INTRODUCTION

Orville Schell is the Arthur Ross Director of the Center on U.S.-China Relations at Asia Society in New York. He is a former professor and Dean at the University of California, Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Schell is the author of fifteen books, ten of them about China, contributed to numerous edited volumes and has written widely for many magazine and newspapers, including The Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker, Time, The New Republic, Harpers, The Nation, The New York Review of Books, Wired, Foreign Affairs, the China Quarterly, and The New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times. Schell was born in New York City, graduated Magna Cum Laude from Harvard University in Far Eastern History, was an exchange student at National Taiwan University in the 1960s, and earned a Ph.D. (Abd) at University of California, Berkeley in Chinese History. He worked for the Ford Foundation in Indonesia, covered the war in Indochina as a journalist, and has traveled widely in China since the mid-70s. He is a Fellow at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University, a Senior Fellow at the Annenberg School of Communications at USC and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Schell is also the recipient of many prizes and fellowships, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Overseas Press Club Award, and the Harvard-Stanford Shorenstein Prize in Asian Journalism.

WHY DO I CARE?

I'm very concerned about the precipitous deterioration of relations between the United States and China. It is no exaggeration to say that there is no other bilateral relationship in the world more important than that between the US and China. Imagine, for a moment, if these two nations were not only partners in peace, but also engaged in a good faith effort to solve some of the world’s most pressing problems. Problems of the commons like climate change, nuclear proliferation, the rise of
non-state actors, the AI control problem, the threat posed by asteroids or potentially hazardous object (PHO), pandemics, etc., are some examples of challenges that only a coalition of nations cooperating in good faith can hope to solve. We are far from such a place today. I think the best we can hope for in the next few years is that tensions begin to ease and that conflict between our nations ceases to escalate. So far, there is no indication that this will be the case.

Many, if not most people alive today grew up with a rather benevolent view of China and the Chinese communist party. I was actually surprised to learn that a history that Gallup polls taken since the late 1970’s show that the American public’s opinion of China actually grew in favorability throughout the 2000’s, peaking (by some measures) around the very beginning of Trump’s first term in office. I expected that these numbers would have been higher in the 1990’s, though it’s important to also note that these polls are a crude measure of public opinion and don’t capture the discrepancy of passion between anti-China activists and those who are categorized as having a “favorable” or “very favorable” view of the Middle Kingdom. Regardless, the situation looks very different today.

On this note, one of the things that drew me to Orville Schell’s writings on China is the fact that he was a China scholar long before relations between the two countries began to thaw. The same year (1967) that Dr. Schell earned his master’s degree in Chinese studies from the University of California, Berkeley, “an astounding 70 percent of Americans agreed on one thing: the greatest threat to U.S. security was the People’s Republic of China.” In this respect, we have much in common with late 1960’s Americans. A Pew Research Center poll conducted in March 2020 shows that roughly two-thirds of Americans now say they have an unfavorable view of China, the most negative rating for the country since the Center began asking the question in 2005, and up nearly 20 percentage points since the start of the Trump administration. Positive views of China’s leader, President Xi Jinping, are also at historically low levels.

In some ways, this is a partisan story. Republicans continue to be more wary of China than Democrats across many questions in the report. Nearly three-quarters of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents see China unfavorably, compared with roughly six-in-ten
Democrats and Democratic leaners. They are also more worried about China when it comes to cybersecurity and economic issues such as job losses to China and the trade imbalance. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to see the United States outpacing China as the world’s leading economic power as well as the world’s top military. And GOP supporters almost universally say it is better that the world be led by the U.S. Still, negative views of China increased slightly among Democrats this year, so partisans of both stripes are now largely negative toward the superpower. In fact, after seeing large increases in negative views of China from 2018 to 2019, both parties registered their most unfavorable opinions to date in 2020. The survey also finds that younger people, who have historically been more positive than older Americans toward China, now increasingly hold negative views of the country and are more prone to see it as a threat to the U.S. than in previous years. Older Americans, however, still take a more negative stance than their younger compatriots on most aspects of the U.S.-China relationship. And it’s important to note that while the survey took place as the coronavirus outbreak spread throughout the U.S., it does not appear that escalating conditions in the U.S. over the course of March shifted attitudes toward China during that period, according to Pew. In another poll conducted in April by The Economist in conjunction with YouGov, researchers found that more than a quarter of adults (27%) view China as an enemy, the highest percentage since the start of the Trump administration, and just about double the percentage who felt that way at its beginning in February 2017. “While republicans have consistently been more negative than Democrats toward China,” according to pollsters, “they are now particularly likely to see China as an enemy of the nation.” Their poll found that two in five Republicans (42%) called China an enemy compared to 17% of Democrats. But unlike 1967, there is no staunch anti-communist waiting on the wings to pull a maverick opening to China as Nixon did in 1972. Writing in the pages of Foreign Affairs magazine in October 1967, Nixon warned “Taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation. But we could go disastrously wrong if, in pursuing this long-range goal, we failed in the short range to read the lessons of history.” Then, he touched on a theme that would only gain relevance two decades later. “The world cannot be safe until China changes,” he continued. “Thus, our aim — to the extent that we influence events — should be to induce change.”
“These were the seeds of ‘engagement,’” writes Orville Schell, “a policy that has defined U.S.-China relations for almost a half century. It has been embraced by eight presidential administrations — Republican and Democrat — and survived various national emergencies, including the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the Belgrade Chinese embassy bombing in 1999, and the aftershocks of the 2008 financial crisis. I myself have been in Tiananmen Square many times over my almost half a century visiting the PRC and, until recently, have always been filled with some measure of engagement’s hope of “putting aside differences to seek common ground” (求同存异).

On his very first trip to China in 1975 to work on a model agricultural brigade and in a factory, Schell was greeted with slogans such as “Down With American Imperialism and Its Running Dogs” still scrawled on walls even as Americans were welcomed with banners extolling “the friendship between our two great peoples” that suggested a common way forward. “This was my first experience being confronted by the submerged contradiction of U.S.-China relations; that despite all of the talk of friendship’ and diplomacy,” he writes. “We Americans remained insoluble in the Chinese Communist Party’s social, political and economic autarky.”

From “The Death of Engagement:”

Today, as the U.S. faces its most adversarial state with the People’s Republic of China in years, the always fragile policy framework of engagement feels like a burnt-out case. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the relationship was already “decoupling” and the demonstrations in Hong Kong and Beijing’s assault on the “one country, two systems” formula was a coup de grace. A recent Pew poll shows that only 26 percent of Americans view China favorably, the lowest
percentage since its surveys began in 2005. Once again, it seems the only thing Americans can agree on is that China is a threat.

All of which begs the question: if engagement has failed as a policy, was it fallacious from the outset? To answer this question and understand how we ended up where we are, we must turn back to the policy’s genesis and follow its evolution through a slice of Sino-U.S. history that has curiously paralleled my own odyssey as a student of China’s often tortured progress to the present.

On February 21, 1972, after more than two decades of Cold War hostility, The Spirit of 76 taxied up to the small stone building that then served as Capitol Airport’s Beijing terminal. As Richard and Pat Nixon were enthusiastically greeted by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, America’s policy of engagement was born. Both sides had strategic reasons for this historic trip. The Sino-Soviet rift had deepened in 1969 when Russian and Chinese troops clashed along their 4,000-mile border and as Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi declared, “It is necessary for us to utilize the contradiction between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. in a strategic sense and to pursue Sino-U.S. relations.” Zhou believed that, trapped in the quagmire of Vietnam, “the American imperialists have no choice but to improve their relations with China in order to counteract the Soviet imperialists.”

Sensing a game-changing opportunity, Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s National Security Advisor, began cultivating Beijing. He declared that the U.S. has “no permanent enemies” and promised to judge countries like China “on the basis of their actions and not on the basis of their domestic ideology.” In his quest to end US-China estrangement, he insisted “geopolitics trumped other considerations.” Those other considerations, however, were not lost on the American people — who were hardly ready to accept China’s Maoist system — or Zhou. While Zhou welcomed Nixon to the Great Hall of the People saying that “the gates to friendly contact have finally been opened,” he also reminded his American guests that “the social systems of China and the U.S. are fundamentally different and there exists great differences between the Chinese government and the U.S. government.”

While Zhou stressed that those differences shouldn’t stand in the way of normal state relations, Nixon went a beat further, noting that “If our two people are enemies, the future is dark indeed.” The two countries have, he said, “common interests that transcend those differences.” “While we cannot close the gulf between us,” Nixon rejoined, “we can try and bridge it so that we may be able to talk across it.”

Nixon’s new China policy sought to transcend America’s long-standing American antipathy toward Mao and the evils of Communism to recast U.S.-China relations, even the global order. It was a tough sell, but Nixon’s intuitive understanding of how to use the power of television as political theater helped him carry the day. He was not only the first U.S. president to visit China, but he’d also arranged to have the trip televised live around the world via satellite links. As he boasted in his opening toast in Beijing, “more people are seeing and hearing what we say here than on any other occasion in the whole history of the world.” “If we can find common ground to work together,” Nixon hopefully continued, “the chance of world peace is immeasurably increased.” Then he dramatically declared, “This is the hour, this is the day for our two peoples to rise to the heights of greatness which can build a new and better world.”
By using TV to take viewers along with him into the enigma of Mao’s Communism, Nixon helped them accept the starkness of his policy reversal. And being able to share the pomp, ceremony, and excitement of his path-breaking trip did more to enable Americans to accept “Red China” than all the high-sounding policy explications and diplomatic communiques put together. Proudly calling his summit “the week that changed the world,” Nixon proclaimed, “We have demonstrated that nations with deep and fundamental differences can learn to discuss those differences calmly, rationally and frankly without compromising their principles.” But, he cautioned, “our work will require years of patient effort.”

It was not lost on anyone that what had greatly eased the way to this rapprochement was the U.S. side’s willingness to excuse China’s “fundamental differences” in ideology and values as a purely “internal affair,” as Kissinger put it. As the two American leaders assured Mao on a subsequent visit, “what is important is not a nation’s internal philosophy” but “its policy towards the rest of the world and toward us.”

It was a pledge that would lead to dissent both from the U.S. Congress and the American people, but there was no denying that this new beginning had also started to transform the PRC from an implacable enemy and rebel disruptor into a seemingly more digestible, if not yet fully collaborative, partner. Quickly, a whole host of blurry unspoken assumptions and inchoate hopes began to grow out of Nixon’s magical mystery tour. Who knew what wonderous things might follow, especially if the US & China actually began trading, allowing tourism, and engaging in educational exchanges? Nixon and Mao both walked away feeling like winners, the former for his dramatic diplomatic breakthrough and the latter for relieving China of its main adversary. But the euphoria masked myriad unresolved issues — such as the status of Taiwan (which China only grudgingly agreed to set aside after Kissinger made some important compromises) and the stark differences between the political systems and values of the two countries.

Just as it had taken an ardent anti-Communist to befriend the CCP leadership, it fell to America’s first “human rights president,” Jimmy Carter, to overlook the Party’s manifold rights abuses and take the next big step. Despite the fact that Carter assumed office declaring that his administration “should not ass-kiss [Beijing] the way Nixon and Kissinger did,” his administration ended up agreeing to both cut off formal diplomatic contact with Taiwan (“free China”) and normalize diplomatic relations with Beijing, the world’s most populous Communist state.

So it was that, on a freezing January morning in 1979, I awoke in Washington, D.C., to find the five star crimson flag of the PRC rippling over the south lawn of the White House. President Carter was about to welcome China’s “supreme leader,” Deng Xiaoping, who had quite counter-intuitively become the toast of Washington society.

“Sino-U.S. relations have arrived at a fresh beginning and the world situation is at a new turning point,” Deng said grandiloquently. “Friendly cooperation between our two peoples is bound to exert a positive and far-reaching influence on the way the world situation evolves.”
After the formalities in the U.S. capital concluded, the 4’11” tall Deng (whom Mao had described as “a pin wrapped in a ball of cotton”) departed for Atlanta and then Houston to tour the Johnson Space Center and enjoy a Texas rodeo. Once again, it was a piece of well-produced political theater that played a latchkey role in advancing the idea that, as different as they were, the USA and PRC might still find ways to co-exist, even work together.

Indeed, after decades contemplating this unbridgeable divide, I had to pinch myself as I sat — with a paper plate sagging under a mountain of baked beans and barbecued beef in my lap — only a few rows from Deng and his Mao-suited delegation in the Simonton Texas rodeo arena as the Yellow Rose of Texas blasted out of the sound system and two young women carrying American and Chinese flags loped over on quarter horses and presented the grinning Deng a Stetson hat. When he appeared a short time later in a horse-drawn stagecoach waving his cowboy hat, as the audience cheered and stomped their feet — it did feel like a new era was being born.

The rodeo was being televised in China, and by publicly embracing such indelible symbols of Americana, Deng was broadcasting a powerful message of reconciliation back home. But his theatrics helped market the new policy of the U.S. and China “engaging” to Americans as well. As Rep. Bill Alexander from Arkansas buoyantly proclaimed, “The seeds of democracy are growing in China.” Even Carter dared to imagine that “all the internal affairs of China and dealings with the outside” now had the potential to “be transformed completely.”

Deng was doing something rare in the world of highly scripted, ritualized diplomatic protocol: he was injecting personal sentiment into the narrative in a way that made it possible for both sides to imagine how the two former antagonists might now actually find some convergence. Who could resist smiling when, after Carter chastised Deng for not allowing freedom of emigration, he cheekily replied, “Well, Mr. President, how many Chinese nationals do you want? Ten million? Twenty million? Thirty million?”

But for all his confidence and charm, Deng’s visit also glossed over contradictions that troubled many skeptics. Long-time intelligence operative and future ambassador to Beijing James Lilley, saw normalization not only as naïve, but a “bungled, compromised agreement” into which the U.S. had rushed. “If Peking can manipulate us so easily, how can any Chinese have real respect for us?” he wondered.

What worried him was the way the “two Chinas question” had been kicked down the road. “We were taken to the cleaners on Taiwan,” he lamented in a memorandum to George H. W. Bush. “Peking houses hard-eyed realists...You do not put dilettantes up

Americans were charmed by Deng’s openness, confidence, pragmatism and embrace of Americana.
against pros and come away with favorable results.” Former Republican Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage was even more dismissive of the way the U.S. had embraced Beijing. In our eagerness to make things work out, he complained, we were “teaching the dog to piss on the rug.”

So eager was Carter to upgrade “the relationship,” he gave Beijing a pass on the human rights question. In historian John Pomfret’s view, Carter’s anxiety to reassure Beijing prevented him from realizing just “how much Deng Xiaoping needed the U.S. to execute his ambitious plan to modernize China.” American officials, he wrote, seemed “oblivious to their leverage.” This view was also shared by George H. W. Bush, who believed “China needs us more than we need them.”

Whatever one’s assessment, these two opening acts in the drama of U.S.-China “engagement” in the 1970s had set the two once estranged countries on a friendly glide path. So much so, in fact, that by the time of the negotiation on the Hong Kong hand-over began in the early 1980s, Premier Zhao Ziyang could credibly proclaim, “It is self-evident that Hong Kong will be run democratically.”

To stand atop the fabled Gate of Heavenly Peace, as I did in May of 1989, and see a million people gathered in protest against the Chinese Communist Party was to behold a scene Mao could not have imagined, except in a nightmare. It was impossible to walk through the Square among so many ecstatic, banner-waving youths and not feel a sense of exhilaration, for this political springtime allowed one to imagine that a more democratic, less adversarial China might finally be arriving.

But where American liberals saw reform and hope, CCP stalwarts saw conspiracy, peril, and “peaceful evolution,” a toxic cocktail of foreign machinations aimed at undermining the Party’s
“dictatorship of the proletariat.” As far as stalwarts were concerned, political reform, if left unconstrained, would threaten one-party rule, so it was hardly surprising when, after initial PLA efforts to clear the Square were thwarted by protesters, a determined Deng reassembled fresh units with new orders to “recover the Square at any cost.” As troops again swept into Beijing, this time behind armored vehicles, not only were thousands of dead and wounded soon littering the streets, but the protest movement and its hopes for meaningful political reform were over.

The Beijing massacre also left the logic of engagement in critical condition. For without reform there could be no convergence, and without any promise of convergence, engagement made no sense. And no argument was able to explain away the barbarity of what viewers around the world had seen on their TV screens. Suddenly conservatives who’d never really believed friendly relations could be forged with a Maoist regime gained new currency. As a columnist in the Austin American Statesman disparagingly concluded, “Deng Xiaoping ain’t worthy of his cowboy hat no more.”

As the world reeled from the massacre, President Bush expressed fears that an “overly emotional” reaction might lead to “a total break” and “throw China back into the hands of the Soviet Union.” At a press conference on June 5, he warned that this was the time for a “reasoned, careful action that takes into account our long-term interest and recognition of a complex internal situation in China.” The U.S. needed, he stressed, “time to look beyond the moment to the important and enduring aspects of this vital relationship.” When asked why he was being so deferential to Beijing, Bush replied, “It would only be a tragedy for all if China were to pull back to its pre-1972 era of isolation and repression.” Then, he raised a new theme: “I think, as people have commercial incentives, whether it’s in China or other totalitarian systems, the move to democracy becomes inexorable.”

He would stop short of breaking relations with China, he said, in order to encourage the Chinese “to continue their change.” Bush had tried to call Deng, but failing to get through, wrote a letter “from the heart.” “We both do more for world peace, if we can get our relationship back on track,” he pleaded. Then, defying the national mood of censure, he dispatched his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, to Beijing on a trip so secret that not even the U.S. ambassador was notified.

Even then, Deng was not remorseful. Blaming the U.S. for “rumor mongering” and being “too deeply involved” in what he called “an earth-shattering event for
China,” he accused Washington of having “impugned China’s interests” and “hurt China’s dignity.” He warned if the U.S. did not summon up a more “objective and honest reaction” toward what he termed China’s “counter-revolutionary rebellion,” Sino-U.S. relations would fall into a “dangerous state.” “I would like to tell you, Mr. Scowcroft,” he chided icily, “we will never allow any people to interfere in China’s internal affairs.”

During this tongue lashing, Scowcroft remained surprisingly contrite. “Rightly or wrongly,” Americans had been outraged, he tried to explain, as if the outrage felt by so many back home had no particular moral charge. Then, he pleaded for Deng to recognize the long distance he’d come as conveying the “symbolic importance” President Bush placed on the U.S.-China relationship and demonstrative of “the efforts he is prepared to make to preserve it.” Alluding to the fact that Bush had just vetoed legislation sanctioning China, even though it had passed the U.S. House of Representatives by a 418-0 vote, Scowcroft told Deng how “deeply appreciative” he was of “your willingness to receive us to explain the dilemma in which [President Bush] finds himself. That’s a message from a true friend of the Chinese government and the people of China.”

“There is no force whatsoever which can substitute for the PRC represented by the CCP,” countered Deng imperiously. “Let me just repeat, we have to see what kind of remarks and what kind of actions the U.S. will take,” he concluded, throwing responsibility for the breakdown back onto Scowcroft and Washington. The Washington Post called the trip “a placatory concession to a repressive and bloodstained Chinese government.” The Wall Street Journal savaged it as “one of the great tin-ear exercises of our time.” But Michel Oksenberg, a senior staff member on the National Security Council under the Carter administration, praised it as “an act of courageous leadership.” Whatever else it was, Scowcroft’s trip was a demonstration of how important the U.S.-China relationship had now become to Washington.

For those of us who had been on the ground during the seven-week protest movement, what was most striking about the Scowcroft trip was how roles had gotten reversed. Instead of Deng, who’d just tarnished his country’s reputation by massacring his own people, seeking Scowcroft’s forgiveness and help in keeping the U.S.-China relationship on track, Scowcroft somehow ended up beseeching Deng to forgive the outrage felt by Americans. Equally important was the way Scowcroft’s deference set a future precedent: Henceforth, when crises hit “the relationship,” it would be the U.S. that would be expected to bear primary responsibility for remaining flexible enough to keep it together.

Some thought Bush’s solicitude grew out of a nostalgia for his days at the Beijing Liaison Office in the mid-1970s and the personal relationships he’d established with China’s leaders as America’s first official diplomatic representative to Beijing. But his belief in the importance of American leadership in helping transform China into a more responsible participant in the existing global order, a conceit that Bush came to refer to as his “comprehensive policy of engagement,” also
played an important role in his deference. After announcing his intention to resume Export-Import and World Bank lending to China, a significant concession in its own right, Bush dispatched Scowcroft to Beijing a second time. Then, in 1991 his Secretary of State James Baker went, as well, and did extract some concessions on the Chinese sale of missiles to rogue regimes. But, gaining this modest victory was, he complained, like getting “your annual physical, the unpleasant part.”

Bush’s policy also exposed a disparity with the U.S.’s intolerance for the political persecution of dissidents in other countries like the Soviet Union. Whereas Russia was still viewed as a Communist tyranny, Deng’s China had now won a deferment from such totalistic judgements. As James Mann later observed, the unspoken, operating principle had become: “The engager will not let the behavior of the Chinese regime, however, reprehensible, get in the way of continued business with China.” Deng, for his part, surprised everyone when he did not foreclose the possibility of further engagement following the massacre. After praising military commanders for putting down the “turmoil,” he rhetorically asked them, “Is our basic concept of reform and openness wrong? … No! Without reform how could we have what we have today?”

Crucially, however, what Deng was recommitting to was not “political reform and opening up,” but “economic reform.” It was a sage maneuver, for as one U.S. president after another came under the sway of engagement, Beijing escaped more active Washington opposition. In fact, as engagement became an ever more deeply rooted article of American faith, China was also able to garner support from other segments of U.S. society, such as academia, the philanthropic community, civil society, and business, as well. By offering Beijing a “no fault China” policy, the
U.S. commitment to engagement proved an enormous providence for Beijing: It could focus on economic growth and augment its wealth and power in an unchallenged environment.

When Bill Clinton unapologetically attacked his predecessor's accommodationist policy towards China at the Democratic National Convention in 1992, he promised a “covenant with America” that “will not coddle tyrants from Baghdad to Beijing.” As he told The New York Times, “one day [the PRC] will go the way of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union,” so the U.S. “must do what it can to encourage that process.” And when Bush had extended China’s Most Favored Nation trading status without conditions, Clinton had disparaged the move as “unconscionable” and “another sad chapter in this administration’s history of putting America on the wrong side of human rights and democracy.” Now the prospect of his victory seemed likely to push U.S.-China policy in a far more antagonistic direction.

But, when he won and China’s economic rise appeared ever more inexorable, Clinton, too, underwent an alchemic change. As he later wrote, he came to believe that even without ongoing U.S. pressure, China would still “be forced by the imperatives of modern society to become more open.” (Ironically, this very line ended up being excised by censors from the Chinese language translation of his book put out in Beijing). It was at a White House press briefing in 1994 that Clinton completed his rebirth as an “engager.” He declared that he’d come to believe “we can best support human rights in China and advance our other very significant issues… by engaging the Chinese” and “delink[ing] human rights from the annual extension of Most Favored Nation status for China.”

It was quite an about-face, but maintaining the U.S.’s post-1989 massacre, pro-human rights policy was becoming untenable, especially as American businessmen — eager for a piece of the growing China market — began lobbying against it. Some businessmen, admitted Winston Lord, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, were “not only not supporting us, but were undercutting us with the Chinese.”

As China gained more and more economic power, the terms of the game were changing, and Clinton recognized he would have to rebalance the linkage between rights and commercial interests. As James Mann bluntly put it, commerce had become “the dominant motivating force behind American policy.” With its new commercial power, China was beginning to understand they could resist U.S. pressure and, if they only held out long enough when crises arose, Washington would yield. Indeed, on May 26, 1994, Clinton finally did grant China unconditional MFN status. “We’ve reached the end of the usefulness of that policy,” he said to justify his flip-flop. “It’s time to take a new path.”

The reprise of a slogan that Deng had launched in the 1980s — “Hide one’s abilities and bide one’s time” (韬光养晦 等待时机) — helped ease the way for Clinton. By suggesting that as it rose, China would resist displays of muscular nationalism and military belligerence, he made China’s rise appear less threatening. At the same time, a growing eagerness among American businessmen to profit from China’s low labor costs and the potential of its enormous markets dovetailed with the logic of a new American bromide: “Open markets lead to open societies.” Such slogans helped Clinton conclude that a more open marketplace would ineluctably “increase the spirit of liberty,” so that even without MFN pressure “over time” China would open “just as inevitably as the Berlin Wall
fell.” It was a beguiling dream, and by the end of his first term a full-blown policy of engagement had taken form around it.

Clinton fleshed out his new policy, called “comprehensive engagement,” which toned down ostracism of China in favor of high-level interaction, even agreeing to meet with Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin at the 1993 Seattle Asian leaders summit. By July 1996, despite two provocative PRC missile firings in the Taiwan Straits, Clinton had concluded that “the nature of the changes going on in China and the way [the Chinese leadership] looked at the world and us” had rendered his previous views “simply not right.” The same U.S. goals, he declared, could be better attained by embracing, rather than opposing, China. Like Carter, he had reversed rudders, and by 1997 his administration was touting the idea of building a “constructive strategic partnership” with Beijing, one that David M. Lampton described as a mixture of “positive inducement, dialogue, and closed-door diplomacy.” The virtues of engaging China would become one of the best-branded and most deeply rooted bipartisan strategies in the annals of recent American foreign policy history.

For anyone who’d experienced the events of 1989, it was surreal to be standing on the steps leading up to the Great Hall of the People awaiting the arrival of president Bill Clinton on a spring day in 1998. For it was less than a decade since protesting students had knelt right here to proffer a petition of grievances to their leaders. And it was down these same steps that PLA troops had spilled on June 4th to deliver one of the most humiliating self-inflicted wounds of the twentieth century as the “People’s Liberation Army” fired on its own “people.” At the time, I’d found it impossible to imagine the CCP ever exorcising such ghosts, ones that had provoked Clinton himself to blithely declare that the Chinese Government “was on the wrong side of history,” as if history had some ineluctable democratic forward motion that Americans alone divined. Yet, here we were back in Tiananmen Square on a bright sunny day, with two smiling presidents greeting each other as if nothing had happened in this most symbolic of Chinese places.

What is more, even though the choreography was highly ritualized, it was abundantly evident from the way Jiang Zemin took Clinton’s arm as he stepped from his limo that both were enjoying each
other’s company. Eager to let bygones be bygones, they strode down a red carpet past an honor guard and stood at attention as their national anthems were played. Then, as officials and the press corps filed into the Great Hall, an astonishing announcement was circulated: Jiang would allow the press conference (complete with an unscripted question and answer period) to be broadcast live on both radio and television across China. This meant that if the two leaders strayed into sensitive political territory, there would be no last-minute way for censors to sanitize the record. It was a dramatic gesture of Jiang’s eagerness to interact with Clinton as an equal.

Indeed, so animated did Clinton’s good-old-boy Arkansas bonhomie make Jiang that, once the press conference began, he displayed a degree of extemporaneity rarely seen in official China. Turbo-charged with the challenge of holding his own with this American master of give-and-take, even when the conversation veered into the sensitive issue of human rights, Jiang gamely plowed on to defend China’s record. And then when things might have ended, he cheerfully piped up, “I’d like to know whether President Clinton will have anything more to add?” He did. “If you are so afraid of personal freedom because of the abuses that you limit people’s freedom too much, then you pay,” Clinton continued, clearly relishing the way the exchange was developing. And, he added, “I believe, an even greater price [will be paid] in a world where the whole economy is based on ideas and information.”

“I am sorry to have to take up an additional five minutes,” Jiang interjected, seeming to enjoy the back-and-forth despite the controversial nature of their subjects. “I’d like to say a few words on the Dalai Lama.” Jaws dropped. Tibet and its exiled religious leader were not topics Chinese leaders welcomed, especially with Americans before live TV cameras. Nonetheless, Jiang went on, “During my visit to the U.S. last year, I found that although education in science and technology has developed to a very high level and people are now enjoying modern civilization, still quite a number believe in Lamaism [Tibetan Buddhism]. I want to find out the reason why.” Known for singing “Home on the Range” and reciting bits of the Gettysburg Address at diplomatic gatherings, Jiang sometimes bordered on flamboyance, even clownishness. But he was also disarming, the perfect engagement partner for a glad-handing Clinton. Alas, he would be the last such Chinese leader.

Back home, after dismissively comparing the yearly congressional MFN review process to “fly-paper” that “accumulated frustrations of people about things in the world they don’t like very much,” in 2000 Clinton approved Permanent Normal Trade Relations status for China. Then he facilitated its accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO) the following year. Both moves bolstered hopes that China’s inclusion in the American-led global trading system would not only lower bilateral trade deficits but encourage further political reform. As Clinton lectured students at Johns Hopkins University, “By joining the WTO, China is not simply agreeing to import more of our products, it is agreeing to import one of democracy’s most cherished values, economic freedom. The more China liberalizes its economy, the more fully it will liberate the potential of its people — their initiative, their imagination, their remarkable spirit of enterprise… [and] the genie of freedom will not go back into the bottle.”

His Secretary of State Madeleine Albright also hope “that the trend toward greater economic and social integration of China will have a liberalizing effect on political and human rights practices.” But she also sagely added, “Given the nature of China’s government, that progress will be gradual, at best, and by no means inevitable.” With the threat of the USSR gone, Clinton was endowing U.S.-China policy with a new core logic: open markets will promote a more equal and liberal society. “Imagine how [the Internet] could change China,” he evangelically asked an audience in 2000 as he hailed this new era. “China’s been trying to crack down on the Internet,” he continued rhapsodically. “Good luck! That’s sort of like trying to nail jello to the wall.”
The dream that through greater interaction with the outside world, China would slowly emerge from its revolutionary Maoist chrysalis until it fledged as a reborn constructive participant — if not a more open and democratic society — in the existing liberal democratic world order had taken such deep root in America’s policy circles that, by the time George W. Bush began campaigning for the presidency in 1999, he quite naturally took up where Clinton left off: touting the positive effects of more bilateral trade.

“The case for trade is not just monetary, but moral,” he preached. “Economic freedom creates the habits of liberty, and habits of liberty create expectations of democracy... Trade freely with China and time is on our side.” By 2005, Bush was propounding an even more roseate vision. At a press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, he explained, “As China reforms its economy, its leaders are finding that once the door to freedom is opened even a crack, it cannot be closed.”

A new U.S.-China compact was being forged not around fears of Soviet adventurism or just the economic benefits of more trade, but around the promise that more interaction would bring salutary political change. As columnist Nick Kristof, a former New York Times Beijing bureau chief, optimistically wrote, “After the Chinese could watch Eddie Murphy wear tight pink dresses, and struggle over what to order at Starbucks, the revolution was finished” because “no middle class is content with more choices of coffee than candidates on a ballot.”

To help reassure the world that its growing “wealth and power” (富强) was not a threat, a Chinese White Paper promised that “a prosperous and developing China, a democratic, harmonious and
stable country under the rule of law, will make more contribution to the world.” And, by 2005, Party General Secretary Hu Jintao was incanting the notion of a “Peaceful rise” (和平崛起), a rhetorical inspiration confected by the former head of the Central Communist Party School, Zheng Bijian, who vectored this slogan to the world via Foreign Affairs.

But such sloganeering masked as much as it revealed. As a leading Chinese propagandist, the head of the State Council’s Information Office, Zhao Qizheng, cynically explained, “The ‘peaceful’ is for the foreigners, and the ‘rise’ is for us.” Such soothing rhetoric was calculated, wrote Kissinger, “to transcend the traditional ways for great powers to emerge, one that can be achieved through incremental reforms and the democratization of international relations.” Such nostrums gave Americans hope that it was only a matter of time before China not only became a more capitalist, more responsible global actor, but also a more open society. “Just stay the course,” this logic implied. Keep trading and continue interacting and the tonic effects of engagement will slowly make China more convergent with the existing liberal democratic order.

This was an optimism best limned by Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book The End of History and the Last Man, in which he wrote that with “the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism,” the world was experiencing a “triumph of the Western ideal.” The counter-scenario — namely that China’s Leninist, one-party state did not see itself as part of this grand
global metamorphosis — hardly seemed credible to engagement proponents who viewed “the West” as possessing the magic keys to history’s very intention and direction.

Lulled by such rhetoric and a relatively sedate Chinese leadership, Pres. George W. Bush mandated his Secretary of Treasury, Hank Paulson, to establish the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue, which was designed to resolve disruptive tensions between the U.S. and China while prodding Beijing into becoming a “responsible stakeholder.” “Closed politics cannot be a permanent feature of Chinese society,” Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick later opined. “It is simply not sustainable. As economic growth continues, better-off Chinese will want a greater say in the future and pressure builds for political reform.”

At an early S.E.D. in Washington that I attended, some opinion makers even believed that a more democratic landfall for China was already on the horizon. John L. Thornton, then Board Chairman of the Brookings Institution, optimistically wrote in 2008, “The debate in China is no longer about whether to have democracy…but about when and how.” Encouraged by such predictions, the Bush administration continued emphasizing engagement as a way to goad Beijing into acting more responsibly. As it became economically more powerful and globally more important, seeking to guide China’s progress in positive ways did make sense. But there was a problem: as engagement proceeded, Sino-U.S. relations showed a growing deficit of reciprocity and balance, and the concessions necessary to keep the relationship functional kept falling disproportionately on U.S. shoulders even as the playing field grew more and more out of level.

Then came the 2008 U.S. financial crisis. As America’s economy spun into crisis while China’s economic growth rates remained high, a wave of exuberant hubris swept Chinese leadership circles and a new element was injected into the bi-lateral equation: Party leaders in Beijing began imagining that “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (有中国特色的社会主义) was possibly equal, if not superior, to the American model. With the U.S. seemingly in decline, Chinese leaders became even less inclined to level the playing field and adopt a more reciprocal approach.
Barack Obama assumed office as the “first pacific president” and, like his predecessors, spent his first term frozen in the aspic of engagement. He became the first president to shelve a visit with the Dalai Lama to mollify Beijing. Then his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, went to Beijing where she declared that U.S. support for contentious issues like human rights would not be allowed to “interfere with the search for solutions to other such important issues as the recent economic crisis and the global climate-change crisis.” Although “some believe that a rising China was by definition an adversary,” she declared, “the United States and China can benefit from and contribute to each other’s successes.”

Despite his administration’s efforts to respectfully signal that the U.S. was looking to establish a more friendly, responsive and reciprocal relationship, when President Obama visited China in April 2009, he was treated with a confusing coolness. As I watched his summit with Hu Jintao unfold, what was striking was that there was no friendly banter at a joint press conference, no university speech with an open question and answers period, and none of the bonhomie or warmth that had animated the Nixon, Carter and Clinton summits. The lack of solicitude shown by Beijing was perhaps a result of the growing conviction that if the U.S. was now in decline, and China was rising, Chinese leaders no longer needed to show deference. As Kissinger observed, they “no longer felt constrained by a sense of apprenticeship to Western technology and institutions.” Instead, they now felt “confident enough to reject, and even on occasion subtly mock, American lectures on reform.”
This attitude was manifested by a new arrogance in the South China Sea where China’s Navy, Coast Guard, and even fishing fleet were being deployed to enforce China’s extensive and controversial maritime claims and to provocatively challenge neighbors as well as the U.S. 7th Fleet. One PLA general explained China’s changed demeanor and new muscular posture this way: “We were weak. Now we are strong.” But while China seemed to see little need, and less dignity, in making concessions, issues such as the North Korean nuclear threat, global pandemics, and the global challenge of climate prompted the Obama administration to soldier on in their quest to remain “engaged.”

“We welcome China’s rise,” Obama kept insisting “I absolutely believe that China’s peaceful rise is good for the world, and it’s good for America.” Accepting a “rising” China “as a prosperous and successful power” was also part of his Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg’s hope chest. “Strategic assurances” were, in his view, the best way to convince Chinese leaders that their rise need “not come at the expense of the security and well-being of others.” Despite China’s frosty responses, he remained committed to forging what he described as a new “core, if tacit bargain.”

Even when Obama generously (some say foolishly) finally recognized China’s own “core interests” (核心利益) — including their claim to the entire South China Sea and other non-negotiable territorial claims to Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Macau and Hong Kong — Beijing did not temper its increasingly aggressive nationalism. As Liu Mingfu, author of the 2010 China Dream, bluntly put it, Beijing’s
“grand goal” was “to become number one in the world” and displace the U.S. Such grand plans were exacerbating imbalances, inequities and anxieties in the bilateral relationship. General Keith Alexander, director of the National Security Agency and head of U.S. Cyber Command, was soon assessing the theft of U.S. intellectual property as “the greatest transfer of wealth in human history.” When Xi Jinping ascended the throne in 2012, he called for the realization of his globally ambitious “China Dream” (中国梦). By 2014, he was also declaring that it was time for some “great power diplomacy” (大国外交) to make “China’s voice heard.”

With Xi being more assertive and demonstrating less flexibility and collegiality towards American counterparts than even Hu, a critical interpersonal lubricant that had allowed previous leaders to bond went missing. The resulting lack of trust and friction did not go unnoticed. In 2015, for instance, Xi promised Obama in the White House Rose Garden not to militarize newly built islands in the South China Sea — then, right away, did exactly that.

Now that China felt less restrained by economic and military weakness, the bilateral relationship entered a new era. It was hardly surprising that an ever-broadening spectrum of American stakeholders began complaining about a playing field that was more and more unlevel. At one point, even President Obama was reported to have asked two of his senior advisers, Lawrence H. Summers and Jeffrey A. Bader, “Did you guys give away too much?” Growing American frustration was brought home to me personally one afternoon in 2012 when I received an unexpected call from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. With both exasperation and bewilderment, she asked, “Why can’t I get any traction with my Chinese counterpart, State Councilor Dai Bingguo? I’ve been trying to find the reset button with him, but I keep hitting a wall. What do they want?”

“Opening gave the Chinese leverage over us,” reflected former Secretary of State George Schultz. “Much of the history of Sino-U.S. relations since the normalization in 1978 was ‘a series of Chinese defined ‘obstacles’… that the U.S. has been tasked to overcome in order to preserve the overall relationship.’ It was hardly surprising when the Obama administration finally began its “pivot to East Asia” and called for a redeployment of some 60 percent of the U.S. Navy’s maritime forces to the Asia region. But, lest Chinese officials retaliate and completely capsize the notion of engagement, Obama continued to insist that “a thriving China is good for America.” As late as 2016, he was reiterating, “I’ve been very explicit in saying that we have more to fear from a weakened, threatened China than a successful, rising China.”

For such an argument to remain convincing, however, the promise of ongoing Chinese political reform — which implied a certain quotient of liberalization, if not democratization — had to be in the mix. But, with Xi moving in an increasingly autocratic and pugnacious direction and with many of his fellow Party leaders viewing engagement as a covert strategy to engender “peaceful evolution,” even regime change, U.S. engagers found themselves drifting in increasingly compass-less waters. In Beijing’s defense, it must be said that their reaction was not pure paranoia. For there was an insoluble contradiction at the heart of the vision of engagement: If getting along with America meant making money, the Party was fine. But, if it also meant democratizing, and possibly
putting itself out of business, the Party was an unwilling player. Engagement may have been “a good strategy initially,” notes China analyst Tanner Greer, but because Xi came to view the policy as designed to politically change one-party rule in China, it “terrified” the Party and “they took action to defeat it.”

Despite repeated efforts by frustrated Obama administration officials to find the magic key to making relations more balanced and reciprocal, Beijing failed to respond in a meaningful enough way. It took the victory of Donald Trump and his anti-China Sancho Panzas — Steve “These are two systems that are incompatible” Bannon and Peter “Death by China” Navarro — to call out China. “These are two systems that are incompatible,” proclaimed Bannon. “One side is going to win, one side is going to lose.” Such voices were extreme, but they accurately described an interaction that had become less and less in America’s interest.

To find myself standing under Mao’s gaze on the steps of the Great Hall of the People once again, this time waiting with President Xi for President Trump to arrive, was surreal. When Trump moved into the White House in 2017, he and his “base” were strangely reminiscent of Mao Zedong himself and his populist peasant movement occupying the imperial Zhongnanhai complex near the Forbidden City in 1949. Indeed, if Trump was a reader, he might have found some of Mao’s writings agreeable, especially his famous dictum, “Without destruction there can be no construction” (不破不立). For like Mao, Trump had an innate predilection for wanting to “overturn” (翻身) established structures. A banquet in the Forbidden City, an honor guard, and a 21-gun salute in the Square.
promised all the pageantry of a big-budget film. But if the sets were grand, the performances were surprisingly flat. When he finally arrived, Trump was predictably preening and vain while Xi was characteristically supercilious and undemonstrative. Even though Trump had boasted after their Mar-a-Lago meeting that he and Xi were “great friends,” neither now evinced any more genuine sentiment than Mao’s dour Mona Lisa-like portrait hanging on Tiananmen Gate.

While Xi had been propagandizing for his “China Dream” and a “China rejuvenation” (中国复兴), Trump had been extolling his “Make America Great Again” fantasy in which one key element was “leveling the U.S.-China playing field.” Alas, Xi’s roadmap for rebirth, meanwhile, had no place for China to submissively integrate itself into the pre-existing liberal, American-led global order. Instead, he saw a muscular China now prosperous and powerful enough to act out unapologetically and unilaterally on the world stage. The more benign part of Xi’s dream envisioned Chinese influence expanding globally through an ambitious master plan of interlocking global projects such as the BRICs Bank, The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

But there was also a darker side to Xi’s grand ambitions that grew out of his paranoid fixation on the idea of “hostile foreign forces” (外国敌对势力) perennially and covertly arrayed against China. Xi’s vision was one that seemed bent on fomenting a latter-day “clash of civilizations.” He insisted that “history and reality have told us that only with socialism can we save China,” and that “the eventual demise of capitalism and the ultimate victory of socialism would be a long historical process, a struggle between our two social systems.” China, he’d begun proclaiming, was “blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization.” The U.S. needs to recognize that Xi Jinping’s Third Revolution presents a new model of Chinese behavior at home and adjust its expectations and policies accordingly,” warned the Council on Foreign Relations’ Elizabeth Economy. “Not only has China become wealthier and more powerful, but less willing to hide its disdain for its critic’s views,” observed the Australian Lowy Institute China specialist Richard McGregor. “Xi has articulated a willingness to leverage Beijing’s elevated power to press the ruling communist party’s ambitions with a force and coherence that his predecessors lacked.” But, he concluded, “Beijing cannot bully its way to superpower status without engendering a strong pushback from other countries, which is exactly what is happening.”

While Trump may be a proverbial bull in a China shop, it was not him who initially and unilaterally abrogated engagement’s tacit compact. Nor was it China’s economic rise that voided it in a neo-Thucydides trap. Instead, it was Hu Jintaos inattention to the growing imbalances in the relationship and Xi Jinping’s increasingly belligerent refusal to make any concessionary adjustments and be more reciprocal that finally over-burdened it. With Xi’s abandonment of the notion of a “peaceful rise,” his accelerated military modernization, eschewal of market reforms, and his increasingly unyielding posture in the South and East China Seas, the Taiwan Straits, and Hong Kong, the Trump administration finally acknowledged that engagement was no longer working in U.S. interests and instead declared China a “strategic competitor” and a “rival power.”

Then, in 2018, Vice President Mike Pence delivered a major policy speech that dramatically reset the terms of the new game: “Previous administrations made this choice [to engage China] in the hope that freedom in China would expand in all of its forms — not just economically, but politically, with a newfound respect for classical liberal principles, private property, personal liberty, religious freedom — the entire family of human rights,” said Pence. “That hope has gone unfulfilled.” His talk led to a debate on the need to “decouple” aspects of our now intimately intertwined economies, even the close relationships that our universities and civil society organizations have forged with Chinese counterparts.
If a mourner was to erect a tombstone to engagement, the epitaph might read:

**Engagement: Born 1972, Died Tragically of Neglect, 2020.**

In making my own genuflection before such a monument to the policy that had been the North Star of my life as a China watcher, I’d rue engagement’s loss as a completely unnecessary tragedy. I also wonder: What possessed Chinese Party leaders, and then Trump, to so recklessly kill a policy that had not only kept the peace for five decades, but allowed China to undergo just the kind of economic development and national rejuvenation that its people have dreamed of for decades? Xi’s muscular approach may be propitiating certain ultra-nationalists at home, but it was also pulling down the keystone of the global archway that upheld China’s integration into the world and antagonizing so many once collaborative foreign partners. Was this really in China’s future interest? In short, what compelling Chinese national interest was served by undermining engagement?

In the end, engagement’s end could not be blamed on any lack of American commitment or effort. It seems to me that the U.S. has shown unprecedented creativity, first by entertaining a vision of peaceful transformation of a once militant, Marxists-Leninist state and then by showing remarkable diplomatic leadership — and patience — in shepherding that vision through so many presidential administrations. As Kissinger recently put it, “our hope was that the values of the two sides would come closer together.”

Such a hope may now seem almost naïve. However, the alternative in 1972 was an on-going Cold War, perhaps even a hot war. Engagement was a chance worth taking and there were many
inflection points during its twisted progress when things might have worked out very differently. (One thinks of 1989.) That they didn’t was not due to a lack of U.S. strategic thinking, diplomatic effort, or willingness to be flexible. Engagement failed because of the CCP’s deep ambivalence about the way engaging in a truly meaningful way might lead to demands for more reform and change and its ultimate demise. Without political reform and the promise of China transitioning to become more soluble in the existing world order, engagement no longer has a logic for the U.S. Beijing’s inability to reform, evolve, and make the bilateral relationship more reciprocal, open and level finally rendered the policy inoperable. Because Xi Jinping viewed just such changes threatening his one-party rule, there came to be an irreconcilable contradiction at the heart of engagement that killed it.

So, what happens now? Is it too late to arrest our slide and devise a new post-engagement policy of engagement to guide ourselves out of the present downward spiral that Kissinger has described as putting us in "the foothills" of a new Cold War, with consequences that are potentially more disastrous than World War I?"

The two presidents should declare a state of urgency, appoint trusted high-level plenipotentiaries and mandate them to form teams of specialists from business, policy, and academia to formulate a set of possible scenarios for lowering the temperature in each of the most important realms of the bi-lateral relationship. Once both national teams have designed their own roadmaps for getting out of our present impasse, they should convene jointly to hammer out several mutually acceptable possibilities, and present them to their respective presidents. The presidents should then convene an emergency special summit dedicated to finding an off-ramp.

Whether the two current presidents are up to such a challenge is far from certain, because the leadership skills required — creativity, flexibility, reciprocity, openness, transparency, and boldness — are precisely those they lack. The CCP’s rigid commitment to a one-party system and fear that flexibility will be perceived as weakness makes it allergic to exactly the kind of give-and-take
necessary to bridge such a wide divide. And even though Trump has not misjudged China’s intentions, he is so erratic, uninformed and thin-skinned it is hard to imagine him being able to bring about a breakthrough between our two countries that are no longer divided just by trade issues, but by a far wider set of discontinuities and contradictions that are made more irreconcilable by our two opposing political systems and value sets.

But for those tempted to wait for a new administration, it is worth pointing out that neither Trump nor Xi have yet attacked the other in an ad hominem way, thus leaving the door still ajar for a one-on-one interaction. But because antagonisms are escalating rapidly, time is very short. For such a plan to be successful, Washington would have to be ready to acknowledge it will not be able to resolve the most fundamental systemic issues dividing Beijing from Washington and forgo regime change as an end game. Beijing would have to be willing to set its paranoia and victimization narrative aside and then temper its global belligerence to focus on areas where common interest still prevails. Right now, the kind of grand hopes of convergence that once animated earlier iterations of engagement are unrealistic. We must settle instead for a far more minimalist agenda, one that would allow us to pragmatically work together on those issues — public health, trade, climate change, and nuclear proliferation — where the mutual interest is obvious and urgent.

Finally, both sides would have to recognize that even in times of deep division there are still issues of critical common interest that can be jointly addressed. It is helpful to remind ourselves that the U.S. and China have squared this circle before, and it is here that the Nixon-Kissinger breakthrough in 1972 is worth re-studying. As Nixon then observed to Premier Zhou, “we have common interests that transcend those differences” and “while we cannot close the gulf between us, we can try and bridge it so that we may be able to talk across it.”

Such a meager vision is enough to make one nostalgic for the grandness of scale and optimism, if naïveté, of our old engagement dream. But perhaps the best we can now hope for, is to find enough common ground to keep tension in “the foothills” rather than allowing them to escalate and ascend into the alpine peaks of a new cold war.
My remarks today are the fourth set of remarks in a series of China speeches that I asked National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien, FBI Director Chris Wray, and the Attorney General Barr to deliver alongside me.

We had a very clear purpose, a real mission. It was to explain the different facets of America’s relationship with China, the massive imbalances in that relationship that have built up over decades, and the Chinese Communist Party’s designs for hegemony. Our goal was to make clear that the threats to Americans that President Trump’s China policy aims to address are clear and our strategy for securing those freedoms established. Ambassador O’Brien spoke about ideology. FBI Director Wray talked about espionage. Attorney General Barr spoke about economics. And now my goal today is to put it all together for the American people and detail what the China threat means for our economy, for our liberty, and indeed for the future of free democracies around the world.

Next year marks half a century since Dr. Kissinger’s secret mission to China, and the 50th anniversary of President Nixon’s trip isn’t too far away in 2022. The world was much different then. We imagined engagement with China would produce a future with bright promise of comity and cooperation. But today – today (1) we’re all still wearing masks and watching the pandemic’s body count rise because the CCP failed in its promises to the world. (2) We’re reading every morning new headlines of repression in Hong Kong and in Xinjiang. (3) We’re seeing staggering statistics of Chinese trade abuses that cost American jobs and strike enormous blows to the economies all across America, including here in southern California. And (4) we’re watching a Chinese military that grows stronger and stronger, and indeed more menacing. I’ll echo the questions ringing in the hearts and minds of Americans from here in California to my home state of Kansas and beyond:

Did the theories of our leaders that proposed a Chinese evolution towards freedom and democracy prove to be true? Is this China’s definition of a win-win situation? And indeed, centrally, from the
Secretary of State’s perspective, is America safer? Do we have a greater likelihood of peace for ourselves and peace for the generations which will follow us?

Look, we have to admit a hard truth. We must admit a hard truth that should guide us in the years and decades to come, that if we want to have a free 21st century, and not the Chinese century of which Xi Jinping dreams, the old paradigm of blind engagement with China simply won’t get it done. We must not continue it and we must not return to it. As President Trump has made very clear, we need a strategy that protects the American economy, and indeed our way of life. The free world must triumph over this new tyranny. Now, before I seem too eager to tear down President Nixon’s legacy, I want to be clear that he did what he believed was best for the American people at the time, and he may well have been right. He was a brilliant student of China, a fierce cold warrior, and a tremendous admirer of the Chinese people, just as I think we all are. He deserves enormous credit for realizing that China was too important to be ignored, even when the nation was weakened because of its own self-inflicted communist brutality. In 1967, in a very famous Foreign Affairs article, Nixon explained his future strategy. Here’s what he said: He said, “Taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside of the family of nations...The world cannot be safe until China changes. Thus, our aim—to the extent we can, we must influence events. Our goal should be to induce change.” And I think that’s the key phrase from the entire article: “to induce change.” So, with that historic trip to Beijing, President Nixon kicked off our engagement strategy. He nobly sought a freer and safer world, and he hoped that the Chinese Communist Party would return that commitment. As time went on, American policymakers increasingly presumed that as China became more prosperous, it would open up, it would become freer at home, and indeed present less of a threat abroad, it’d be friendlier. It all seemed, I am sure, so inevitable. But that age of inevitability is over.

The kind of engagement we have been pursuing has not brought the kind of change inside of China that President Nixon had hoped to induce. The truth is that our policies—and those of other free nations—resurrected China’s failing economy, only to see Beijing bite the international hands that were feeding it. We opened our arms to Chinese citizens, only to see the Chinese Communist Party exploit our free and open society. China sent propagandists into our press conferences, our research centers, our high-schools, our colleges, and even into our PTA meetings. We marginalized our friends in Taiwan, which later blossomed into a vigorous democracy. We gave the Chinese Communist Party and the regime itself special economic treatment, only to see the CCP insist on silence over its human rights abuses as the price of admission for Western companies entering China.

Ambassador O’Brien ticked off a few examples just the other day: Marriott, American Airlines, Delta, United all removed references to Taiwan from their corporate websites, so as not to anger Beijing. In Hollywood, not too far from here—the epicenter of American creative freedom, and self-appointed arbiters of social justice—self-censors even the most mildly unfavorable reference to China. This corporate acquiescence to the CCP happens all over the world, too. And how has this corporate fealty worked? Is its flattery rewarded? I’ll give you a quote from the speech that General Barr gave, Attorney General Barr. In a speech last week, he said that “The ultimate ambition of China’s rulers isn’t to trade with the United States. It is to raid the United States.” China ripped off
our prized intellectual property and trade secrets, causing millions of jobs all across America. It sucked supply chains away from America, and then added a widget made of slave labor. It made the world’s key waterways less safe for international commerce. President Nixon once said he feared he had created a “Frankenstein” by opening the world to the CCP, and here we are. Now, people of good faith can debate why free nations allowed these bad things to happen for all these years. Perhaps we were naive about China’s virulent strain of communism, or triumphalist after our victory in the Cold War, or cravenly capitalist, or hoodwinked by Beijing’s talk of a “peaceful rise.” Whatever the reason – whatever the reason, today China is increasingly authoritarian at home, and more aggressive in its hostility to freedom everywhere else. And President Trump has said: enough. I don’t think many people on either side of the aisle dispute the facts that I have laid out today. But even now, some are insisting that we preserve the model of dialogue for dialogue’s sake. Now, to be clear, we’ll keep on talking. But the conversations are different these days. I traveled to Honolulu now just a few weeks back to meet with Yang Jiechi. It was the same old story – plenty of words, but literally no offer to change any of the behaviors. Yang’s promises, like so many the CCP made before him, were empty. His expectations, I surmise, were that I’d cave to their demands, because frankly this is what too many prior administrations have done. I didn’t, and President Trump will not either. As Ambassador O’Brien explained so well, we have to keep in mind that the CCP regime is a Marxist-Leninist regime. General Secretary Xi Jinping is a true believer in a bankrupt totalitarian ideology. It’s this ideology, it’s this ideology that informs his decades-long desire for global hegemony of Chinese communism. America can no longer ignore the fundamental political and ideological differences between our countries, just as the CCP has never ignored them. My experience in the House Intelligence Committee, and then as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and my now two-plus years as America’s Secretary of State have led me to this central understanding: That the only way – the only way to truly change communist China is to act not on the basis of what Chinese leaders say, but how they behave. And you can see American policy responding to this conclusion. President Reagan said that he dealt with the Soviet Union on the basis of “trust but verify.” When it comes to the CCP, I say we must distrust and verify. We, the freedom-loving nations of the world, must induce China to change,
just as President Nixon wanted. We must induce China to change in more creative and assertive ways, because Beijing’s actions threaten our people and our prosperity. We must start by changing how our people and our partners perceive the Chinese Communist Party. We have to tell the truth. We can’t treat this incarnation of China as a normal country, just like any other. We know that trading with China is not like trading with a normal, law-abiding nation. Beijing threatens international agreements as – treats international suggestions as – or agreements as suggestions, as conduits for global dominance. But by insisting on fair terms, as our trade representative did when he secured our phase one trade deal, we can force China to reckon with its intellectual property theft and policies that harmed American workers. We know too that doing business with a CCP-backed company is not the same as doing business with, say, a Canadian company. They don’t answer to independent boards, and many of them are state-sponsored and so have no need to pursue profits. A good example is Huawei. We stopped pretending Huawei is an innocent telecommunications company that’s just showing up to make sure you can talk to your friends. We’ve called it what it is – a true national security threat – and we’ve taken action accordingly. We know too that if our companies invest in China, they may wittingly or unwittingly support the Communist Party’s gross human rights violations.

Our Departments of Treasury and Commerce have thus sanctioned and blacklisted Chinese leaders and entities that are harming and abusing the most basic rights for people all across the world. Several agencies have worked together on a business advisory to make certain our CEOs are informed of how their supply chains are behaving inside of China. We know too, we know too that not all Chinese students and employees are just normal students and workers that are coming here to make a little bit of money and to garner themselves some knowledge. Too many of them come here to steal our intellectual property and to take this back to their country. The Department of Justice and other agencies have vigorously pursued punishment for these crimes. We know that the People’s Liberation Army is not a normal army, too. Its purpose is to uphold the absolute rule of the Chinese Communist Party elites and expand a Chinese empire, not to protect the Chinese people. And so, our Department of Defense has ramped up its efforts, freedom of navigation operations out and throughout the East and South China Seas, and in the Taiwan Strait as well. And we’ve created a Space Force to help deter China from aggression on that final frontier. And so too, frankly, we’ve built out a new set of policies at the State Department dealing with China, pushing President Trump’s goals for fairness and reciprocity, to rewrite the imbalances that have grown over decades. Just this week, we announced the closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston because it was a hub of spying and intellectual property theft. We reversed, two weeks ago, eight years of cheek-turning with respect to international law in the South China Sea. We’ve called on China to conform its nuclear capabilities to the strategic realities of our time. And the State Department – at every level, all across the world – has engaged with our Chinese counterparts simply to demand fairness and reciprocity. But our approach can’t just be about getting tough. That’s unlikely to achieve the outcome that we desire. We must also engage and empower the Chinese people – a dynamic, freedom-loving people who are completely distinct from the Chinese Communist Party. That begins with in-person diplomacy. I’ve met Chinese men and women of great talent and diligence wherever I go. I’ve met with Uyghurs and ethnic Kazakhs who escaped Xinjiang’s concentration camps. I’ve talked with Hong Kong’s democracy leaders, from Cardinal Zen to Jimmy Lai. Two days ago, in London, I met with Hong Kong freedom fighter Nathan Law. And last month in my office, I heard the stories of Tiananmen Square survivors. One of them is here today. Wang Dan was a key student who has never stopped fighting for freedom for the Chinese people. Mr. Wang, will you please stand so that we may recognize you? Also, with us today is the father of the Chinese democracy movement, Wei Jingsheng. He spent decades in Chinese labor camps for his advocacy. Mr. Wei, will you please stand? I grew up and served my
time in the Army during the Cold War. And if there is one thing I learned, communists almost always lie. The biggest lie that they tell is to think that they speak for 1.4 billion people who are surveilled, oppressed, and scared to speak out. Quite the contrary. The CCP fears the Chinese people’s honest opinions more than any foe, and save for losing their own grip on power, they have reason – no reason to. Just think how much better off the world would be – not to mention the people inside of China – if we had been able to hear from the doctors in Wuhan and they’d been allowed to raise the alarm about the outbreak of a new and novel virus.

For too many decades, our leaders have ignored, downplayed the words of brave Chinese dissidents who warned us about the nature of the regime we’re facing. And we can’t ignore it any longer. They know as well as anyone that we can never go back to the status quo. But changing the CCP’s behavior cannot be the mission of the Chinese people alone. Free nations have to work to defend freedom. It’s the furthest thing from easy. But I have faith we can do it, I have faith because we’ve done it before. We know how this goes. I have faith because the CCP is repeating some of the same mistakes that the Soviet Union made – alienating potential allies, breaking trust at home and abroad, rejecting property rights and predictable rule of law. I have faith. I have faith because of the awakening I see among other nations that know we can’t go back to the past in the same way that we do here in America. I’ve heard this from Brussels, to Sydney, to Hanoi. And most of all, I have faith we can defend freedom because of the sweet appeal of freedom itself. Look at the Hong Kongers clamoring to emigrate abroad as the CCP tightens its grip on that proud city. They wave American flags. It’s true, there are differences. Unlike the Soviet Union, China is deeply integrated into the global economy. But Beijing is more dependent on us than we are on them. Look, I reject the notion that we’re living in an age of inevitability, that some trap is pre-ordained, that CCP supremacy is the future. Our approach isn’t destined to fail because America is in decline. As I said in Munich earlier this year, the free world is still winning. We just need to believe it and know it and be proud of it. People from all over the world still want to come to open societies. They come here to study, they come here to work, they come here to build a life for their families. They’re not desperate to settle in China. It’s time. It’s great to be here today. The timing is perfect. It’s time for free nations to act. Not every nation will approach China in the same way, nor should they.
Every nation will have to come to its own understanding of how to protect its own sovereignty, how to protect its own economic prosperity, and how to protect its ideals from the tentacles of the Chinese Communist Party. But I call on every leader of every nation to start by doing what America has done – to simply insist on reciprocity, to insist on transparency and accountability from the Chinese Communist Party. It’s a cadre of rulers that are far from homogeneous. And these simple and powerful standards will achieve a great deal.

For too long we let the CCP set the terms of engagement, but no longer. Free nations must set the tone. We must operate on the same principles. We have to draw common lines in the sand that cannot be washed away by the CCP’s bargains or their blandishments. Indeed, this is what the United States did recently when we rejected China’s unlawful claims in the South China Sea once and for all, as we have urged countries to become Clean Countries so that their citizens’ private information doesn’t end up in the hand of the Chinese Communist Party. We did it by setting standards. Now, it’s true, it’s difficult. It’s difficult for some small countries. They fear being picked off. Some of them for that reason simply don’t have the ability, the courage to stand with us for the moment. Indeed, we have a NATO ally of ours that hasn’t stood up in the way that it needs to with respect to Hong Kong because they fear Beijing will restrict access to China’s market. This is the kind of timidity that will lead to historic failure, and we can’t repeat it. We cannot repeat the mistakes of these past years. The challenge of China demands exertion, energy from democracies – those in Europe, those in Africa, those in South America, and especially those in the Indo-Pacific region. And if we don’t act now, ultimately the CCP will erode our freedoms and subvert the rules-based order that our societies have worked so hard to build. If we bend the knee now, our children’s children may be at the mercy of the Chinese Communist Party, whose actions are the primary challenge today in the free world. General Secretary Xi is not destined to tyrannize inside and outside of China forever, unless we allow it.

Now, this isn’t about containment. Don’t buy that. It’s about a complex new challenge that we’ve never faced before. The USSR was closed off from the free world. Communist China is already within our borders. So, we can’t face this challenge alone. The United Nations, NATO, the G7 countries, the G20, our combined economic, diplomatic, and military power is surely enough to meet this challenge if we direct it clearly and with great courage. Maybe it’s time for a new grouping of like-minded nations, a new alliance of democracies. We have the tools. I know we can do it. Now we need the will.

To quote scripture, I ask is “our spirit willing but our flesh weak?” If the free world doesn’t change – doesn’t change, communist China will surely change us. There can’t be a return to the past practices because they’re comfortable or because they’re convenient. Securing our freedoms from the Chinese Communist Party is the mission of our time, and America is perfectly positioned to lead it because our founding principles give us that opportunity. As I explained in Philadelphia last week, standing, staring at Independence Hall, our nation was founded on the premise that all human beings possess certain rights that are unalienable. And it’s our government’s job to secure those rights. It is a simple and powerful truth. It’s made us a beacon of freedom for people all around the world, including people inside of China.

Indeed, Richard Nixon was right when he wrote in 1967 that “the world cannot be safe until China changes.” Now it’s up to us to heed his words. Today the danger is clear. And today the awakening is happening. Today the free world must respond. We can never go back to the past. May God bless each of you. May God bless the Chinese people. And may God bless the people of the United States of America. Thank you all.
THE WORLD’S MOST TECHNOLOGICALLY SOPHISTICATED GENOCIDE IS HAPPENING IN XINJIANG

Two recent disturbing events may finally awaken the world to the scale and horror of the atrocities being committed against the Uighurs, a mostly secular Muslim ethnic minority, in Xinjiang, China. One is an authoritative report documenting the systematic sterilization of Uighur women. The other was the seizure by U.S. Customs and Border Protection of 13 tons of products made from human hair suspected of being forcibly removed from Uighurs imprisoned in concentration camps. Both events evoke chilling parallels to past atrocities elsewhere, forced sterilization of minorities, disabled, and Indigenous people, and the image of the glass display of mountains of hair preserved at Auschwitz.

The Genocide Convention, to which China is a signatory, defines genocide as specific acts against members of a group with the intent to destroy that group in whole or in part. These acts include (a) killing; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm; (c) deliberately inflicting conditions of life to bring about the group’s physical destruction; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. Any one of these categories constitutes genocide. The overwhelming evidence of the Chinese government’s deliberate and systematic campaign to destroy the Uighur people clearly meets each of these categories.

Over a million Turkic Uighurs are detained in concentration camps, prisons, and forced labor factories in China. Detainees are subject to military-style discipline, thought transformation, and forced confessions. They are abused, tortured, raped, and even killed. Survivors report being subjected to electrocution, waterboarding, repeated beatings, stress positions, and injections of unknown substances. These mass detention camps are designed to cause serious physical, psychological harm and mentally break the Uighur people. The repeated government orders to “break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins”; “round up everyone who should be rounded up”; and systematically prevent Uighur births demonstrate a clear intent to eradicate the Uighur people as a whole.

Ekpar Asat (brother of one of the present authors) is an emblematic example of how Uighurs are targeted regardless of their recognition as model Chinese citizens by the Communist Party. Asat was praised by the government for his community leadership as a “bridge builder” and “positive force” between ethnic minorities and the Xinjiang local government. But Asat still suffered the same fate as over a million other Uighurs and disappeared into the shadows of the concentration camps in 2016. He is held incommunicado and is reported to be serving a 15-year sentence on the trumped-up charge of “inciting ethnic hatred.” Not a single court document is available about his case.

In 2017, Xinjiang waged a brutal “Special Campaign to Control Birth Control Violations,” along with specific local directives. By 2019, the government planned to subject over 80 percent of women of childbearing age in southern Xinjiang to forced intrauterine devices (IUDs) and sterilization. The goal is to achieve “zero birth control
Government documents reveal a campaign of mass female sterilization supported by state funding to carry out hundreds of thousands of sterilizations in 2019 and 2020. This goes far beyond the scale, per capita, of forced sterilization inflicted on women throughout China under the past one-child policy.

To implement these policies, the Xinjiang government employed “dragnet-style” investigations to hunt down women of childbearing age. Once apprehended, these women have no choice but to undergo forced sterilization to avoid being sent to an internment camp. Once detained, women face forced injections, abortions, and unknown drugs. And statistics show that the government is meeting its birth prevention goals.

Between 2015 and 2018, population growth rates in the Uighur heartland plummeted by 84 percent. Conversely, official documents show that sterilization rates skyrocketed in Xinjiang while plunging throughout the rest of China, and the funding for these programs is only increasing. Between 2017 and 2018, in one district, the percentage of women who were infertile or widowed increased by 124 percent and 117 percent, respectively. In 2018, 80 percent of all IUD placements in China were performed in Xinjiang despite accounting for a mere 1.8 percent of China’s population. These IUDs can be removed only by state-approved surgery—or else prison terms will follow. In Kashgar, only about 3 percent of married women of childbearing age gave birth in 2019. The latest annual reports from some of these regions have begun omitting birth rate information altogether to conceal the scale of destruction. The government has shut down its entire online platform after these revelations. The scale and scope of these measures are clearly designed to halt Uighur births.

With Uighur men detained and women sterilized, the government has laid the groundwork for the physical destruction of the Uighur people. At least half a million of the remaining Uighur children have been separated from their families and are being raised by the state at so-called “children shelters.”

What makes this genocide so uniquely dangerous is its technological sophistication, allowing for efficiency in its destruction and concealment from global attention. The Uighurs have been suffering under the most advanced police state, with extensive controls and restrictions on every aspect of
life—religious, familial, cultural, and social. To facilitate surveillance, Xinjiang operates under a grid management system. Cities and villages are split into squares of about 500 people. Each square has a police station that closely monitors inhabitants by regularly scanning their identification cards, faces, DNA samples, fingerprints, and cell phones. These methods are supplemented by a machine-operated system known as the Integrated Joint Operations Platform. The system uses machine learning to collect personal data from video surveillance, smartphones, and other private records to generate lists for detention. Over a million Han Chinese watchers have been installed in Uighur households, rendering even intimate spaces subject to the government’s eye.

The Chinese government operates the most intrusive mass surveillance system in the world and repeatedly denies the international community meaningful access to it. It is therefore incumbent on us to appreciate the nature, depth, and speed of the genocide and act now before it’s too late.

Recognizing or refusing to name this a genocide will be a matter of life or death. In 1994, by the time U.S. officials were done debating the applicability of the term to the situation in Rwanda, nearly a million Tutsis had already been slaughtered. A document dated May 1, 1994, at the height of the genocide, by an official in the Office of the Secretary of Defense stated: “Genocide finding could commit [the U.S. government] to actually ‘do something.’” Four years later, President Bill Clinton stood before Rwandan survivors and reflected on his administration’s historic failure and vowed: “Never again must we be shy in the face of the evidence.”

With the passing of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, the U.S. government has begun to take steps in the right direction to avoid another human catastrophe. Seventy-eight members of Congress have followed up with a call for the administration to impose Magnitsky sanctions on the responsible Chinese officials and issue a formal declaration of the atrocity crimes, including genocide. So far, the administration has officially imposed Magnitsky sanctions on four Chinese officials and an entity in charge of the Orwellian surveillance system and responsible for the expansion of the internment camps in Xinjiang. The U.S. government must now make an official determination of genocide. This will not be difficult, as U.S. State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus has already asserted that “what has happened to the Uighur people … is potentially the worst crime that we have seen since the Holocaust.”

A formal declaration of genocide is not simply symbolic. It will catalyze other countries to join in a concerted effort to end the ongoing genocide in Xinjiang. It will also prompt consumers to reject the over 80 international brands that profit off genocide. Furthermore, the determination will strengthen legal remedies for sanctioning companies that profit from modern slavery in their supply chains sourced in China and compel business entities to refrain from profiting from genocide and commit to ethical sourcing.

In our interconnected world, we are not only bystanders if we fail to recognize the genocide as we see it. We are complicit.
US EXITS CHINESE CONSULATE AS NATIONS’ TIES DETERIORATE

At dawn on Monday, as the deadline to leave the U.S. consulate in the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu approached, staff were still trickling out with briefcases in hand, just minutes before the U.S. flag was lowered in the courtyard. Chinese authorities said that the Americans had vacated at 10 a.m., making the consulate the latest casualty in the rapidly deteriorating relations between the world’s two largest economies.

Immediately after the handover, Chinese officials pulled up outside the front entrance in a minibus and entered the compound after the last consulate staffer had cleared out, according to videos published by Chinese newspaper People’s Daily.

Chinese workers approached the building, using a white-grey shroud to cover the words “Consulate General of the United States of America” that were embossed on the exterior walls surrounding the outpost.

U.S. diplomats have been given 30 days to leave the country, according to people familiar with the matter.

The events surrounding the 35-year-old consulate show just how bad ties between the two countries have gotten amid clashes over trade, accusations of espionage and intellectual property theft, the coronavirus and China’s oversight of Hong Kong, as both sides toughen their policies and rhetoric.

On Friday, the Chinese gave American diplomats and their staff 72 hours to clear out of the building just south of the city center. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said Monday the closure was a “legitimate and necessary” response to the U.S. shutting the Chinese consulate in Houston and consistent with diplomatic practice. U.S. officials say the Chinese consulate in Houston had been involved in espionage and intellectual property theft.

Political analysts say the events in the past week may mark a new floor in diplomatic U.S.-China relations. Incidents that have posed the greatest tests to ties between the two countries in recent
decades include the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999.

The packing and moving began shortly after China ordered its closure on Friday. Large moving trucks entered and left the diplomatic compound over the weekend, including at night, watched by a security detail, according to footage by the Associated Press.

The street and sidewalk in front of the consulate was heavily guarded and cordoned off, but that didn't stop several Chinese from gathering around its vicinity, attempting to take photographs or selfies.

The consulate, which oversees the Western Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, the megacity of Chongqing, and the Tibet Autonomous Region, had been opened by then Vice President George H.W. Bush in 1985. It is headed by Consul General Jim Mullinax, who was wrapping up a three-year stint in Chengdu.

In regular times, the consulate consisted of 200 staff at full strength, including about 150 local hires, according to its website. It provided U.S. citizen and visa services and promoted trade ties. Several diplomats left earlier this year during the initial outbreak of coronavirus, leaving about 160 staff when China closed it, including about 15 American diplomats, people familiar with the matter said. More diplomats were set to return in the following weeks on a series of charter flights from Washington, they said.

The U.S. has had a long history of engagement with Western China, and the consulate in Chengdu is strategically important for its proximity to Tibet, a restive region that has been a foreign policy headache for China in the past.

China sent troops into Tibet in 1950 in what Chinese authorities described as a peaceful liberation. Human-rights groups have since accused China of repressing the local population.

Last year, U.S. Ambassador Terry Branstad made a visit to Tibet, the first for a U.S. ambassador since 2015. In July, Tibet became a diplomatic flashpoint, after U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said he would restrict visas for some Chinese officials in retaliation for Beijing obstructing travel to Tibet by U.S. diplomats, journalists and tourists.

Another U.S. government unit, Peace Corps, also coordinated its activities from a local university in Chengdu from 1993, until the government unit was pulled out of China earlier this year. Much of Peace Corps’ educational and cultural outreach had focused on the Western Chinese provinces and Chongqing.
QUESTIONS:

Background — In your recent article for the Wire China (the Death of Engagement), you mention your own early experiences in China and where you were during some important events over the course of nearly 50 years of engagement. Q: What first got you interested in China? Q: What made you get into journalism?

US-SINO Relations: The Early Days — Q: What was the country like in the 1970’s, before it began to westernize and consumerism took hold? Q: Can you describe the mood towards the US in China and vice-versa during this time?

Significance of the Opening — Q: How significant was the opening of China in the early 1970’s? Q: How important was the Nixon team’s arrangement to have the trip televised live around the world via satellite links to creating the perception that relations were changing? (and generally, how important was TV, given Deng’s later “cowboy hat” appearance at a Texas Rodeo in 1979?)

Engagement: a Failed Strategy from the Outset? — You’ve posed the question “if engagement has failed as a policy, was it fallacious from the outset?” Q: Well, was engagement fallacious from the outset? Q: Was it doomed to fail? Q: Was it naive to believe that engagement would, on its own, transform China?

Nixon’s Article in Foreign Affairs (1967) — In his recent speech delivered outside the Nixon Library, Secretary Pompeo referenced a line from an article written by the 37th president of the United States (Asia After Viet Nam) that you also quoted in your article: “The world cannot be safe until China changes. Thus, our aim – to the extent we can, we must influence events. Our goal should be to induce change.” Now, you quoted more of the article, and your emphasis was placed just as much on the danger of isolated a country with 1 billion people as it was on the need to “induce change” but Secretary Pompeo really made the point to emphasize this part of the article. Q: Why did you choose to reference Nixon’s 1967 article on China in your own piece? Q: Why is the legacy of Richard Nixon important in how we think about our relationship to China today? Q: What would Nixon and Kissinger have to say about our China policy today? Q: Would they say that disengagement with China is the right strategy in the absence of reciprocity?

Pompeo Speech & Trump Admin Policy Stance — Q: Where do you think that you and the Secretary agree and/or disagree in your interpretations of our historical relationship to China, its roots, and the best way forward?

Pissing on a Rug — You wrote that “for those of us who had been on the ground during the seven-week protest movement, what was most striking about the Scowcroft trip was how roles had gotten reversed. Instead of Deng, who’d just tarnished his country’s reputation by massacring his own people, seeking Scowcroft’s forgiveness and help in keeping the U.S.-China relationship on track, Scowcroft somehow ended up beseeching Deng to forgive the outrage felt by Americans. Equally important was the way Scowcroft’s deference set a future precedent: Henceforth, when crises
hit “the relationship,” it would be the U.S. that would be expected to bear primary responsibility for remaining flexible enough to keep it together.

Former Republican Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage had warned about this during the Carter administration when he supposedly overheard saying that in our eagerness to make things work out with the CCP, we were “teaching the dog to piss on the rug.”

It seems that from the very beginning, America was so eager to normalize relations with China that it seemed to give away far more than it needed to. Q: Why did this type of one-sidedness to US-Sino relationship persist for so many decades? Q: How and why did we respond the way that we did after Tiananmen Square Massacre?

**Carrots, Carrots, & More Carrots** — As James Mann bluntly put it, commerce had become “the dominant motivating force behind American policy.” With its new commercial power, China was beginning to understand they could resist U.S. pressure and, if they only held out long enough when crises arose, Washington would yield. Q: When did the bipartisan consensus on the commercial benefits of engagement with China really kick off? Q: How much of the eagerness to further integrate our economies and normalize relations stem from the lucrative economic benefits that came to those in positions to influence this normalization (captains of industry, politicians, thought leaders, etc.)?

**Existential Risk to CCP** — Q: Is opening up with the west and liberalizing its political economy existentially incompatible with the CCP’s identity and mandate?

**Lots of Carrots** — Q: What did we see under the Obama administration with the “coolness” with which Hu Jintao treated Obama during their various meetings and summits? Q: Did this betray an arrogance by Chinese officials that their time on the world stage had finally arrived and that they no longer needed to pay deference to the “once top dog?”

**Threat We Face** — Q: How big is the threat we face from the CCP? Q: How are we supposed to engage with a country that’s engaged in its own, modern holocaust in Xinjiang?

**South China Sea** — Much has been made of disputes in the South China Sea. Q: What is the nature of our disagreement with China in the South China Sea? Q: What is the risk/likelihood that we will find ourselves in a conflict in the South China Sea?

**5G** — Q: Where do things stand with 5G? Q: What position have our European allies taken on this new standard?

**Commercial Espionage** — Q: How much proprietary technology and intellectual property do we think Chinese companies and CCP-aligned entities and agencies have stolen over the years?

**Theatres of War & a New Cold War** — Q: What are the various theatres of war in which America and China find themselves in
today? **Q:** What is the risk of a cyber escalation? **Q:** What would a new Cold War with China look like?

**Economic Fallout — Q:** What has been (and could be) the economic fallout of continued deterioration in the relationship between the US and China?

**Bi-Partisan Consensus — Q:** How might our relationship with China change (for better or worse) under a Biden presidency? **Q:** Are the Chinese biding their time, hoping that this will happen?

**Public Opinion — Q:** What is American public opinion like when it comes to China? **Q:** Likewise, what is the opinion of the Chinese people about America?

**Engagement — Q:** How can we deescalate some of the tensions and maybe find ways to re-engage with China on things that we can both agree on without compromising our values?

**QUOTES:**

"The Chinese Government has been methodical in the way it’s analyzed our system, our very open system, one that we’re deeply proud of. It’s assessed our vulnerabilities, and it’s decided to exploit our freedoms to gain advantage over us at the federal, state, and the local level."

“As it became economically more powerful and globally more important, seeking to guide China’s progress in positive ways did make sense. But there was a problem: as engagement proceeded, Sino-U.S. relations showed a growing deficit of reciprocity and balance, and the concessions necessary to keep the relationship functional kept falling disproportionately on U.S. shoulders even as the playing field grew more and more out of level.”

“For those of us who had been on the ground during the seven-week protest movement, what was most striking about the Scowcroft trip was how roles had gotten reversed. Instead of Deng, who’d just tarnished his country’s reputation by massacring his own people, seeking Scowcroft’s forgiveness and help in keeping the U.S.-China relationship on track, Scowcroft somehow ended up beseeching Deng to forgive the outrage felt by Americans. Equally important was the way Scowcroft’s deference set a future precedent: Henceforth, when crises hit “the relationship,” it would be the U.S. that would be expected to bear primary responsibility for remaining flexible enough to keep it together.”

“As James Mann bluntly put it, commerce had become “the dominant motivating force behind American policy.” With its new commercial power, China was beginning to understand they could resist U.S. pressure and, if they only held out long enough when crises arose, Washington would yield. Indeed, on May 26, 1994, Clinton finally did grant China unconditional MFN status.”

“If we can find common ground to work together,” Nixon hopefully continued, “the chance of world peace is immeasurably increased.” Then he dramatically declared, “This is the hour, this is the day for our two peoples to rise to the heights of greatness which can build a new and better world.”