United States Grand Strategy toward China

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The United States should not be afraid of China. The so-called "rise of China" is a ubiquitous, growing concern among US policy makers, and the 2017 US *National Security Strategy* asserts Chinese competition jeopardizes US security.[1] This anxiety is not necessarily caused by China's growth but rather by American perception. US policy is grounded in realist assumptions that power determines security, and competition for power is a zero-sum game.[2] However, the lens of rational liberalism reveals the United States and China can—and should—cooperate to achieve mutually beneficial results. A liberal grand strategy of rational interdependence will employ rational liberalism to create cooperation and interdependence across the realms of international relations, and this interdependence will enhance US national security and calm fears of a rising China.

Rational liberalism combines the liberal conviction that cooperation is possible with the rational assumption that states are utility maximizers. When states' interests are not in harmony, liberals prefer pursuing their state interests through cooperation and negotiation rather than coercion and competition.[3] As such, cooperation is not "the absence of conflict," but a logical "reaction to conflict or potential conflict."[4] Although ideational liberals posit states must be democracies to trust each other enough to cooperate, rational liberals contend cooperation is not limited to democracies.[5] As Immanuel Kant noted, "intelligent devils" can make rational cost-benefit calculations—the key is rationality, not ideology.[6] The United States' warming relationship with Vietnam provides a good example of cooperation despite deep political differences.[7] Given the US and Chinese governments' ideological opposition, the primacy of rationality over ideology is the foundational theoretical principle for this grand strategy.

China's motivations and interests confirm the United States and China are amenable to strategies based on rational liberalism. Two observations and one assumption are particularly important. First, statements from US and Chinese leaders demonstrate both states are rational actors that prioritize their own national security.[8] Second, both states have expressed a willingness to cooperate on national security matters.[9] Finally, it is reasonable to assume war between the United States and China would result in devastating loss of life, property, and wealth and would decrease both states' security. A grand strategy of rational inter-

dependence starts with these three points and employs the lens of rational liberalism to explain how the United States can enhance multiple layers of US national security by cooperating with China. In the short term, the United States will benefit from utility maximizing interactions. In the longer term, as the states develop interdependence across multiple realms of international relations, China will have less incentive to harm US security, including through war.

The first step in deploying this grand strategy is identifying areas of diplomatic cooperation. As Charles Freeman notes, "[d]iplomacy is the adjustment of relations between states by mutual agreement."[10] Washington's primary diplomatic tool with China should be what Freeman calls "constructive engagement," where states seek to increase areas of cooperation on issues of shared concern.[11] The United States and China have potential shared interests in many areas, including climate change, pandemic response, and international crime.[12] These myriad topics provide the opportunity to develop deep diplomatic ties through long-term iterative negotiations.[13] International organizations can complement these ties by increasing negotiation efficiency through routinized processes and providing an independent venue for dispute resolution.[14] Diplomats should also seek opportunities to open Chinese society to the United States.

Soft power can shape China's national interests and limit areas of perceived competition. Soft power uses informational tools like "culture, ideology, and institutions" to gently lead other states to change their goals.[15] US politics and culture have historically had broad global appeal, and deepening US–China ties will allow democratic values to penetrate China without coercion. Although this strategy does not proactively seek Chinese regime change, gradual Chinese liberalization will reinforce the states' interdependence, and shared democratic ideology would further disincentivize conflict.[16] While openness will also allow Chinese ideas to enter the United States, this should not alarm policy makers due to the presumption that in an open democracy the best ideas will prevail. Simply put, the more political, educational, and cultural exchanges the United States has with China, the more soft power it will be able to exert.

This openness should be accompanied by a change in rhetoric. Instead of labeling China as a dangerous revisionist power, the United States should recognize that, although the countries are often opposed, they are both legitimate states that are rational and sophisticated enough to cooperate.[17] This does not ignore China's revisionist activities but allows the United States and its allies to address these actions in an environment of rational bargaining rather than escalatory rhetoric. The goal of this shift is for the United States to become more respected and less threatening in China's strategic narrative, which can significantly shift China's

posture toward the United States.[18] The US will need to reinforce its rhetoric with tangible actions that promote interdependence.

The most fertile area for interdependence is the economy. Economic sanctions seek to weaken other states, while financial aid strengthens them.[19] Neither extreme is appropriate in this strategy. Instead, the United States should reduce trade barriers.[20] Free and fair trade has direct and indirect effects. Directly, it allows states to increase their wealth by specializing in goods and services in which they have comparative advantages.[21] Indirectly, economic interdependence incentivizes peace, since both states' welfare depends on the comparative advantages of trade.[22] Taking aggressive economic acts, such as imposing sanctions, would reverse these gains and motivate China to see the United States as an enemy in its strategic narrative and blame Washington for its economic failures.[23] Punishing China economically could further incentivize Beijing to continue creating a parallel, illiberal economic order. The *National Security Strategy* identifies China's "state-driven economic model" as a threat to US security.[24] The United States can mitigate this threat by incentivizing China to participate in the US-led economic system where the United States and its allies shape the rules in accordance with democratic values. The more China is incentivized to withdraw from this system, the less economic influence the United States will be able to exert on China. Instead, Washington should promote economic interdependence, which will not only benefit the US economy, but will disincentivize US–China military conflict.

The cooperative nature of this grand strategy causes military power to take a subsidiary role. This does not mean the US military should become complacent or dormant. Liberalism does not embrace weakness; it merely proposes national security can be built through cooperation and preserved by avoiding unnecessary war. The United States should focus on areas of potential military cooperation with China, such as providing humanitarian aid in response to regional natural disasters, combating piracy and terrorism, and working together to promote stability on the Korean Peninsula. Cooperation will not instantly solve many long-standing regional security issues, such as Taiwan's geopolitical status and conflicting claims in the South China Sea.[25] However, interdependence will provide motivation and forums for productive long-term discussions of more challenging issues in a context other than a competitive zero-sum game.

The United States is unlikely to alleviate its fear of China through competitive military power. This would be a dangerous game where war can be one miscalculation away. Rational interdependence does not attempt to halt China's rise but instead to convert China's growth into US security through interdependence. This strategy is not a panacea that will eliminate discord between the United States and China, but it will provide incentives and processes to resolve differences with-

out military conflict. While the United States and China have many divergent interests, these differences can be resolved peacefully since the benefits of cooperation outweigh the costs of conflict.

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Notes

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