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Opinions

What Mike Pompeo doesn't understand about China, Richard Nixon, and the U.S. foreign policy

Opinion by **Richard Haass**

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Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a blistering speech about China on Thursday. The problem was not simply that the nation's chief diplomat was decidedly undiplomatic. Worse was his misrepresentation of history and his failure to suggest a coherent or viable path forward for managing a relationship that more than any other will define this era.

The secretary asked what Americans have to show for 50 years of "blind engagement" and said the answer was little or nothing. He instead erected a straw man: U.S. policy failed, he said, because China did not evolve into a democracy when, in fact, the purpose of the policy developed by Richard M. Nixon and Henry Kissinger was to use China as a counterweight to the Soviet Union and shape China's foreign policy, not its internal nature.

What's more, their efforts largely succeeded. In cementing China's split from the Soviet Union, the United States gained leverage that contributed to the Cold War ending when and how it did.

Yes, China continues to flex its muscles in the South China Sea, but Pompeo failed to note it has not fought a war with another country since its 1979 border conflict with Vietnam. Importantly, China has not used force against Taiwan, which has emerged as a thriving democracy.

Pompeo also sought to commit the United States to a path that is bound to fail. It is not within our power to determine China's future, much less transform it. To be sure, the country faces enormous challenges: an aging society that will soon start shrinking dramatically, a badly damaged environment, an inadequate public health system, an unsustainable economic model that relies on massive amounts of investment for growth, and a top-heavy leadership that stifles creativity and has difficulty correcting its mistakes.

But all this and more — including the role of the Chinese Communist Party — will be for the Chinese people and their leaders to determine. For now, to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, Pompeo and his colleagues need to negotiate with the Chinese government they have.

What the United States can and should try to do is shape China's choices, to bring about a China that acts with a degree of restraint at home and abroad and that works with us to deal

with regional challenges, such as North Korea and Afghanistan, and global challenges, such as nonproliferation and climate change.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration is undermining prospects for moderating China's behavior. The first foreign policy decision of the then-new administration was to pull out of the emerging Trans-Pacific Partnership. This grouping, which represented about 40 percent of global gross domestic product, had the potential to force China to change the very economic behavior the secretary criticizes. Instead, the United States focused on negotiating a bilateral trade agreement with China that has achieved little more than a Chinese commitment (so far not realized) to import slightly more U.S. products while shelving larger structural issues.

An administration committed to changing Chinese economic behavior would be spearheading reform of the World Trade Organization, rather than paralyzing its appellate body.

An effective U.S. policy toward China would work with, not against, our allies and partners. Instead, under this administration, we treat the European Union as an economic foe, bash South Korea and Japan over how much they pay to offset the costs of our stationing soldiers on their territory and regularly raise doubts as to our reliability, be it by unilaterally canceling military exercises on the Korean Peninsula or threatening to withdraw some of our troops from South Korea, as we are doing from Germany. It is not realistic to expect allies to stand up to a powerful neighbor if they cannot count on us.

Similarly, we should be working with countries of the region to produce a collective front against Chinese claims and actions in the South China Sea; instead, it took three-and-a-half years for the State Department to produce a tougher but still unilateral U.S. policy. Meanwhile, we press our allies not to use China's 5G technology but have failed to work with them to develop an alternative.

It is ironic, too, that an administration that embraces "America First" is doing so little to make this country more competitive vis-a-vis China. A real strategy would include the federal government spending more on basic research, modernizing infrastructure and making it possible for the most talented people in the world to come and stay here, rather than pushing them away.

Pompeo spent a good deal of his speech highlighting China's human rights failures, which are many and deserve U.S. condemnation. But our standing for criticizing China would be immeasurably greater if we were equally tough on Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Otherwise, our words appear to be nothing so much as opportunistic.

America's voice would be even stronger if we practiced at home what we preached abroad. President Trump and those who work for him have forfeited much of their credibility as democracy advocates with their repeated descriptions of the U.S. media as an enemy, their attacks on an independent judiciary and their use of federal forces to repress dissent in our cities. Here and elsewhere, foreign policy begins at home.

Theodore Roosevelt advised the United States to speak softly and carry a big stick. This president and his chief diplomat are perilously close to getting it backward.