, but China has been quick to seize upon it and will continue to do so. (When Obama met with the Dalai Lama a few weeks ago, China immediately complained that it was a violation of the document.)

The administration avoids sweeping pronouncements about China's political future because it recognizes, to a fault, the limits on its own power to bring about change. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the United States, in public and intellectual debates, the old 1990s notion that trade will lead to political liberalization in China is giving way to new formulas for deflecting concern about the Chinese regime's continuing suppression of organized dissent. The old line was that China was headed inevitably for political change. The new one is that most Chinese people really don't want political change, anyway: They are said to like China's existing system. In fact, this line of thinking is not new, but a revival. It echoes the argument frequently made about China in the West during the 1960s and early '70s, until, after Mao's death, that turned out to be wrong.

Those with a rosy view of the regime's popularity sometimes point to a Pew Global Attitudes Project survey conducted two years ago, which found that 86 percent of Chinese were satisfied with "the way things are going in our country today." But the Pew poll also found that an unimpressive number of Chinese, by global standards, were happy with the way things were going in their own lives, as opposed to the nation as a whole. Pew did not ask--because no outside pollster could possibly ask--the basic questions: Would you like to be able to choose your own leaders? Do you like the Chinese Communist Party? Do you think a single party should run everything in this country?

Recognizing that our commerce with China will not open up its political system has implications both for American policy and for how it is explained or justified. Finally, the United States can pursue an economic policy toward China that

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suits American economic interests--detached from any large political project. We should not cling to old visions of liberalizing China through trade, while Beijing pursues mercantilist policies to protect its own industries and workers.

During the 2008 primaries, campaigning in industrial states, both Obama and Hillary Clinton attacked China's economic policies and promised changes in a new administration. Clinton was particularly acerbic. "It is outrageous that China and other countries continue to manipulate their currencies to put our goods at a disadvantage," she told one union audience in Pittsburgh. Obama was less fiery but made the same point that very same day. Chinese leaders are "grossly undervaluing their currency, and giving their goods yet another unfair advantage," Obama said. Their promises of a new policy were shelved soon after the administration took office. The incoming treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner, told the Senate Finance Committee in a written statement that "President Obama ... believes that China is manipulating its currency." In short order, there were worries that the new administration might be getting off on the wrong foot with China, and Geithner reversed course. Last April, in its first formal report on currency issues, the Treasury Department decided not to say anything about China's manipulation.

The Obama administration is due to file a new currency report next month that will address the question for China once again. And China will probably offer a small-scale appreciation in an effort to deflect larger changes. Some China analysts warn that the leadership in Beijing can't move too quickly to correct its abuses because, if it did, there would be widespread layoffs of Chinese workers. That's genuinely too bad, but the Obama administration needs to keep its focus on U.S. jobs and to press for truly significant changes in the value of the Chinese renminbi. By Paul Krugman's recent estimate, China's current policies may cost the United States 1.4 million jobs over the next couple of years.

When it comes to diplomacy, the same sorts of considerations apply. The idea of integrating China into a U.S.-led world order was a chimera from the start. So, instead of pursuing vague and larger purposes, we should simply pursue our own interests, as China does. We can stop pretending that those interests coincide. There is no need to sign grand statements about Sino-American cooperation when they don't reflect the underlying reality between the two countries. At this point, speeches invoking the old days of the Nixon-Kissinger era not only don't help, but they actually get in the way of doing whatever business we can with Beijing. Airy talk about the past diverts us from confronting the disagreements of the present. It establishes a false context in which new American leaders are supposed to feel guilty for not getting along with their counterparts as well as Kissinger did with Zhou Enlai.

On questions of democracy and human rights, we need to start with the presumption that the Chinese political system isn't going to open up anytime soon. On her first trip to China as secretary of state, Hillary Clinton said she didn't want to focus on human rights issues because "we pretty much know what they're going to say." That was partially right. If the purpose of human rights discussions with China is to win over the leadership, they are pretty much a waste of breath. But the reason to keep on raising these issues is to convey our own continuing belief in the values of free and open political debate, in the hopes that others in China, outside the leadership, will hear and care.

America's perceptions of China vary from season to season. Only a year ago, as the two governments worked to stimulate their economies in the midst of the financial crisis, there was casual talk of the United States and China operating as a new "G-2," teaming up to run the world. Now, in the wake of Copenhagen and the awkward Obama trip, we get instead popular depictions of China out there on its own: China as G-1.

China might soon move to smooth things over. It could ease its currency policies enough that American and European leaders could claim a small victory. It could provide a modicum of assistance with Iran to avoid being tarred as the country that blocked sanctions. Perhaps a year from now, the ephemeral adjective popularly applied to China will switch back again from "assertive" to "flexible."

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But, no matter how we describe Chinese behavior to reflect such relatively minor vicissitudes in its policies, our underlying view of the country has already profoundly changed. The United States has come to realize that its assumptions about China from the 1990s and early 2000s were quaint and time-bound, a reflection of America's overconfidence after the end of the cold war. Back then, American leaders thought China was on the wrong side of history, moving in our direction, destined inevitably to liberalize. History, alas, wasn't so sure.

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