



## Why Getting China Half Right Risks Getting It All Wrong

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# Why Getting China Half Right Risks Getting It All Wrong

In recent years, as relations between the United States and China have dramatically deteriorated, respected US-based analysts and scholars have warned about the dangers of underestimating the China challenge.<sup>1</sup> Others, however, have cautioned about a tendency to overhype the long-term China threat, whether to suggest that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is on brink of decline ("peak China")<sup>2</sup> or that China constitutes a "Potemkin economic superpower."<sup>3</sup> Still others have emphasized the need for the United States to "right-size" the China threat.<sup>4</sup> Although each of the three groups draws different conclusions about the scope, scale, and severity of the challenge that the PRC poses to the United States, something they all share is an obsession with Chinese capabilities without due consideration to what the PRC actually intends to *do* with its military, economic, and technological assets.

In a summer 2025 *Foreign Affairs* article, diplomat Kurt Campbell and political scientist Rush Doshi delivered a timely corrective to Washington hubris.<sup>5</sup> Debunking the "peak China" thesis, they underscored that Beijing still wields formidable advantages in scale, manufacturing capacity, and technological prowess. Their critique of Trump's "go-it-alone" approach is spot-on: without a sustained, bipartisan commitment to strengthening its alliance network in new and innovative ways, the United States risks isolation and being "outmatched" by China.

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However, by focusing solely on capabilities, scholars and analysts only get China half right. Their articles highlight a disconcerting tendency to obsess about China's capabilities and extrapolate maximalist ambitions from them. A sound China strategy must marry capability assessments with a careful and clear-eyed reading of intent. Ignoring Beijing's articulated objectives, or assuming Chinese priorities mirror American ones, invites miscalculation and courts catastrophe. If the United States imputes PRC policy solely on what Beijing *might* do with its burgeoning capabilities and assumes the worst-case scenario, then Washington risks self-fulfilling prophecies in an already fraught relationship.

Getting China right requires two steps. First, rigorously assessing both Chinese capabilities and intentions. Second, translating this holistic understanding into calibrated responses that are neither appeasing nor unduly provocative. In practice, this requires more than a superficial understanding of China: it requires a deeper appreciation of how Beijing perceives itself, Washington, and the world. Major powers seldom excel at putting themselves in the shoes of another major power. China, unfortunately, seems to be afflicted by a severe case of "empathy deficit" disorder,<sup>6</sup> or what grand strategy expert Edward Luttwak labeled "great state autism."<sup>7</sup> While the United States suffers from the same affliction, the condition appears somewhat less severe. This is not to suggest that the onus is all on the United States to accommodate its rival. Rather, it is to underscore the magnitude of the challenge in charting an effective China policy. If Beijing is seen as an exceedingly idiosyncratic adversary, managing the China challenge requires full US understanding of Chinese intentions and how they combine with capabilities.

Beijing's strategic intentions are remarkably parochial and inwardly focused. This is not to say that Beijing does not have regional or global ambitions.

**Beijing's strategic intentions are remarkably parochial and inwardly focused**

Rather, the key point to grasp is that Beijing's outward aspirations tend to be an extension of domestic priorities.<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that the United States has little to fear from China or that China poses no serious threat to US interests. On the contrary, the China challenge is very real. But it is not the threat of a dictatorial regime that has meticulously devised a comprehensive game plan for world domination or a devious and detailed scheme

to take down the United States.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Beijing is driven by instinctive fear of a presumed malevolent US intent to break up China and end Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule. This perceived threat poses a direct existential threat to what Beijing considers its bottom-line vital interests: national unity and regime perpetuation.

While Beijing's priority core interest is often characterized as "regime survival," this wording implies extreme desperation and abject fear of imminent overthrow or collapse. Not so. Beijing is quite confident of regime security in the short term, and far more worried about its prospects in the medium and long term.<sup>10</sup> Hence, Beijing formulates numerous multi-year plans in virtually every endeavor—from economics and technology to military modernization. Beijing sees its array of over-the-horizon policies—most of which are domestically directed—as being largely driven by the urgent need to compete with Washington by countering the grave multidimensional long-term US threat. In sum, Beijing always perceives itself to be in self-preservation mode, perpetually reacting to malign American anti-China initiatives.

### **Pitfalls of Net Assessment Capabilities-Centric Analysis**

For at least half a century, net assessment analysis, "the craft and discipline of analyzing military balances,"<sup>11</sup> has been an enduring Pentagon framework for studying US rivals. In such an assessment, the focus is on measurable material factors while less readily quantifiable dimensions tend to be downplayed.<sup>12</sup> Widening the aperture from hard power military factors to China's growing economic and technological capabilities, and inferring intent from those metrics, risks getting China only half right. Critics often portray the PRC as a Leninist monolith with its opaque Communist Party decision-making as a black box blocking informed analysis. In reality, however, the party-military-state publishes a wealth of official documents, speeches, and authoritative commentaries, including a white paper titled "China's National Security in the New Era" issued in May 2025.<sup>13</sup> It is Beijing's first-ever attempt at producing a publicly available US-style national security document. In short, there is ample primary evidence from which to discern China's strategic intentions. Skeptics rightly caution about the dangers of blindly accepting official propaganda or gullibly digesting disinformation. To help guard against these pitfalls, one should mine multiple sources: outlets intended for external consumption and those directed toward internal audiences. Careful analysis of an array of evidence reveals what seems to be consistent and authentic messaging by Beijing regarding priorities and objectives.

**T**here is ample primary evidence to discern China's strategic intentions

"Beijing" is shorthand for seniormost Chinese Communist Party leadership, with Xi Jinping as central strongman. Although political power is highly concentrated at the apex, bureaucrats in the party, state, and military apparatuses are

both key actors and core audiences for Beijing's messaging. Moreover, perhaps counterintuitively for a repressive dictatorship, Beijing considers public opinion a critical dynamic. Indeed, the central irony of the PRC is that the wrath of its own people is what China's ruling class fears most.<sup>14</sup> The major implication of this is not only that Chinese rulers conflate national security with regime security but that foreign policy challenges tend to be considered local or domestic ones. As Beijing's newly issued national security white paper states: "The most fundamental thing is to maintain the leadership and ruling status of the Communist Party ... and maintain the socialist system."<sup>15</sup> For a regime that many outside observers insist is laser-focused on regional hegemony and/or global domination, Beijing remains remarkably inward-looking.

## **Understanding What China Wants**

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Getting China half right risks getting it all wrong. Overemphasizing growing capabilities while extrapolating to maximalist ambitions and projecting worst-case scenarios invites escalating tensions and unintended conflict. It is not unbiased, clear-eyed analysis or a defense against naivete; it is oversimplified and downright dangerous. A nuanced China policy must pair capability assessments with a careful reading of Beijing's intentions. China's security calculus can be discovered by answering three questions: What are Beijing's core interests? What threats does Beijing perceive to these interests? How does Beijing look to counter these threats?

### **What Are Beijing's Core Interests?**

Core or vital interests are in the eye of the beholder and linked intimately to one's self-identity. Like the United States, China regards itself as an exceptional country. China is certainly a distinctive rising power, possessing a split personality of sorts—what political scientist William Callahan characterizes as an "identity dilemma."<sup>16</sup> Coexisting alongside the identity as the proud heir to a wondrous ancient civilization is an enduring modern identity of unabated victimhood with a legacy of endemic domestic chaos and divided nationhood. In this environment, Xi Jinping's "China dream of national rejuvenation" resonates powerfully.<sup>17</sup> Abiding pride in the might and glory of long ago—and shame at more recent bullying and carve-ups by far stronger foreign powers during the so-called "Century of Humiliation"—produce a Beijing with an underdog mentality manifesting extraordinary sensitivity to perceived slights, external interference, and outside pressure.<sup>18</sup> That Beijing assiduously cultivates this disrespected China narrative only serves to amplify the counterproductive impact on its foreign and security policies.

Beijing's 2025 national security white paper emphasizes "political security," which refers to the authority and rule of the CCP, and is defined as "the core of national security." This articulation reflects both the CCP's claim to legitimacy through economic performance and a deep-seated insecurity. Beijing's "core interests" encompass maintaining Party rule, continued economic development, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity to include the regions of Xinjiang and Tibet as well as the island of Taiwan. Noteworthy is that Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in remarks at a high-profile forum in Kazakhstan in May 2024, described Taiwan as the "core of core issues."<sup>19</sup> While China's economic presence is now global with billions in trade, investments, and infrastructure—and millions of PRC citizens routinely living, working, studying, and traveling overseas have produced ever-expanding "overseas interests"—Beijing continues to prioritize regime preservation and domestic stability above all else.

### **What Threats Does Beijing Perceive?**

For China's leaders, regime security and national security are one and the same, and they view the United States as the principal threat.<sup>20</sup> Beijing also infers US intentions from American capabilities: vast hard-power assets, global alliance networks, and significant soft-power influence. Based upon these indicators, Chinese leaders routinely accuse their American counterparts of being guided by a "Cold War mentality." As Wang Jisi, a leading Chinese strategist, points out to an American audience, "Chinese elites view the United States as a sinister challenge to China's internal political security and to the CCP's authority. As they see it, Washington has more tools to influence China than it had to influence the Soviet Union during the Cold War."<sup>21</sup> Beijing's national security white paper also contends that "some countries have launched tariff wars, trade wars, technology wars, and public opinion wars against China ... [all of] which seriously threatens China's security and development."<sup>22</sup> Washington is clearly the unnamed prime perpetrator and orchestrator-in-chief of these initiatives. On other occasions, Chinese leaders do not hesitate to call out the United States by name on occasion for an action that seriously threatens China's national security.<sup>23</sup>

Importantly, public views align with elite opinion to produce a shared perception of the United States as an existential threat to China. A 2024 opinion survey by Tsinghua University's Center for International Security and Strategy found that 87.5 percent of Chinese respondents believe the US goal is to "contain China's development." Almost half of those surveyed perceive that the United States is conducting a "peaceful evolution" campaign to subvert the PRC's political system. Although harshly critical of US policy toward China, some 80 percent of Chinese respondents view American citizens neutrally or positively.<sup>24</sup>

The United States is also viewed as the central obstacle to what Beijing labels “peaceful reunification” with Taiwan. From Beijing’s perspective, unification would have happened via armed “liberation” during the early Cold War without US military intervention. Following US-China rapprochement in the 1970s, Beijing blames Washington for renegeing on repeated commitments to walk away from Taipei, and hence stymying cross-strait reconciliation and inevitably sabotaging unification without war. China is convinced that the United States has been two-faced, never intending to abandon Taiwan.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, Beijing assesses that Washington is engaged in fundamentally changing the status quo in the Taiwan Strait by tacitly supporting independence, strengthening quasi-official ties, and de facto resurrecting a US-Taiwan military alliance.<sup>26</sup> In December 2025, Trump’s announcement of the largest-ever arms sales package—\$11 billion worth—to Taiwan further reinforced China’s perception of significantly enhanced US-Taiwan security ties. Moreover, according to one authoritative US Congressional source, “U.S.-Taiwan security cooperation includes training in the United States and in Taiwan, which, although generally not widely publicized, appears to be expanding.”<sup>27</sup> Beijing’s heightened concern over what it perceives as Washington backsliding on commitments made decades ago vis-à-vis Taiwan may not be fully appreciated by the Trump administration. A two-hour call between President Trump and President Xi in early February 2026 produced two very different readouts. While Trump merely listed Taiwan as one of a handful of issues the two leaders discussed, official PRC media report Xi as telling Trump: “The U.S. must handle arms sales to Taiwan with extreme caution.”<sup>28</sup>

### How Does Beijing Counter Threats?

Beijing’s security ethos stresses seizing and maintaining the initiative in matters military or otherwise. But in practice, Beijing tends to be reactive. Indeed, in military strategy, the PRC’s paramount concept is “active defense.”<sup>29</sup> According to this concept, China’s armed forces will not initiate conflict, but are committed

**In practice, Beijing tends to be reactive**

to responding vigorously if attacked. China’s latest defense white paper, issued in 2019, recites an oft-repeated mantra attributed to Mao Zedong: “we [China] will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked.”<sup>30</sup>

In a similar vein, influential Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong stressed that “the PLA’s mission will remain one of deterrence, not expansion.”<sup>31</sup> Outside of defense matters, Beijing frequently accuses other countries of initiating unfriendly actions, whether physically violating PRC sovereignty or launching

unfair rhetorical salvos criticizing China. Such alleged actions provide the justification for Beijing to respond forcefully. In US-China relations, Beijing invariably blames the United States for triggering a crisis or confrontation. Hence, in practice, Beijing finds itself to be on the reactive end of an action-reaction dynamic, whether in a spat over trade or a tiff over Taiwan.<sup>32</sup>

## **Why US Trade and Taiwan Policies Fall Short**

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US policymakers too often fixate on China's growing capabilities—measuring tariff percentages levied, counting warplanes, or cataloging naval deployments—while neglecting the intentions that drive Beijing's decisions. Answering the above three questions can clarify Chinese intentions in a given policy area and help anticipate actions. Currently, the two most contentious issues in US-China relations are tariffs and Taiwan. In the former, Washington appears to have underestimated Beijing's resolve and capabilities, while in the latter Washington seems to be overestimating Beijing's intentions. In each case, the United States risks a policy that falls short and unintended escalation which spirals into the abyss.

### **Underestimating Tariff Resolve**

When the Trump administration imposed crushing 125 percent tariffs on China in April 2025, Washington assumed that the prospect of tremendous economic pain would compel Beijing to capitulate. From a purely material standpoint, this seemed logical: an export-dependent China should have buckled under the strain of US duties and sanctions. Instead, Chinese leaders responded with determined retaliatory tariffs and restrictions on rare earths. Following a fragile truce in Geneva in May and further talks in London in June, both parties agreed to extend their tariff pause, culminating in a joint Stockholm statement in August.<sup>33</sup> The United States and China later agreed to a temporary trade truce following a meeting between Trump and Xi on October 30, 2025 on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Busan, South Korea. The arrangement, which involved tariff reductions and commitments on certain trade issues, followed earlier negotiations, including a 90-day tariff suspension agreed in the Stockholm Joint Statement. While it remains too early to declare a victor, the US move has been widely interpreted as a notable backpedal during an unwanted and economically disruptive tariff war.<sup>34</sup>

Beijing's core interests are not limited to Chinese economic vitality in the form of unhindered exports. China's massive retaliatory tariffs threatened to devastate China's own economy in a country where the regime gladly takes credit for growth and prosperity, but then fears public blame and outrage when it fails to

deliver. Of course, US-imposed tariffs provide a convenient and very visible scapegoat, but alarm over the prospect of popular anger puts pressure on Chinese leaders to make a real effort to fix the economic difficulties by negotiating with the United States. But there are limits to how far Beijing will go. For Chinese leaders to accept Trump's terms and travel to Washington to negotiate, like others, would represent more than a diplomatic concession; it would symbolize subservience and imply weakness.

A higher priority for Chinese leaders is the political legitimacy of the ruling CCP, and Xi Jinping and fellow Politburo members cannot appear weak in the court of PRC public opinion.<sup>35</sup> For Beijing, swift capitulation to foreign pressure was out of the question. A tough rebuff is essential when elites and masses perceive

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the first-mover country as posing the greatest existential threat to the regime and China. Moreover, since weathering the onslaught of Trump's initial trade war in 2017 and the Biden administration's punitive tariffs and export controls, Beijing has anticipated a renewed trade war with Washington. In 2026, China is better positioned to withstand another wave of US tariffs and prepared to respond both rhetorically and in kind.<sup>36</sup> In

May 2025, Xi told multiple foreign leaders that "there are no winners in trade wars,"<sup>37</sup> and Beijing has sought to portray itself as a champion of free trade in the face of Washington's blizzard of seemingly indiscriminate tariffs targeting allies and adversaries alike.

In pushing back with counter tariffs, Beijing was prepared to accept considerable economic pain, calculating that the Chinese people were prepared to absorb hardship at least for a time if it meant standing up to perceived American bullying. Moreover, Beijing rightly assumed that a trade war would do equal if not greater damage to the US economy and expected Washington to eventually dial it back.<sup>38</sup> As RAND researchers noted a decade ago, an inhibitor to the United States and China launching a major trade war is the fear of escalating to "mutually assured economic destruction."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, this phobia prompted Trump and Xi to agree to a rare phone conversation in early June 2025 in an effort to avoid escalation. Of course, each leader publicly claimed victory, but most importantly, this direct top-level communication allowed officials from both sides to explore off-ramps. On the call, Xi reportedly invoked a nautical analogy, stressing that both countries should "steer the rudder" to course-correct US-China relations.<sup>40</sup>

A more effective China trade policy would combine US leverage with a clear understanding of Beijing's dual imperatives: protecting CCP legitimacy through

continued economic vitality and preserving Chinese access to world markets that drive growth. This means targeting specific sectors and getting very concrete about exactly what steps Beijing should take to accomplish US trade objectives. Positive reinforcement if Beijing actually delivers can help; even public praise or simple acknowledgement that the PRC has followed through on a commitment will be noticed.

### **Overestimating Intentions on Taiwan**

American assessments of Beijing's Taiwan strategy often presume that China's massive multi-decade military buildup is in preparation for an eventual full-scale invasion of the island, with the most frequently mentioned date being 2027.<sup>41</sup> Certainly, the PRC's defense modernization is remarkable, whether measured by sheer scale or the upgrade in weapon systems and operational capabilities. Moreover, perhaps the most visible manifestation of this force modernization has been more missiles, aircraft, and maritime forces deployed in the vicinity of Taiwan, and greater military muscle flexing in the Taiwan Strait as well as in the air and waters around the island.<sup>42</sup> These dramatic displays certainly signal considerably improved capabilities, but do not reveal much about how Beijing plans to use those forces.

In fact, Beijing's preferred approach has long been what it labels "peaceful reunification." While this phrase is a misnomer, its usage is illuminating. First, "reunification" is inaccurate since Beijing's communist rulers have never controlled or occupied Taiwan. Second, "peaceful" is extremely misleading because Beijing's understanding of the word is very different than how it is interpreted by people in most other world capitals.<sup>43</sup> The PRC conception of war and peace is distinctive. For Americans and many others, war and peace are viewed as dichotomous: a country is either at war or in a state of peace. But for Beijing, war and peace exist on a continuum with all-out war at one extreme and perfect peace at other extreme. The day-to-day real world exists somewhere on a spectrum in between the two extremes in an ambiguous "gray zone" shrouded in an imprecise mix of conflict and amity.

Hence, for Beijing, peaceful reunification amounts to a sustained campaign of coercion below the threshold of outright war that can include carrots as well as sticks. In the early years of this cross-strait policy starting in 1979, Beijing focused on carrots. For example, in the early 1980s, Deng Xiaoping introduced the "one country, two systems" formula promising considerable autonomy following future unification. Originally intended for Taiwan, the formula was first applied to Hong Kong in 1984 and then Macao in 1987. In 1994, China enacted the Law on the Protection of Investment of Taiwan Compatriots, guaranteeing legal protections for Taiwanese investments and profits as cross-Strait

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military conflict**

economic ties expanded. But as frustration grew when Taipei appeared to backslide along with Washington's perceived willful meddling and encouragement, Beijing started to signal its displeasure. The real missiles launched during the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-96 and paper "missile" of the Anti-Secession Law of 2005 were among the measures intended to counter Taiwan's delaying tactics and moves toward creeping independence. Beijing has tended to be more conciliatory to Kuomintang leaders and administrations as well as more hostile toward Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leaders and administrations, since the former are considered pro-unification while the latter are seen as against it.<sup>44</sup>

Most recently, where Taiwan is concerned, Chinese sticks have been far more evident than carrots. This gray zone strategy—including maritime militia harassment, airspace incursions, and economic pressure—is designed to gradually erode the Taiwanese will to fight or resist.<sup>45</sup> The goal is to achieve unification without a full-blown military conflict. If this kind of victory sounds familiar, it is: thousands of years ago, China's legendary strategist Sun Zi admonished rulers that subduing an adversary without fighting was the best way to attain a win.<sup>46</sup>

In presuming that Beijing's endgame is cross-strait unification via military conquest, the United States has concentrated on ramping up deterrence through repeated statements of commitment to defend Taiwan, as the Biden administration did, and through expanded military assistance to the island, as Trump has. This risks reinforcing Beijing's narrative of American double dealing and provocations and might compel China to shift its own stance from the gray zone strategy to a conventional military one. For Beijing, the kinetic military seizure of Taiwan continues to be the least preferred option. Hence, while China's national security white paper reiterates Beijing's hardnosed commitment to "never promise to give up the use of force," at the same time the document also emphasizes that "China has always strived for peaceful reunification."<sup>47</sup> In his March 2025 work report to the rubber stamp parliament, Premier Li Qiang emphasized reconciliation when he said: "We will firmly advance the cause of China's reunification and will work with our fellow Chinese in Taiwan to realize the glorious cause of the national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."<sup>48</sup> But this does not appear to include negotiating with the island's current president, Lai Ching-te, from the DPP, who Beijing does not trust and openly derides.

Real deterrence requires more than matching hardware; it demands determining the adversary's willingness to use force. Beijing's calculus on the use of force

against Taiwan will depend on whether Chinese leaders believe their policy of “peaceful reunification” is working, as analysts and former US government officials Bonnie Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, Thomas Christensen and others have noted.<sup>49</sup> If Chinese leaders believe their approach is still viable, then they are unlikely to launch a major military operation against Taiwan. If, however, Beijing concludes that the policy has failed, then Chinese leaders are more likely to determine they have no other option than to use military force. In any event, a full-blown invasion or other major military operation against Taiwan entails considerable risks for China with no guarantee of success. Indeed, any decision by Xi Jinping to launch an attack on the island would depend on his level of risk acceptance at the time.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, it is worth noting that Xi does not appear to have full confidence in the ability of his military to be victorious, nor does he appear to completely trust his generals, as suggested by his ongoing anti-corruption purges in the PLA. The most recent high-profile victim (in January 2026) is Zhang Youxia, the vice chair of the Central Military Commission, China’s rough equivalent of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>51</sup>

This reading of Beijing’s intentions and its Taiwan Strait calculus prompts the question: how might one persuade Chinese leaders that their unification policy is working? History suggests a possible way forward. In the early 2000s, the George W. Bush administration engaged in quiet coordination with China to defuse tensions in the Taiwan Strait. From Beijing’s perspective, this episode was a rare successful instance of US-China mutual reassurance, in which both countries worked in concert to manage the challenge of mercurial Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian of the DPP.<sup>52</sup> For example, in a rare public move, President George W. Bush, standing alongside Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in 2003, openly rebuked Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian for moving unilaterally to alter the cross-Strait status quo.<sup>53</sup> To successfully deter Chinese aggression against Taipei, credible assurances are just as important as credible threats, as others have noted.<sup>54</sup>

Overestimating China’s readiness to use military force over Taiwan can undermine deterrence. However, if Chinese leaders perceive they are winning without fighting, this obviates the resort to an armed attack on Taiwan. Moreover, if Beijing assesses that its “peaceful reunification” policy is working, this could lead to a decision to scale back on gray zone provocations in the Taiwan Strait. This in turn could lead to a marked decrease in all-around tensions which could further reinforce the perception in Beijing that its preferred policy is working.

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In the Taiwan Strait, effective deterrence does not hinge on flowing more arms to Taipei. Rather, a calibrated reduction of military posturing by both Washington and Beijing could prove more stabilizing. In this case, less can be more. Of course, the question above remains: how might one persuade Chinese leaders that their unification policy is working? Seeking an answer, while exceedingly challenging, seems well worth exploring. Offering Beijing credible assurances would be a key element.

## How to “Get China Right”

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Focusing solely on China’s capabilities is problematic. But so is a preoccupation with combining a net assessment of China’s growing hard power capabilities with a good faith effort to discern Beijing’s long game through the rubric of grand strategy. Often overlooked is the reality that the realm of grand strategy lies in the ruminations and publications of scholars rather than being the bailiwick of political leaders and governments.<sup>55</sup> Xi Jinping has yet to give a speech titled “The Grand Strategy of China in the New Era,” and the PRC State Council has yet to issue a white paper titled “China’s Grand Strategy.” By contrast, multiple distinguished Chinese and American academics have spilled much ink on the topic. Unsurprisingly, they offer divergent views, including an assessment that China lacks a grand strategy, as senior Chinese scholar Wang Jisi contended a decade ago.<sup>56</sup> In other words, defining China’s grand strategy is not an objective fact but a subjective social science interpretation.<sup>57</sup> Fortunately, discerning Beijing’s short- and medium-term plans and ambitions is much less fraught because senior leader speeches and official Chinese documents directly address these quite clearly.

On both trade and Taiwan, Washington’s tendency to see China largely through the prism of Beijing’s capabilities has led US leaders to get China only half right. A policy grounded equally in capability assessment and intent analysis would recognize that China’s leadership prioritizes regime security above expansionist aims, that economic integration remains indispensable to Beijing’s domestic legitimacy, and that coercion short of war on Taiwan serves Beijing’s objectives more effectively than all-out invasion.

By attuning strategies to these intentions, crafting trade measures that punish unfair practices without triggering nationalist backlash, and balancing credible defense guarantees with diplomatic reassurances that undercut China’s gray zone rationale, US policy can deter aggression while avoiding needless escalation. In an era of near-nuclear parity, it is in neither country’s interest to sleepwalk into conflict born of misunderstanding or miscalculation. A better understanding of

motives, alongside traditional measures of strength, can help prevent minor crises from spiraling into catastrophic warfare.

Improving understanding can be approached in a variety of ways, but sustained leader-level engagement is particularly central. The October 2025 meeting in Busan between Trump and Xi marked a deliberate effort to arrest escalating tensions and move the relationship toward a more managed and predictable form of strategic competition, as reflected in steps to ease trade frictions. This stabilizing function was further evident in November, when tensions between China and Japan flared following Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks on Japan's possible military involvement in a Taiwan contingency. Amid the resulting diplomatic strain, Trump held separate telephone conversations with Xi and with Takaichi, underscoring the importance of restraint and crisis management. Taken together, these episodes illustrate how regular summit-level engagement has served as a floor for mutual understanding, helping to contain crises, maintain communication channels, and create space for further negotiation and cooperation. At least two face-to-face meetings are set for 2026: in April, Trump is scheduled to visit China, and in December the United States will host the G20 summit in Florida. In addition, Xi may also meet with Trump in the White House sometime in late 2026.

In addition, maintaining regular official communication between economic officials and defense leaders is necessary. Track Two dialogues can help but are a supplement, not a substitute, for official Track One dialogues. Maintaining and growing America's bench of China experts seems crucial and requires opportunities for in-country study and experience. It is also in America's interests to ensure that the PRC has successor generations of knowledgeable Americanists. Well-conceived people-to-people exchanges, including but not limited to students and scholars, will improve opportunities to deepen each country's understanding of the other.

Moreover, Washington should not overlook ordinary Chinese people who tend to be more favorably disposed to the United States than their political leaders. More specifically, according to the poll cited above, the Chinese people view the American people more favorably than they do the US government. This suggests both an opportunity and approach: focus on the Chinese public and leverage their goodwill toward ordinary Americans and things American. Greater attention to soft power—whether through permitting meaningful public diplomacy or exposure to such quotidian things as American music, movies, professional sports, and higher education—all have the potential to shape Chinese public views of the United States positively. Such an effort could yield consequential results but would require a major reversal of current Trump administration initiatives.

Most Chinese students and scholars are not engaged in espionage, but operating under the assumption that they are all spies will alienate this stratum of Chinese society as well as the Chinese public. Meanwhile, making CCP membership or evidence of party affiliation a central factor in denying entry into the United States is not a commonsense criterion for a country where almost anyone having the money to travel or funding for tuition is either a member of the CCP or somehow related to a party member. After all, party membership is

**Understanding Chinese intentions substantially improves the odds of sound policy**

not an indicator of a true believer; rather, it is a credential necessary to advance one's career. A smarter US approach would be to continue to target those who are directly associated with specific repressive policies and/or employed by the internal security apparatus. Enhancing people-to-people exchanges benefits not only China but also serves US interests.

Understanding Chinese intentions will not guarantee flawless outcomes, but it substantially improves the odds of sound policy. Even in the best of circumstances, Beijing remains a challenging interlocutor: its leadership harbors a fragile self-image, an insecure worldview, and a reactive security calculus grounded in deep-seated distrust of outsiders.

Is it possible that Beijing's intentions could take a more ambitious and expansive turn in the future? Significant change cannot be ruled out. What would prompt such a shift in intentions? One possibility would be a resolution of the Taiwan issue. The specifics of geostrategic reappraisal would be influenced by whether unification occurred in a relatively peaceful manner via cross-strait coercion or came about through military conquest. Moreover, if unification were achieved by armed force, then this reappraisal would also be shaped by factors such as the scope, scale, and duration of combat operations against Taiwan as well as the cost in lives, equipment, infrastructure, and budget outlays. Furthermore, the degree of involvement by the United States and its allies in the war would also affect Beijing's strategic reappraisal.

Setting aside the critical question of why the PLA would launch a major military operation to seize Taiwan, the CCP has explicitly stated that realizing unification is a prerequisite for attaining PRC national rejuvenation and has never renounced the use of force.<sup>58</sup>

The removal of the PLA's central warfighting scenario would permit greater attention to other scenarios and open the door to consideration of other possible goals. Most likely would be a redoubling of efforts to dominate other close-to-home priority geographic locales: notably the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Additionally, it is possible that Beijing could lift its gaze beyond

the so-called first island chain—the Kuril Islands, Japan, the Ryukyus, Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, and Natuna Besar—to the open Pacific Ocean.<sup>59</sup> Repeated proclamations across the decades by CCP leaders that the PRC will “never seek hegemony”<sup>60</sup> could certainly evolve into Beijing looking out to the so-called second island chain—the Bonin Islands, the Marianas, the Caroline Islands, and Indonesia—and beyond. The goal could be to turn the Western Pacific into a no-kidding Chinese sphere of influence rather than a zone of occupation.

But to be clear, a sea change along these lines in Beijing’s thinking would almost certainly be predicated on a major seismic geopolitical event. While the PRC’s absorption of Taiwan would constitute such an event, the above analysis suggests that the likelihood of Beijing seizing Taipei in the near future is extremely low, even if it cannot be completely ruled out.

This discussion is inherently speculative and only underscores the need for deeper research on and understanding of China’s leadership perceptions, strategic culture, evolving identity, and national aspirations. Assuming from the outset that China will inevitably become expansionist based solely on its growing capabilities, and formulating policies accordingly, risks producing the very outcome we fear.

Assessing China’s material capabilities is relatively straightforward; decoding its intentions demands far more effort, particularly when it comes to its future intentions. The greatest danger lies in using capabilities alone as a proxy for motive and assuming the worst. Chinese leaders face the same temptation when they infer US intentions purely from Washington’s military and economic power. This mutual strategic laziness risks turning misperceptions into self-fulfilling prophecies.

## Notes

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