

Time Will Tell

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner are right to raise questions about the assumptions that have guided U.S. China policy. Twenty-five years ago, the West bet that China would head toward democracy and a market economy. Such a bet was not simply the product of post-Cold War illusions. Social science theories of modernization suggested that as an economy approached the threshold of an annual income of \$10,000 per capita, an expanding middle class would demand more liberties. This expectation was based not only on Western history but also on the recent experiences of Asian countries such as South Korea. Moreover, the development of the Internet meant that societies had access to vastly more information than ever before. U.S. President Bill Clinton said that trying to control the Internet would be like trying to "nail Jell-O to the wall." As it turned out, the Chinese Communist Party proved quite adept at that seemingly impossible task.

FULL TEXT

Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner are right to raise questions about the assumptions that have guided U.S. China policy. Twenty-five years ago, the West bet that China would head toward democracy and a market economy. Such a bet was not simply the product of post-Cold War illusions. Social science theories of modernization suggested that as an economy approached the threshold of an annual income of \$10,000 per capita, an expanding middle class would demand more liberties. This expectation was based not only on Western history but also on the recent experiences of Asian countries such as South Korea. Moreover, the development of the Internet meant that societies had access to vastly more information than ever before. U.S. President Bill Clinton said that trying to control the Internet would be like trying to "nail Jell-O to the wall." As it turned out, the Chinese Communist Party proved quite adept at that seemingly impossible task.

Were these theories wrong? Yes, in the short run, but it is too soon to be sure for the long run. It may take many more decades for modernization theories to be properly tested by history.

Regardless, U.S. policy toward China has not been a total failure. When I supervised the Pentagon's East Asian strategy review in 1994, the United States knew that if it tried to contain China and prevent its economic growth, it would fail, because such a policy had no support in the region or elsewhere. Moreover, as I told the U.S. Congress at the time, treating China as an enemy would guarantee that it would become one. Integrating China into the international order would not assure future friendship, but it would keep open a range of cooperative possibilities. Just to be safe, however, we created an insurance policy in case this bet failed. As Campbell has pointed out elsewhere, when it comes to U.S. grand strategy in Asia, some Americans start with China and work from the inside out. Others work from the outside in and aim to stabilize the situation by arranging alliances in the region to balance Chinese power. That was the strategy we chose during the Clinton administration.

In 1994, we began to revive the U.S.-Japanese security alliance, which was in bad shape. Many Americans regarded the alliance as a Cold War relic, and some even feared a Japanese economic threat. In Japan, many politicians viewed the U.S. treaty as obsolete and wanted a closer relationship with China or reliance on the un, instead of the United States, for security. After two years of hard work, we were able to reduce support for those

positions in both countries. The joint declaration on a security alliance signed in April 1996 established the U.S.-Japanese treaty as the basis for stability and prosperity in East Asia in the post-Cold War era. It remains so to this day. Some American hawks argue that China wishes to expel the United States from the western Pacific, or at least push the country back beyond the chain of islands that run along China's coast. But Japan is the heart of this island chain, and it pays the United States to keep 50,000 troops there. China is in no position to expel the U.S. military.

No one can be certain about China's long-term future-not even Chinese President Xi Jinping. If the United States maintains its alliances with Australia and Japan and continues to develop good relations with India, it will hold the best cards in the Asian balance of power. The United States is better positioned than China not just in terms of military power but also in terms of demographics, technology, currency reserves, and energy independence. There is no need to succumb to exaggerated fears. Washington can wait to see what future decades will produce in Beijing. Deng Xiaoping created a framework for institutional succession, which Xi has torn up. Xi's new system might not last forever. In the meantime, there are issues such as climate change, pandemic disease, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and financial instability on which both countries can benefit from cooperation. Maybe the United States was not so wrong after all. As strategic gambles go, the outside-in China policy has proved more robust than the current handwringers recognize.

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DETAILS

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