

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / Is This How a Cold War With China Begins?

It's part of the great narrative of American politics that Donald Trump took on China. He said China was raping us. They were cheating American businesses or taking our jobs, screwing us over in deals. And one thing here was Trump. He didn't just talk. He actually took action. He began to trade war. He blocked the Chinese company Huawei. He moved towards forcing the self-tik-tok. And just fundamentally, he treated China as a threat, as a quasi-enemy, not really as a partner. And then in 2020, whatever he says, he lost. And Joe Biden, with his more measured rhetoric and his continuity with the Obama team, he took the White House. But he didn't go back to the old consensus on China. He didn't roll back Donald Trump's policies. He went way further. He's more measured in how he talks about China than Trump was, but the places where he isn't, they're more consequential, like in his repeated declarations about how far America will go in supporting Taiwan. Declarations his own administration has repeatedly now walked back. And it's not just Biden. Washington as a whole is increasingly hawkish on China. Bills like the Inflation Reduction Act and the Chips and Science Act, they're often framed as opposition to China. If you want to get something done in Washington today that is bipartisan, you frame it as competition with China. Nancy Pelosi, she visited Taiwan against a pleas of much of Washington's foreign policy community. There's this dynamic in Washington right now where there's a lot of consensus around China, but always in the direction of getting more hawkish, more confrontational with Beijing. And that is not in any way to say there aren't real reasons for that, or that Beijing doesn't hold some responsibility for that. But it is a dynamic that needs to be named and looked at and thought about. Jessica Chen Weiss has been trying to do that. She's a political scientist and a China scholar at Cornell University. From August 2021 to July 2022, she served as senior advisor in the Biden State Department. And she emerged from that experience really worried about what she calls the China trap. This dynamic, the U.S. and China are in, that could become, maybe has become, a process of mutual escalation that is not going to be easy to break and could make conflict a lot more likely than it needs to be. As always, my email as a client show at nytimes.com. Jessica Chen Weiss, welcome to the show. Thanks so much.

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It's great to be here.

So I want to begin with a moment I found really remarkable.

So back in May, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is still fresh.

It's in full swing.

Putin is global enemy number one.

And Secretary of State Tony Blinken gives this major speech at George Washington, and he says that, quote, even as President Putin's war continues, we will remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order.

And that's posed by the People's Republic of China.

You worked in Biden State Department for a while on U.S.-China issues.

When Blinken frames China as the central threat to the international order, even at a time when Russia is invading Ukraine, what does he mean?

Wow, that takes me back, because I was actually in the State Department when that speech came out.

And what it basically means is that China is increasingly influential in the international system, and it's run by a government that has very different values from ours.

And it is, unlike Russia, which poses a cute military threat, it's invaded its neighbor.

China has, I think in the eyes of the administration, a much longer game.

It is interested in reshaping the rules, the norms, the principles of that order to better suit and provide space for China's authoritarian system in the international order, which has long-privileged democracies.

I think the cynical take that you'll hear from critics inside America and outside is that we are not worried about the international order.

We are worried about our own leadership or preeminence of it.

What do you think we're worried about?

I have to say that those cynics are probably not far off the mark.

I think that it's not a pretty fact, and I wish it were otherwise.

But if you fast forward several months to Jake Sullivan's speech on the eve of the rollout of the US semiconductor restrictions, he talked about maintaining not a relative, but an absolute lead over China and as large as possible of a lead.

And so I think that even though we don't talk about it a lot, ultimately this is about American primacy or preeminence, where we got used to being the sole superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War, and I think that we're still coming to grips with the fact that even though I think we still remain hedge and shoulders above many others, increasingly the world is becoming more and more populated by other major powers with significant influence that they would like to throw around.

And so when we talk about the rules-based international order, I think that it reflects the nostalgia for what was and doesn't really reflect the fact that we have, I think, really done as much as China to undermine it in recent years, particularly under the Trump administration with the withdrawal from certain UN bodies, the Paris Agreement, et cetera.

And so although this administration is back and very much wants to be seen as a champion of the rules-based international order, as Secretary Blinken loves to call it, nonetheless, even in recent weeks, we've repudiated the ruling of the World Trade Organization against the Trump era steel tariffs and aren't doing a whole lot, although I think there is, I

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think, a desire to revitalize and modernize that international order.

I think that the scale of the investment and really the political will to do so I think has really founded on the kind of on the shoals of political partisanship at home and the fact that we are no longer as committed to leading internationally as we once were.

I think it's always hard to talk in terms of the rules-based order because as you're gesturing towards America, often violates the rules of it, and so you can get really caught in charges of hypocrisy, but I think if you back out what is being said here is that we are a liberal democracy and you want the global superpower to be a liberal democracy and China is an increasingly authoritarian and surveillance-oriented and worrying state.

So to quote Secretary Blinken, he says in the same speech, under President Xi, the ruling Chinese Communist Party has become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad.

We see that in how Beijing has perfected mass surveillance within China and exported that technology to more than 80 countries, how it's advancing unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea, undermining peace and security, freedom of navigation and commerce, how it's circumventing or breaking trade rules, harming workers and companies and so on.

The argument being made here is that China has become a kind of state that it would be frightening to have them wielding too much power, that there has been a change, it's been a change in a market period of time, particularly under Xi, and that is why America has had to move into a more competitive or confrontational or concerned posture.

Do you buy that?

There's no question that China has become both of those things more repressive at home and aggressive in the tactics that it's using abroad.

I think the question is, where is this leading?

Where are the increasingly confrontational or competitive actions on both sides?

Is tit for tat spiral that we're in?

Where is that headed?

In my view, it's likely to lead to a growing risk of an avoidable crisis likely over Taiwan and it's likely to put increasing strain, if not paralysis, in that international system and on the various institutions that once worked to find common solutions or regulate disputes.

So, increasingly, we're seeing efforts to block and check, counter China's initiatives, which there's a role for that, but the question is, are they in service of something that we want, that we want to create or we want to fashion, that ultimately acknowledges the reality that China's not really going anywhere, it's going to remain influential to a greater or lesser degree, and so simply blocking Chinese influence can't really be the solution.

It means that we have trouble prioritizing, it means that we are often overly reactive, and it means that we aren't really driving toward a specific destination, a positive some kind of inclusive vision of the future for ourselves at home, but also in the world.

What do we want it to look like in three, five, or 10 years?

I'm not sure we have yet figured out what that is.

I want to talk about some of those recent policies, but I want to work our way up to them.

Tell me how you would characterize the orientation towards China over the past three presidents.

What did Obama do differently than what was being done before him?

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What did then Trump do differently than Obama, and what has Biden then done differently than Trump?

So Obama came into office really with the global financial crisis, sort of roiling global markets and our own domestic economy, and it was at that time that first we looked to China a little bit to help stabilize the international system, which it did, but it also, I think on the Chinese side, also dislodged kind of any notion that the United States was the teacher and China the student, and we saw from 2008 into 2012 a Chinese Communist Party that was even under Xi Jinping's predecessor, Hu Jintao, increasingly concerned and frankly more willing to crack down upon domestic dissent and expressions of sympathy or interest in liberal ideas that they saw as really imported from the outside.

And so I think the Obama administration registered China's growing what was then often termed assertiveness, oftentimes in reaction to something else that took place, whether it was an incident in the East China Sea with Japan or in the South China Sea with the Philippines.

China began acting more assertively, sending ships into disputed waters regularly, and then toward the end of the Obama administration, doing this massive reclamation in the South China Sea and setting up militarized outposts there.

And so the Obama administration really moved, I think, more toward emphasizing deterrence and in this so-called pivot or rebalance to Asia.

But the Trump administration really took that to a whole nother level.

Trump's assessment of China was that it was out to rape the United States, and especially after the COVID pandemic broke out, really pointed the finger at China and began to accuse China of really seeking to undermine, dominate the world and undermine democracy.

And we saw really the escalation of a number of punitive actions that hadn't been taken before.

We saw the trade war, which to some extent settled out with a phase one trade deal, negotiated arrangement.

But that really then collapsed, I think, under the pressure of the pandemic and the increasing willingness of the Trump administration to allow more hawkish voices, particularly Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and others, to really go after the Chinese Communist Party with a variety of different punitive action sanctions, bans, and from there, that was really, I would say, what the Biden administration inherited when it entered office.

I would say that many people expected the Biden administration to lift some of the more unreasonable or even irrational pieces of what the Trump administration had implemented in particular, these tariffs that were hurting many American businesses and consumers.

But I think there was a combination of political concern that doing so would be seen as too soft on China, would make it harder to get key nominees through Congress, would give Republicans an opening to attack the administration.

And there was also, I would say, a fair amount of continuity in the underlying diagnosis that China was now the greatest strategic challenge to the United States and our policy needed to change to reflect that.

And I think there was, for example, in key senior officials, the belief that the policies of the past had failed.

This is, in the words of Kirk Campbell, the era of engagement was over and that we needed something different.

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And so there was, I think, a shared assessment that really meant that the Biden administration started out with a pretty tough set of policies that had been inherited from the Trump administration,

which ultimately didn't really change to much extent.

And then we've only seen, in a sense, I think, the accumulation of additional efforts to do various things.

I would say that they've been very careful to say that we are not in a cold war, we do not seek a cold war, we do not seek decoupling, but nonetheless are taking very systematic, tough actions to try to protect many of the national security interests that were seen as key vulnerabilities.

And so now here we are today with, I would say, a growing interest in at least conducting normal diplomatic engagements with China.

But I think that fundamentally the focus on competition, I think, remains predominant, although I think the administration has been clear that we would like to cooperate with China in areas that are in our mutual interest, ranging from climate change to infectious disease or counter-narcotics.

But that cooperation, I think, in this approach is something that's sort of nice to have, but not necessarily a defining feature of the strategy, which really rests on these three pillars that Secretary Blinken laid out, invest at home, align with our allies and partners, and then compete with China.

And you'll notice that the cooperation isn't really prominent there.

It's a sort of a second, I would say almost like a second tier priority.

I think there was a view when Biden came in, I don't love the terms harder and softer, but that he would be a breakaway from Trump's more punitive policies and rhetoric towards China, back towards something else, more engagement, more cooperation focused.

I think that didn't happen.

I think it's quite fair to say his policies took what Trump did and then built on them quite dramatically.

And rhetorically, he's not, he doesn't say things like China's out to rape us the way Donald Trump did, but in some ways he and his administration, in part because I think the view is you can actually listen to what they're saying, they say things that are more profound within the context of the relationship.

He's made a number of comments that go far beyond what has been our more ambiguous statements on Taiwan.

You have things like the Blinken speech.

It's not gentle rhetoric by any means.

And it all comes down, I guess, to this word I hear from them all the time when I ask them about it, which is competition.

And I want to ask you about it because I think there can be two ways of understanding competition.

One is that we want to make sure we can win a race, right?

We think China's built up an amazing manufacturing capability and we want to reinvest in domestic manufacturing.

And then there's another thing that I think is sort of hiding in that word sometimes, which is it's not winning the race.

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It's making it so the other guy can't win the race.

It's impeding or handicapping or sabotaging.

And the semiconductor rules seem like a big breakpoint here.

Can you talk a bit about what those are and what they implied in the way that our view of China, of what we should be doing towards China changed?

That's a great question.

And I would say, first of all, you're right that there's two ways to compete if you're running the race.

You could run faster or you could slow your opponent down.

And I think that the semiconductor restrictions almost explicitly in how Jake Sullivan described it reflected a shift in understanding of the administration, that it was no longer enough simply to run faster and stay a couple of generations ahead.

We now needed to do everything we could to hold China back to a level that was to maximize our lead in doing so.

And that over time that that wouldn't necessarily be adjusted as technology progressed but would be fixed in place.

And so you may say that's a bet about the nature of these foundational technologies and their military applications, which has a little bit of a futuristic sci-fi bent.

But people I think say that, well, these chips are being used in China's hypersonic missiles.

And so it's totally sensible that we should not be selling these chips to them.

But there are different ways to not sell advanced chips and semiconductor manufacturing equipment to China.

One is to say, you can't sell to these entities which are known to be associated with the People's Liberation Army, the Chinese military.

That was sort of the older style, kind of the end user based export control system.

And this one, however, is much more sweeping, firms need to apply for licenses to export either these advanced node chips to China or to export the equipment necessary to make them.

And that it's also extraterritorial.

This applies to firms anywhere in the world that use U.S. technology to do so.

And so there's a unilateralism to the semiconductor restrictions so far at least that is a little bit at odds with the ostensible kind of multilateral emphasis of the Biden administration.

I said so far at least because I think the administration is now very much engaged in the process of trying to get allies and partners on board, particularly Japan and the Netherlands, which are leaders in this area, to go along with and adopt similar kinds of export controls.

But until that happens, effectively, the United States is coercing others around the world to not sell this kind of technology to China.

I want to hold on this policy for a second because to zoom out, the reason this particular policy got a lot of attention in my view is that it was a little bit of a crossing of a bridge.

And maybe I'll quote Cleet Williams, who worked on international economic policy towards China under Trump on this.

He said to Politico that the Biden administration views Chinese indigenous innovation as a per se national security threat.

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And that is a big leap from where we've ever been before.

And you can take that too far.

They don't view it that way on everything.

But Jake Sullivan, the national security advisor, said that they don't just see it this way on semiconductors.

They see it this way on renewable energy technology.

They see it this way on biotechnology.

And it's true that all of these things have or can have either a national security dimension, chips go in a missile, or they can become something where other countries have a dependency on Chinese production.

And so China has coercive capabilities in the way that maybe Russia did with natural gas towards Europe.

But I mean, we're really then saying that very, very important technologies are just intrinsically national security threats.

And we are, I mean, I don't really know how to think about this.

We are really just saying we are going to try to slow China's technological advancement as a country because we think it is unsafe for us in the world if they pass us or match us in next generation technological capabilities.

And that's a really, I mean, I'm not saying that there's no rationale for it.

It's just a very profound stance to take towards another country that you also are intertwined with and need to cooperate with and are not at war with.

I think you've put your finger on it.

It is a really big shift in the way that we have regarded and treated China.

And even though you might say that there are, of course, some technologies that should not be sold or transferred to China, when you start talking about green technology and biotech, we then have to wonder, okay, if you're going to slow China down, how much are you also slowing our cells down and how much are you then making it harder for the world to solve the kinds of pressing challenges, climate change, cancer that might be discovered in China.

And if they were discovered in China or made affordable in China, wouldn't that be a good thing for the world?

And I would say that we'll have to see, but I think the signs are that this is how the Biden administration sees these technologies.

And even though that doesn't extend to China's ability to produce teddy bears or underwear, that's still a lot of technologies that don't have clear military purposes.

And so I'm concerned.

I'm concerned about the direction of travel here, even though rhetorically we reject decoupling between the administration's statements about future technologies that could be...

Can you say what decoupling is?

Yeah.

So, decoupling is basically the idea that we won't trade with each other, that we will separate ourselves economically, financially.

And I would say that most people, in regard to anything else, would say that that's impossible.

We are among each other's largest trading partners.

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And so it's right to say this is not decoupling, but it is certainly moving us in that direction. And there's a question, at what point does movement to disentangle and erect barriers between ourselves?

To what extent does that have really negative repercussions for our ability to decarbonize, to solve many common challenges in health and other areas?

How does a policy like this look to China?

What is it, both in terms of their direct response to the policy and in terms of what they understand our view towards them and our relationship to them is?

These export controls served as yet another data point for Chinese analysts to say, look, the United States is out to contain China's rise, and it will stop at very little to do so.

I think that they got the message when the Trump administration used similar measures against Huawei, and it was then that they really started to stockpile and invest very heavily in making their firms effectively independent, not reliant so much on external inputs.

But Huawei is still struggling, and so these export controls are hurting Chinese firms. The question is, will they succeed, and the Chinese response has been, they won't. One of the unfortunate consequences of unilateral export controls of this nature is that they give firms around the world a huge incentive to de-Americanize their technologies so that they can continue to sell to Chinese firms.

Experts in this area, one put the impact of these restrictions, and maybe it would slow China down for a couple of years, but that they would nonetheless ultimately manage to surmount this through even greater domestic investments in R&D and in their own indigenous innovation.

And so I think another question with these export controls is, will they even be effective?

So what benefit have we gotten at what cost?

Hi I'm Phoebe Lutt, a producer on the opinion desk of the New York Times.

What we do in opinion at the times can often be controversial, but that's what we do here on the opinion desk.

We gather experts, people at the center of the big news story whose voices we vent and trust on the issues of the moment.

We work with those people to craft an argument that makes sense and present it with clarity and respect for the other side.

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You wrote in a piece for Foreign Affairs that quote, overreacting by framing competition with China in civilizational or ideological terms risks backfiring by turning China into what many in Washington feared already is.

When I was thinking about that, because I've been doing more reporting around this question and something I'll hear from administration officials is, look, China gets up in the morning and they want to become the world's leading superpower and they think we stand

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in their way.

I'm paraphrasing here, and then basically the next sentence is something like, and we take them seriously on that and we are completely determined to stand in their way.

This is funny way in which, to the point of your quote, it certainly seems like we might be making the other side's fears about us truer than they would otherwise be, which then makes it more reasonable to act in these ways, which then makes the fears even truer.

I just worry about, I wonder about a cycle of turning ourselves into antagonists and how inevitable or necessary that really is.

That's exactly the dynamic that I see taking place.

I think some would say, well, of course, there's nothing to do about that.

They couldn't be persuaded otherwise.

That's their ambition.

I see it a little bit differently.

In fact, many in the US intelligence community don't conclude that China is bent on global domination.

If you look at the 2022 threat assessment from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, it talks about China's desire to become the preeminent regional power and a major global power.

That's a, not the major global power.

I think that there is, unfortunately, an artificial sense of certainty about China's ultimate ambitions. Because if you believe they are fixed and unchanging, then there's no downside risk to just standing in their way, because you've already priced that in.

But if you think, as I and many others do, that very little in Chinese politics is fixed, that system, it is one that has evolved, it has reinvented itself, it uses ideology and rhetoric often very instrumentally.

It embraced and co-opted capitalists and then rewrote its ideology to gloss over the fact that it was doing so.

That there's a lot more domestic contestation, if you will, over what China wants.

They're not sure exactly what kind of international order they want.

They're not sure what costs they're willing to pay in order to be a leader.

There have been I think a lot of domestic concerns about China's overseas spending at a time when there's still intense poverty, rampant inequality, high levels of youth unemployment for China to be spending that overseas and rather than on bettering the lives of China's own people.

It means that there's these unresolved debates within China over what China wants.

Now, certainly, this Chinese Communist Party wants security and feels, I think, mortally threatened by the more intrusive liberal, the universalism of liberal values.

They do want to reshape the international order to privilege the state over the political rights of individuals, but that's different from saying they want to upend international order, necessarily replace the United States as the sole global superpower.

You were in the administration for a while on these issues, and I think it's fair to say you're more on the dovish side of these questions.

My instincts tend to put me there, but the people we're talking about, Tony Blinken and Jake Sullivan and so on, they're not people who hate peace or are unaware of these dynamics

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in which more hostile policy towards China is going to make China more hostile towards us, and as China continues to rise in power, there's going to be more hostility between the two countries, and that's a dangerous thing.

They clearly believe this to be truly important, and you'll hear them say things like, this is a defining decade.

This is a decade in which the terms of our relationship and competition with each other will be profoundly set.

What is it that you would hear inside or outside as the counter argument to this?

Their current argument would be that we tried, the Obama administration tried very hard to engage China to bring it into the international system and look what happened.

They militarized the South China Sea, they stole our intellectual property, and really there's no good faith effort on their side.

Even if we wanted to, they're bent on taking advantage of the privileges that have been afforded to them and the access that they have had.

I would say that there's bad faith and a lot of mistrust, I would say mutual suspicions on both sides, and that even though that history can't be redone, nonetheless, the bet all along I think was that having China on the inside of these institutions was better than having China on the outside of them, and that even though China is no longer liberalizing, we still have to figure out how to live with one another.

The alternative, which is to simply continue this tit for tat struggle with one another, is really leading in a direction that will ultimately be at enormous cost to not only our economic interests, but also our values as we basically make a common cause with whoever around the world that might stand with us against China.

What do we actually want?

Because there's a realism here in all these speeches.

People understand, they say they know China is powerful, it is large, it is becoming more powerful, and so there's no real world here where China is not, I mean, as it already is to some degree, a central superpower.

It's not 100% clear to me then what it is, like the stated end game is.

Do you feel like you have a better sense of that?

Not only do I not have a better sense of it, but I think that there's real resistance to even defining it, because history of course doesn't end, and it's difficult to look, you know, 5, 10 years down the pike when I think many people are today motivated by this sort of sense, this urgent need to counter whatever it is that pops up on the radar that China is doing here, there, or the other place.

And so I think that it's difficult.

I mean, I think there's a recognition that unbounded competition, you know, without guard rails as the administration likes to put it, that's not a good place to be.

So we have the rhetoric of we need to manage this competition responsibly, but what does that mean and where is it going?

I don't think that there's a clear vision, unfortunately, and it's really not on one administration, I think, to put that forward.

This has to be something that is more broadly bought into, because, you know, given the nature of American politics, I think that there's an unfortunate tendency to, you know, not

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want to stick out one's neck when kind of more measured pragmatic policy, you know, is just going to invite an investigation, which we may well see as the House stands up its new select committee on China.

To draw on another political or geopolitical argument that I think has become influential, one thing you'll hear is that there is an ineluctable tension between a world safe for liberal democracies and a world safe for authoritarian or autocratic regimes.

And that there's no real plausible coexistence there because the two are just always in conflict. The very things that liberal democracy is doing and supporting and pushing are a threat to the stability of autocratic regimes, the freedom of speech, the lack of domestic surveillance, political rights, political liberalization, and vice versa.

And so the reason we have such an interest here in China's rise or in curbing it is because we are trying to make the world safe for ourselves and for political systems like ours, and that if China becomes powerful enough, they'll use economic coercion, the surveillance and so on, not because necessarily they're expansionistic, but because they are just trying to protect themselves from the threat of liberalism.

How do you take that argument?

So I'm very much of the view that a world safe for democracy could also be a world safe for autocracy.

So long as it's one that reinforces the sovereignty norms at the heart of the UN Charter, which is non-interference in others affairs.

Now what does that mean in practice?

I think it basically means that both United States and China would have to curb some of the kind of extraterritorial infringements that we're seeing today, whether that's Chinese influence efforts abroad and supporting candidates or intimidating dissent, or it might mean kind of reining in the scope of American sanctions on Chinese Communist Party officials for things that they have done inside their borders, for example.

I think the question here is, will defining this competition as one between systems alleviate or make that competition more intense?

And here I think there's a concern that if China concludes that the United States is indeed unwilling to coexist with China so long as it remains authoritarian, that it will only take more and more aggressive actions to delegitimize and potentially destabilize democracy.

Now I'm not a Russia expert, but my understanding from talking to colleagues who are is that the Russian interference efforts were, at least in Moscow, conceived of as retaliation for U.S. efforts to support democracy in Russia and its near abroad.

And so I worry that we are at the beginning stages of an escalating ideological competition where the United States and China no longer remain chiefly interested in defending our respective systems, but are, in fact, as the United States and Soviet Union were during the Cold War, engaged in going around the world meddling in various places to kind of put our thumb on the ledger in order to counter the perceived influence of our geopolitical rival.

One of the scenarios that emerges when people are afraid of this is Taiwan.

And you hear, again, different incarnations of the scenario.

One is that China gets stronger and decides it's time to take Taiwan by force, another

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is that China is getting weaker and worries that the window is closing to take Taiwan. But there's a real fear that what happened with Russia and Ukraine will happen with China and Taiwan, and America has become more committed in things Joe Biden says.

We say our policy hasn't changed, but he's been much more explicit about our intention to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion effort.

How do you think about the flashpoint of Taiwan?

So I would say that there are a lot of pressures on the status quo, which has really served all parties, Beijing, Taiwan, and the United States pretty well for decades.

But it is under, I would say, unprecedented pressure.

And the status quo really is that Taiwan is a self-governing democracy, but it doesn't enjoy formal legal international recognition.

And one of the sources of pressure on this are, I think, to some extent it is, China is growing military capabilities, which make it a little bit less credible that the United States would be able to hold off China if it were to decide to invade.

That said, it would still be extremely costly, very difficult for the Chinese military to take the island easily.

Given geography, it's a very tough target.

And I would say that other changes, I think, equally significant are first Taiwan's democratization and evolution over generations of a more independent, so-called naturally independent Taiwanese political identity that wants very little to do with mainland China.

And the experience of watching the kind of crackdown on Hong Kong's autonomy and democratic freedoms have really made the so-called one country, two systems model that China has offered as the way that Taiwan would be governed after unification, really kind of a non-starter among the Taiwan public, as well as Taiwan's political leaders.

And so what we have now, I would say, is kind of a very eroding status quo, which for the US part, I think, has also become a little bit hard to explain, especially as the desire to stand up to China, I think, takes hold.

And in particular, Taiwan is this kind of, there's a sort of moral piece here that Taiwan is a vibrant democracy worth defending, but that ultimately has the effect of destabilizing this kind of equilibrium that has held for so many years because part of what has made this work for so long was that leaders in Beijing could continue to tell themselves that there is a prospect for peaceful unification and that the United States would not necessarily stand in the way of that.

But increasingly, as you have the United States doing things with Taiwan that look like to Beijing, a restoration of the kind of defensive alliance, a formal relationship that the United States once had with Taiwan before the switch in diplomatic recognition at the end of the 1970s, that kind of secular improvement in US-Taiwan relations looks in Beijing like a steady march toward Taiwan's permanent separation or even eventually formal independence.

And I would say that you have even in the United States, former officials, you have Secretary Mike Pompeo even calling for Taiwan to be recognized by the United States as an independent and sovereign country.

And so politics here, I think the more public attention we have to this issue, it's become increasingly difficult to pursue and uphold this very really ambiguous status for Taiwan that has maintained and been the secret to peace and stability for all these decades.

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10 or 15 years ago, it was very clear what we were doing and what we hoped would happen. So we were bringing China into the global economic and political system and we're hoping they would liberalize, hoping that either the Chinese Communist Party would become some kind of more democratic institution or other things would arise.

But there's a view that if you get China richer and more integrated, that there would be an inevitable demand for an opening up and so you'd have a country more on the path to being some kind of more liberal, more democratic state.

I think some of the turn as we've discussed is almost like a spurned lover dynamic in Washington, which is not meant to dismiss it, but a real like that proved truly wrong. If anything discredited neoliberalism and a whole era of policymaking, it was that and a feeling that maybe this was not good, frankly, for the American economy either, that we lost a lot of manufacturing towns and opened up space for populist authoritarians like Trump. And so in that space, there's not really a lot of vision right now of what we should want.

If you were writing out that vision, what should it be if you take China's form a little bit for granted, the Chinese Communist Party and so on, what is it that we should want and be striving for?

So that's a great question.

And I think that we have to start here at home with a kind of more realistic assessment of what it is that we can do in the world and who it is that we want to be at home and what will enable us to be as competitive, if you will, going into the future regardless of what shape that international order looks like.

And so in particular here, I think that there's a lot of good words, something that the free and open, secure and sustainable, inclusive, all these words, they're great ones.

But what does that mean in practice?

Right now, I fear that the kinds of policies that we are adopting to ostensibly protect what we make and innovate here at home are actually smothering innovation and discouraging international investment and talent from coming and remaining here in the United States.

A recent survey by the Asian American Scholar Forum found that 60% of Chinese-born scientists who are working in the United States, including naturalized citizens and permanent residents, are considering leaving the United States to work elsewhere, maybe Europe or Canada, because of this combination of xenophobia, anti-Asian attacks, but also policy efforts to protect research security.

And it's not just Asian-American scientists, it's also international scientists generally.

A survey by American Physics Society found similarly shockingly high levels, like 40% felt that the United States was no longer a welcoming environment for science and innovation.

And so to me, we have to start with, who do we want to be at home?

And then how can we be true to our principles when we talk about freedom from coercion?

How do we really truly work with our allies and partners rather than twisting their arms, whether it's on export controls or when we think about, for example, the Inflation Reduction Act and the sort of the bi-American requirements?

We are introducing these frictions that I think makes it difficult to lead inclusively with as broad a coalition as possible.

I think we should also stop drawing artificial barriers between autocracies and democracies,

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realizing that we ourselves are going through a moment here at home.

Of course, I mean, the administration acknowledges this, but nonetheless, by still describing it as that kind of a world where you have one system pitted against another, you make it harder to work with countries of all stripes on common challenges, including improvements in domestic governance and responsibility.

And so I think that what our vision ought to be is one where the United States still engages with the world knowing that what happens overseas doesn't stay overseas, that we can't simply wall ourselves off, and that actually being much more principled about how it is that we work with the world, that that has been the kind of the hallmark of American competitiveness, the sort of principles, legal framework, a consistent framework, rather than a society where kind of the taint of something Chinese is enough to decide that you want nothing to do with it, so with Virginia Governor Yonkin sort of pulling out a consideration for the Ford battery plant because there was a Chinese investor involved.

That kind of knee-jerk reactivity, I think, is kind of the antithesis of the sort of forward-looking, really pragmatic results-based policymaking that I'd like to see us able to recapture.

And so on other issues, I think there's human rights, for example, I mean, I think that's an issue where we want to be leading.

It's of course difficult to be leading when we have committed such atrocities ourselves, but nonetheless, I think that there's a way to do so, just recognizing that our ability to transform other societies and to nudge by hook or by crook other governments in this direction is rather limited, and so we need to, I think, prioritize more how do we use our resources in a way to support not only democracy here at home, but those who are already committed to democracy abroad, without at the same time really feeding the insecurities of authoritarian governments elsewhere, because as I think we discussed earlier, there's a concern that the more pressure we place on authoritarian governments elsewhere, the more they will in turn try to undermine our democratic freedoms, and that's the spiral that I think is most important that we arrest alongside, of course, the potential conflict over Taiwan.

I think it's a good place to end.

So as our final question, what are three books you would recommend to the audience?

The first is a book by my colleague and co-author, Jeremy Wallace, about China.

It's called Seeking Truth and Hiding Facts, Information Ideology and Authoritarianism in China.

And it really is about the sources of domestic contestation and evolution of what the Chinese Communist Party has been, how a revolutionary Communist Party came to embrace GDP statistics as its measure of legitimacy, and how once those numbers didn't quite add up, how under Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party has embraced sort of a neopolitical turn to legitimize their continued rule.

The second book I'd recommend is a work of fiction by Celeste Ng.

It's called Our Missing Hearts, and it's really a cautionary tale about many of the, I think, unfortunately real dynamics that we're already seeing as sort of a combination of concerns about the protection of American culture and traditions and what is being taught in schools, along with the dose of suspicion of anything of Asian or Chinese origin and family separation policies, which are unfortunately part of our history and are present. And so this is really a cautionary tale about what our society could become if we let this

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sort of instinct to counter or protect ourselves against anything that might smack of having Chinese influence dialed up to a hundred, what that could do to us and our democracy.

And finally, the last book I'll recommend is a book by my very good friend Valerie Core called Sino-Stranger.

And if one of the challenges that we have here is overcoming the very deep divisions here in our society to figure out what is that kind of affirmative vision, that future that we want to create, her book I think provides a roadmap to looking beyond the many things that divide us to thinking about what unites us and taking in always at the forefront our collective humanity, not just here at home, but what that could look like and envisioning what could coexistence look like.

Jessica Chen Weiss, thank you very much.

Thanks so much, it's been great to be here.

Ezra Clancho is produced by Emma Vagau and a galvange of Galibourg and Carmen Quistin-Lynn, fact-checking by Michelle Harris, mixing and original music by Isaac Jones, audience strategy by Shannon Basta, the executive producer of New York Times-Opening Audio as Andy Rose Strosser, special thanks to Carol Saburo and Christina Semilowski.