

The Two Futures of U.S. China Policy

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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While in Asia, President Obama focused quite a bit on the U.S. relationship with China. This was wise and reflects the increasingly obvious reality that the U.S.-China relationship is, and almost certainly will remain for many years, our country's most important bilateral relationship. Moreover, [Obama's Tokyo speech](#) reflected the need for cooperation between the U.S. and China. "it is important to pursue pragmatic cooperation with China on issues of mutual concern — because no one nation can meet the challenges of the 21st century alone ... That is why we welcome China's efforts to play a greater role on the world stage — a role in which their growing economy is joined by growing responsibility." The Chinese and U.S. economies are deeply linked in a relationship that is the trade equivalent of being too big to fail. Similarly, nascent rivalries for influence and power around the world cannot be allowed to grow out of control. All of this occurs in the obvious, if downplayed by the administration, context of China as a country with very little political freedom and a record of widespread human rights abuses.

The subtext of much of the discussion about the U.S.-China relationship is that as China becomes wealthier and more powerful, it will become increasingly important for the U.S. to recognize this and find ways to work cooperatively with China both as a strategy for economic growth and also for global stability. As China develops U.S. hegemony will decline forcing the U.S. to cede some of its global leadership not to democratic Europe, but to authoritarian China.

While these are probably wise guidelines, they overlook another very real possibility. What if things move in a different direction in China? What happens if an overheated economy, rising domestic instability and the extraordinarily difficult conditions under which tens of millions of Chinese toil combine render China's current rate of growth unsustainable. From the outside China continues to look like an unequivocal success story, but this is to a great extent a triumph of media repression over reality. Many of those [glittering skyscrapers remain largely devoid of tenants](#). China's authoritarian system is fraying as [numerous demonstrations occur annually in both Han and non-Han parts of China](#). China's [workers are among the most oppressed workers on the planet](#), living in dormitories, seeing their children once a year and in many cases, poorly paid and forced to move illegally from city to city to find work. If Karl Marx came back to life and took a global tour he would almost certainly conclude that China is currently the country in the world most ready for Communist revolution.

The question of in what direction China will go will likely be resolved by decisions made by the Chinese government, the rate of recovery of the global economy and a few other variables, so the outcome is still unclear. However, if things go badly in China, the bilateral U.S.-China relationship will be no less important, but will need to focus on

different issues. Bad economic times and domestic instability could lead the Chinese government to increase nationalist rhetoric, raising potential problems, for example, regarding Taiwan. If the Chinese government feels threatened and responds with a crackdown of some kind, something they have done in the past, the U.S. may not be able to stand by and do, and say, nothing. In a worst case scenario, major instability, or real economic collapse, in China would be a global crisis which would require a completely different U.S. approach to China.

It is not yet possible to know what will happen in China; and Obama is right to publicly focus on the themes he discussed in Tokyo, but the U.S. should be thinking through these other possibilities as well. The current policy challenges are difficult enough with a growing and, at least from the outside, stable, China, but if things change in China, the challenges will get much bigger very quickly. We should at least be thinking about that now.