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## Why China should care about its image in the West

Tom Plate says the anti-China syndrome in the US runs deep. While America's approach to the bilateral relationship needs to be based on more realistic expectations, not to mention some humility, Beijing must also consider what it can do to ease tensions

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*(If Beijing wants to maximise international support and minimise resistance to its rise, the government needs to accept that the way it looks at itself is not always the way others look at it. Illustration: Craig Stephens)*



Tom Plate

The American general and statesman Colin Powell, at his secretary of state confirmation hearing years ago, bluntly told Congress: “China is not an enemy, and our challenge is to keep it that way.” But America always needed China's help – and now it needs it more than ever. Things below the bilateral surface look ominous and many of us are bracing ourselves for a big chill in the next jarring yo-yo in relations.

The problem from the American side is that, while it is true that not everyone wishes China well, even those who do are now worried.

One of our clearest thinkers on this topic is Harvard's William H. Overholt. His worry is what China is doing to itself – that its economic achievements are so phenomenally ahead of its lagging political development that, before too long, something will have to give.

Overholt is brilliant on China. Once, when an unbroken Western chorus line of so-called China “experts” scoffed at Deng Xiaoping's reforms, this Westerner who loves Asia (he lived in Hong Kong for 18 years, worked at the Nomura Research Institute and later held a similar job in Singapore) presciently wrote *The Rise of China*. This was in 1994 – the first book in English to predict China's astonishing success. Was he ever on the money!

But it is his latest book, *China's Crisis of Success*, that is now essential reading: it goes the other way and sees internal trouble for the world's new superpower, especially for China's president, whom he admires for boldness and courage. In his tough actions against opponents, he says, “Xi Jinping has chosen the most risky political strategy of any leader of a serious country today.”

Xi's challenge is almost unimaginably difficult: to maintain the forward thrust into the modern world without chancing domestic instability. “China is on the cusp of greatness, stagnation or tragedy,” Overholt says, “and the risks are so high that small, unexpected events could make the difference ... Like an infant who has outgrown its baby shoes, China must refit itself to its new circumstances.”

One of those refit-requiring circumstances is a precipitous plunge in empathy from the American establishment – and the anti-China syndrome now goes deep. Yes, the [South China Sea](#) maritime build-up is part of it. But it goes deeper: It is almost as if China's success is a rebuke to America's *raison d'être*. Why did its economic miracle not bring it closer to our kind of democracy? Why has China not become more like [Taiwan](#) and [South Korea](#), which abandoned uncivil authoritarianism? Why did our engagement policy fail to persuade the Chinese that they are, as Bill Clinton once put it, “on the wrong side of history”?

“Our China policy has failed!” – runs the Washington wail. One rendition of the hair-shirt self-flagellation appears in *Foreign Affairs*, the bellwether publication of the East Coast foreign policy establishment. “The liberal international order has failed to lure or bind China as powerfully as expected. China has instead pursued its own course, belying a range of American expectations in the process. That reality warrants a clear-eyed rethinking of the United States’ approach to China.”

This call for a China policy overhaul, however well-intended, fills me with dread. Consider what happened after the disastrous Middle East policy review in the earliest days of the George H.W. Bush administration. It led (again) to the military option: the witless invasion of Iraq.

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At least the *Foreign Affairs* recommendation, while based on the conceit that by now China should be more like the US, implicitly acknowledges the conceit itself: “The starting point for a better approach is a new degree of humility about the United States’ ability to change China.”

You can say that again. And at a University of Southern California conference last week, they did. Its two-day exploration of business opportunities and hurdles in the region – the biggest on the West Coast every year for the past three decades – proffered China oodles of deserved respect.

The concluding luncheon address came from US trade expert Wendy Cutler. This veteran negotiator convincingly raised doubts about the notion that China’s economic and trade ambitions were fundamentally at odds with significant US security concerns. She reviewed the goals of “Made in China 2025”, the [Xi Jinping](#) government’s plan for a huge build-up of [technology](#) in critical sectors, including [robotics](#), aerospace, and biomedicine, and concluded that she could not find one item immune to bilateral amelioration by adult give-and-take. The Asia Pacific Business Outlook was a shot of sunshine across the beclouding bilateral relationship.

But it must be said that China's huge "2025" dream can be undermined by its own hubris. If Beijing wants to maximise international support and minimise resistance to its rise, the government needs to accept that the way it looks at itself is not always the way others look at it. It needs to avoid being perceived as interfering in the internal affairs of others. The rising military profile – a [third aircraft carrier under construction](#), [new military installations](#) in the South China Sea, and the overseas [base in Djibouti](#) – is all feral fodder for the West's media merchants of fear. Beijing will run significant risks if it decides it doesn't care one bit.

In the US these days, there is a chill in the air about China, and it is unnerving. A well-travelled academic policy plenipotentiary tells me: "In Washington now, you sometimes feel you can't say anything positive about China."

How far the anti-Beijing sentiment will go, how long it will last, and how much harm it will eventually do is unknowable. But it bodes ill to travel along an ominous path that could take us to a kind of neo-McCarthyism in which, before long, no good word may safely be said of China. The paranoid icemen cometh.

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