



Was US-China engagement premised on Chinese political liberalization?

BY WILLIAM H. OVERHOLT, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 10/14/21 04:00 PM EDT
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In a 2018 [article](#), two future Biden administration officials asserted that U.S. engagement with China was a failure because it assumed that an engaged China would become a democracy or liberal polity (as well as parallel economic assumptions). The authors subsequently became the senior Biden White House and Pentagon officials dealing with China and one, Kurt Campbell, then officially announced the end of engagement. A review of the historical turning points shows that their assertion is false.

Notwithstanding an out-of-context quotation that Campbell and Ely Ratner found, in which Richard Nixon spoke about China's need to change, Nixon engaged China mainly as a counterweight to the Soviet Union. That worked magnificently. The subsequent Jimmy Carter campaign in 1976, which supported an expanded relationship with China, never mentioned democratization or political liberalization publicly or in internal briefs.

Michel Oksenberg, who led Carter's diplomatic recognition of China, always emphasized — with support from Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski — American inability to change China. "America has only limited influence on China's internal affairs," [he wrote](#) in a 1991 Foreign Affairs article. "The United States cannot create to its liking [even] small countries on its doorstep — Panama, Haiti, Cuba, El Salvador. And experiences in the Middle East and Southeast Asia demonstrate that

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Americans have no special talent for shaping the governance of countries further afield. Yet, for reasons that have fascinated successive generations of historians, America has sought to produce a China more to its liking. The efforts have always ended in a massive failure.”

The next turning point was a close vote in 1993 over whether to deprive China of “most favored nation” (MFN) status. In the argument over MFN, later called permanent normal trade relations or PNTR, the dominant view of congressional Democrats, many Republicans, and initially of Clinton’s White House was that continuing engagement through MFN would enable and encourage vicious authoritarianism as symbolized by the [Tiananmen Square](#) massacre — the exact opposite of the Campbell/Ratner argument that engagement was being assumed to catalyze liberalization.

During the MFN/PNTR debates, an annual “door-knock” by the American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) in Hong Kong, representing many of the largest U.S. companies, appeared to decisively move just enough votes to alter the outcome (or at least members of Congress humored AmCham participants into believing that motivated their changed stances). AmCham argued that taking away MFN status would devastate friendly territories such as Hong Kong and Taiwan and strengthen repressive nationalists in Beijing. In short, the arguments were economic and geopolitical, and the domestic Chinese politics argument completely contradicted the Campbell/Ratner history.

On a contentious issue such as engagement with China, the administration and members of Congress air every powerful argument in congressional hearings. A review of the extensive congressional testimony in 2000 about China’s prospective World Trade Organization (WTO) membership reveals no efforts by the administration to make arguments about democratization or political liberalization central to policy. The closest was the [assertion by Lawrence Summers](#) that WTO membership would enhance the rule of law in China. Zhu Rongji, premier of the People’s Republic of China from 1998 to 2003, was indeed intent on using WTO rules to strengthen the Chinese legal system and turn the country into a single market; he did so. Neither Summers nor Zhu portrayed that as presaging broader liberalization.

Yes, multiple U.S. presidents dating to Ronald Reagan made occasional comments about liberalizing or democratizing China as a potential benefit of engagement, but this was [political hyperbole](#) in marketing moments or an informal expression of ideas, never pursued as a central thrust of policy.

In China from the mid-1980s through the 1990s, a remarkable liberalization of social life occurred. Art caricaturing Mao Zedong and communist bureaucrats blossomed in Beijing. There were outspoken critics and televised debates about alternative paths to democratization. The social differentiation predicted by political science modernization theory occurred and stimulated diverse thought and interest group organization. Alongside an earlier loosening of controls on jobs, marriages, geographic location and personal style, this occasioned much foreign comment. But none of that temporary flowering drove the decisions about engagement. Economic and security interests, and moral repugnance over Tiananmen Square and [repression in Xinjiang](#), among others, have always been decisive.

The story of expectations about economic liberalization and subsequent disappointments is more complex but equally distorted, deserving of a separate account.

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Instead of acceding to the pressures of social differentiation as South Korea and Taiwan did, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has responded by radical repression, which may or may not prove sustainable. The policy changes under Xi fully justify a reconsideration of earlier engagement policies. But the Campbell/Ratner fallacy has founded China policy on a false premise. It has fostered a gratuitous generational polarization in an already fragmented policy community, and it has contributed to an increasingly simplistic view of China and China policy.

In 1993, then-Ambassador Winston Lord gave the administration's authoritative definition of engagement: "Engagement means being firm wherever necessary and cooperative wherever possible" — exactly what President Biden says he is trying to achieve.

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