




Responsible US–China Policy


A responsible approach to the US–China relationship strengthens America at home, protects critical industries, and deters aggression while preventing rivalry from spiraling into permanent confrontation. We should defend our interests firmly, but avoid repeating the mistakes that led to costly, open-ended wars.

Policymakers are often pushed towards emotionally charged language on China, even though the myth of popular hostility to China is not well-supported. The public is more concerned about conflict with China than about appearing weak. Yet certain rhetorical habits move policymakers away from a real and restraint-oriented approach, and increase the risk of escalation. Here are some common pitfalls, and how to avoid them:

 “China is an existential threat.”

 “China is a serious competitor, but America has much to gain from a healthy relationship and much to lose from permanent hostility.”

 “This is a choice between democracy and autocracy.”

 “We defend our values best by strengthening our own democratic institutions, competing in smart and constructive ways, and avoiding unnecessary wars.”

 “A deal with China sells out the American public.”

 “A smart, enforceable deal with China protects jobs, lowers risks of conflict, and keeps competition stable instead of spiraling toward crisis.”

Should the US decouple economically from China?

A full economic break with China would hurt American families and make conflict more likely. Severing most economic ties with the world’s second-largest economy would raise prices, damage American farmers and manufacturers, and trigger retaliation that hurts US businesses. Broad exclusion also pushes both countries toward deeper hostility and increases the risk of military confrontation. Rather than decoupling, the US should strategically reduce dependencies in key areas while deepening ties in others that serve to rebuild American strength at home.

 “We need to separate the US and Chinese economies.”


 “We need protections in some sectors, but a self-inflicted economic rupture would deprive America of great opportunities without strengthening our security.”

Should the US restrict Chinese access to technology and limit research collaboration?

Intellectual property theft and improper technology transfer are real problems, and they require enforcement. But broad suspicion and restrictions on even low-risk cooperation are overreach that weakens American science and damages American business. China has become a major power in many scientific and technical fields, and cutting off collaboration will not stop China’s progress. Instead, it risks harming US universities, companies, and researchers, while

reducing American visibility into Chinese capabilities. Overbroad restrictions can also damage America's talent pipeline and fuel prejudice against Chinese scholars. A responsible approach would involve controls on narrowly defined, high-risk technologies and research areas, while encouraging collaboration in medicine, climate science, public health, and other low-risk areas.


 "If China 'wins' in AI, chips, or biotech, America has lost."

 "America cannot lead in innovation if it cuts itself off from one of our most dynamic competitors and one of the most important sources of new technological breakthroughs."

Should the US defend Taiwan if China invades? How should the US deter Chinese aggression?

The US has a strong interest in preventing coercion and preserving peace in the Taiwan Strait, but the deteriorating US-China relationship in recent years has made that more difficult. A war would be devastating for Taiwan, the US, China, and the global economy. Deterrence should focus on convincing Beijing that it cannot achieve its aims in Taiwan quickly or cheaply, while also reducing the risk of escalation. That means strengthening Taiwan's self-defense, maintaining a credible U.S. military posture centered on denial rather than provocation, and preparing serious economic and diplomatic consequences for aggression. However, efforts to restrict China must be accompanied by robust reassurance, including reinvigorating a stable One China Policy, steady crisis communication, and initiatives that cultivate shared interests between the two powers.


 "The US needs to commit to defending Taiwan and prepare for war with China."

 "The best way to support Taiwan is to prevent war, and that requires not just a smarter approach to deterrence but also rebuilding the diplomatic relationship with China."

How should the US respond to China's human rights abuses?

The Chinese government's human rights abuses, including repression in Xinjiang and crackdowns on labor, feminist, and democracy activists, are real and wrong. The US should speak clearly about those abuses. But when human rights are instrumentalized as a tool to gain geopolitical advantage, they lose credibility. If Washington frames every dispute as part of an ideological crusade, it strengthens nationalist forces in China and makes it easier for Beijing to portray domestic reformers as agents of a foreign power. A new Cold War atmosphere empowers authoritarianism and militarism, which are the very forces most hostile to universal rights. A more strategic approach means speaking clearly and consistently about abuses, applying standards evenly to preserve credibility, and rebuilding diplomacy with China so Beijing has a stake in listening to US criticism.

 "The only way to stand up for human rights is to confront China everywhere."

 "We should speak clearly about human rights abuses, but we shouldn't use them as a reason to escalate towards conflict that could hurt millions and close space for real progress on human rights."

Can the US and China work together on global issues?

The US should compete with China, but refusing to cooperate on global threats is strategic irresponsibility. Some dangers, like pandemics, climate disruption, financial shocks, and nuclear escalation, cannot be managed without direct engagement between the world's two largest powers. We don't cooperate because China is altruistic — we cooperate because both Americans and Chinese pay the price when global crises spin out of control.

 "Cooperation with China sells out the American people."

 "Cooperation isn't appeasement. It's protecting Americans from global threats we can't manage alone."