NO ONE can say we didn’t see it coming. Since the end of the Cold War, and even before, it has been obvious that a rapidly rising China could eventually menace America’s position and influence in East Asia—and, perhaps, globally as well. Since the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995–96, moreover, there have been accumulating signs that Beijing is not a status quo power, but rather one determined to reshape the East Asian order. For decades, then, there has been no shortage of warnings about the emerging China challenge.

As early as 1975, Henry Kissinger predicted, “If they keep developing the way they have, they could be a pretty scary outfit.” In the 1980s, Pentagon analysts worried that the long-run “possibility of Chinese conflicts with U.S. allies and friends and the United States itself cannot be excluded.” After the Cold War ended, the George H. W. Bush administration speculated that Washington might have to “contain, or balance” Beijing. By 1997–98, the CIA was publicly reporting China’s determination “to assert itself as the paramount East Asian power,” and even to become a global power “on a par with the United States by the middle of the 21st century.” And in the early 2000s, Andrew Marshall—the legendary director of the Office of Net Assessment in the Department of Defense—argued that America must gear up “for a long-term competition between the US and China for influence and position within the Eurasian continent and the Pacific Rimland.” All of this, besides warnings by prominent intellectuals such as Robert Kagan, Aaron Friedberg and John Mearsheimer, who predicted—as early as the mid-1990s—that China’s rise was likely to be disruptive.

Today, these warnings increasingly seem vindicated. From China’s maritime expansionism and illegal island building in the South China Sea to its efforts to coerce and intimidate neighbors from India to Japan, from ambitious geostrategic projects meant to draw surrounding countries more deeply into its grasp to a multidecade military buildup shrouded in opacity and deception, there is abundant evidence that Beijing seeks to dominate its periphery. As Adm. Harry Harris, the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, remarked in 2016, one would “have to believe in a flat earth” not to perceive China’s agenda. Indeed, Chinese leaders themselves have become quite candid about the country’s vaulting geopolitical ambitions. In October 2017, at the Nineteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, President Xi Jinping proclaimed that China had entered a “new era” and could now “take center stage in the world.”

The point at which the Chinese threat goes from a distant prospect to an urgent near-term reality is thus rapidly approaching, if it has not already arrived. For years, American strategists have known this moment was coming—but Washington consistently has been slow to react. The rapidity of China’s rise has been matched by the lethargy of America’s response. Understanding why is critical to addressing that challenge in the years ahead.

To be clear, America has not simply stood aside as China reaches for regional hegemony. After the Cold War, Washington maintained a powerful military presence in East Asia, partially as a check on a potentially aggressive China. Since then, America has periodically modernized its bilateral alliances, developed deeper partnerships with non-allies countries such as Singapore and Vietnam, built and deployed new and advanced military capabilities to the region, and designed creative operational concepts. From the Bush-era “transformation agenda” to AirSea Battle and the Third Offset
Strategy, the China threat has never been far from Pentagon planners’ minds. From the mid-2000s onward, in fact, the Pentagon gradually shifted a larger proportion of its air and naval forces into the Asia-Pacific region, as part of a quiet rebalance under George W. Bush and a more ostentatious version under Obama. Meanwhile, the United States has sought to prevent China from bullying its neighbors—by sending two carrier strike groups to deter potential action against Taiwan in 1996, for instance—and it has worked to strengthen regional diplomatic resistance to Beijing’s assertiveness in the South China Sea and elsewhere. None of this has been lost on Chinese observers, many of whom accuse America of seeking to thwart Beijing’s ascent.

What is also clear, however, is that these efforts have not kept pace with the challenge. The regional military balance has shifted sharply in China’s favor: the RAND Corporation reported in 2015 that the Asia-Pacific was “approaching a series of tipping points” at which Beijing might believe it could successfully use force in crises involving Taiwan or perhaps even the South China Sea. “By next decade,” another close observer predicts, “China’s military buildup will give it the ability to dominate the air and sea lines of communication in the western Pacific.” The United States has also struggled to respond to Chinese coercion short of war; it has largely failed, as former Obama administration officials have acknowledged, to prevent Beijing from dramatically strengthening its position in the South China Sea through island building and intimidation of neighboring states. China’s economic tentacles have spread across the region, giving Beijing increased leverage in countries as far afield as Australia. The president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, exaggerated when he said in 2016 that “America has lost” in the Asia-Pacific, but the situation has grown steadily grimmer.

And far from systematically containing China, the United States has powerfully assisted its rise. By opening U.S. markets to China, bringing Beijing into the World Trade Organization, and promoting technology transfer and foreign investment in China, America has contributed enormously to China’s astonishing economic growth. Moreover, America has encouraged China to increase its international reach by pushing Beijing to become more involved in addressing challenges from climate change to nuclear proliferation. It is hard to square the accusation that America “is bent on containing China,” as Hillary Clinton pointed out in 2010, with the reality that “China has experienced breathtaking growth and development” since reestablishing relations with the United States.

For historians looking back on this period, America’s behavior will present a puzzle. Hegemonic powers are not supposed to tolerate, much less assist, the rise of challengers; they are supposed to fiercely and even violently resist. Was it not “the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta” that led to the Peloponnesian War? So why has the United States responded so counterintuitively to the rise of such a formidable rival?

Part of the answer undoubtedly lies in the particular strategies China has pursued to denucle America’s response. From the late 1980s through the late 2000s, China adhered to Deng Xiaoping’s dictum: “Hide our capabilities and bide our time.” Accordingly, Beijing sought to project an unthreatening image and stressed its commitment to rising peacefully, so as to avoid conflict even as it assiduously developed “comprehensive national power.” After 2008, Chinese behavior became more tranquil, as the global financial crisis and perceptions of American retrenchment convinced China’s leaders that the country’s geopolitical window was opening. But even as China started pushing harder throughout the region, it did so via incremental tactics—building up its navy and Coast Guard forces to control disputed areas in the South China Sea, and taking other measures short of war—that were deliberately designed not to provoke a U.S. military response. Give credit where due: China has proven adept at strengthening its position while limiting resistance to its rise.

Yet if these strategies have proven effective, it is also because America has constrained itself. Over the past quarter century, U.S. policy has been shaped by a set of core ideas about how best to respond to China’s emergence. All of these ideas were sincere and well intentioned, all contained elements of real insight, and in many cases they were reasonable and even arguably appropriate, given the context in which they took root. But all these ideas pointed in the same direction—toward policies that now appear to represent more of an underreaction than an overreaction to China’s rise—and they seem increasingly suspect today. Good policy begins with getting the underlying ideas right. When it comes to China, America is overdue for an intellectual reset.

THAT RESET should begin with the idea that China will inevitably—if perhaps only eventually—become a satisfied democracy at peace with its neighbors and the world. This belief took root at the outset of the post–Cold War era, when authoritarian regimes were tumbling everywhere, and the Chinese government, which had been badly shaken during the Tiananmen Square protests, looked like the next to fall. By 1993, predicted Winston Lord, the former U.S. ambassador to China, “There will be a more moderate, humane government in Beijing.” A more democratic government, in turn, would presumably be more peaceful in its foreign relations and more positively disposed toward the United States. The reconsolidation of the Communist regime in the early 1990s was thus an ideological cold shower of sorts, for it indicated that history had not yet ended in Beijing. In response, however, U.S. officials simply tweaked the argument.

The Chinese dictatorship might be here to stay in the short term, they acknowledged, but surely it was unsustainable over the long run. In the meantime, promoting ties with Beijing might be the best way to hasten the development of a middle class that would demand greater political rights. Indeed, promoting globalization and promoting democracy went hand in hand, because greater commerce would expose Chinese citizens to liberalizing currents from abroad, and because only truly free societies could compete in an integrated global market. “The more China liberalizes its economy, the more fully it will liberate the potential of its people,” Bill Clinton argued. “And when individuals have the power, not just to dream, but to realize their dreams, they will demand a greater say.” The crucial implication was that the United States could trade freely with China—and thereby hasten the development of a middle class that would demand greater political rights. Indeed, promoting globalization and promoting democracy went hand in hand, because greater commerce would expose Chinese citizens to liberalizing currents from abroad, and because only truly free societies could compete in an integrated global market. “The more China liberalizes its economy, the more fully it will liberate the potential of its people,” Bill Clinton argued. “And when individuals have the power, not just to dream, but to realize their dreams, they will demand a greater say.” The crucial implication was that the United States could trade freely with China—and thereby hasten the development of a middle class that would demand greater political rights.

This idea, dubbed the “Soothing Scenario” by James Mann, had the virtue of appealing to Americans’ deep-seated belief that their form of government is both morally desirable and universally desired. It reflected the immense ideological optimism of the post–Cold War moment, and was well attuned to the best social-science literature on the relationship between prosperity and democracy, and between democracy and peace. Not least, it was useful in providing assurance that Americans could deepen their commercial engagement with China—and enjoy the vast economic rewards that engagement brought—without forsaking either their moral values or their national-security interests. For if it was true, as Bill Clinton argued, that “the choice between economic rights and human rights, between economic security and national security, is a false one,” then Americans need not confront the choice at all.

As reasonable as this idea may initially have seemed, however, over time it has become steadily harder to defend. China has not moved toward democracy over the past quarter century, even as its national wealth, per capita wealth and integration into the global economy have shot upward. Chinese leaders, rather, have used prosperity to buy legitimacy while also ruthlessly but skillfully repressing dissent. According to the Polity IV dataset, China is just as authoritarian as it has been for decades—and the human-rights crackdowns, repression of civil society and centralization of power under Xi Jinping indicate that the regime is actually becoming less liberal. China may still eventually become a democracy, and it is conceivable, as Sinologist David Shambaugh argues, that increasing authoritarianism is actually an anxious response to pressures from below. Yet it is doubtful that China will become a democracy before it grows powerful enough to severely disrupt the international order. The United States has long felt it had the luxury of building, using paramilitary and Coast Guard forces to control disputed areas in the South China Sea, and taking other measures short of war—that were deliberately designed not to provoke a U.S. military response.

NEITHER DOES a second wager—that Beijing will become a “responsible stakeholder.” Since the late 1980s, U.S. officials have believed—correctly—that China’s assistance is critical to addressing an array of global problems, from trade disputes and piracy to terrorism and climate change. Likewise, there has been a bipartisan consensus that the United States can best obtain China’s help on these issues, and moderate Chinese behavior more broadly, by drawing Beijing into the international system and demonstrating that it can gain wealth, power and respect by accepting its rules.
This idea gained its name in 2005, when Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick announced that America ultimately wanted a China that would "work with us to sustain the international system that has enabled its success." Yet its origins date to the Clinton and even George H. W. Bush years. In 1989, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger argued that the United States could gain China's cooperation on weapons proliferation and other important issues only if it refrained from isolating that country after the Tiananmen massacre. It was already clear, Madeleine Albright agreed in 1997, that "China will be a rising force in Asian and world affairs. The history of this century teaches us the wisdom of trying to bring such a power into the fold as a responsible participant in the international system, rather than driving it out into the wilderness of isolation."

As a result, U.S. officials have worked energetically over a quarter century to enable China’s integration into the global economy, on the theory that a rich China would be a satisfied China, and that globalization would foster lucrative relationships that Beijing would be loath to disrupt. At the same time, both Democratic and Republican administrations have consistently sought to give Beijing a greater voice in world affairs, by bringing it into international diplomatic forums and encouraging it to play a larger role in security and political issues in the Asia-Pacific and globally.

The responsible-stakeholder policy was not naive in the context in which it developed. There was little international or domestic support for a policy of isolating Beijing, except perhaps in the immediate aftermath of Tiananmen; and it was inconceivable that the United States would not at least try to integrate the world’s most populous country into the broader global order. In some respects, that integration has undoubtedly occurred: China’s economy is far more globalized, and its participation in international diplomacy is far more extensive than at the end of the Cold War. Likewise, there are ways in which the policy has arguably succeeded. China has, on several important occasions, cooperated with U.S. policy objectives. It supported the indefinite extension of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty in the 1990s; it assisted, albeit reluctantly, in the economic isolation of Iran during the dispute over that country's nuclear program; and during the late Obama years it participated in groundbreaking international diplomacy to curb climate change. More recently, China has even styled itself as the defender of multilateralism and globalization in response to the parochial nationalism of Donald Trump.

After more than two decades of experience, however, the limitations of the responsible stakeholder have also come into view. In particular, it is evident that China is at best a selective stakeholder, and that the core goal of this policy—persuading Beijing to define its national interests as America might like them to be defined—is probably unachievable.

Beijing has never been willing to alter what it perceives to be its most crucial national-security interests to suit Washington’s concept of global order; witness the unending, and continually unavailing, U.S. efforts to obtain the desired level of Chinese cooperation in pressuring North Korea over its nuclear weapons and missile programs. Worse still, China does not seem to have moderated its behavior, or fundamentally bought into the U.S.-led international system, as it has grown more powerful. If anything, its expansionist tendencies in the South China Sea and East China Sea; its efforts to bully neighbors along its maritime and territorial peripheries; its increasingly frequent resorts to diplomatic, economic and paramilitary coercion; its harassment of U.S. military aircraft and vessels in international waters; its ongoing military buildup; and many other actions tell a different story. Such behavior, Aaron Friedberg observes, compels us "to re-examine the pleasing assumption that the country is fast on its way to becoming a status quo power." Even where China has benefited from the existing system, in fact, it has frequently declined to play by the rules. Xi Jinping may be a rhetorical champion of free trade and globalization, but Chinese economic policies often tend toward the protectionist and mercantilist.

When Chinese commentators speak of “Asia for Asians,” when Chinese leaders demand that its neighbors show greater deference to Chinese prerogatives, when China continually seeks to undermine U.S. alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific, one thinks not of a “responsible stakeholder” but of a proud and ambitious nation determined to bend the system to its liking. Nothing could be more normal; this is how rising powers usually behave. And so, as China’s power continues to grow relative to America’s, one should only expect Beijing to become less, rather than more, accommodating. U.S. leverage should certainly continue to erode as China is more cooperative is possible. But the idea that China will simply accept the international order that America designed is an illusion that must be punctured.

WASHINGTON WOULD also do well to part with a third shibboleth: that hostility toward China will be met in kind. Since the 1990s, U.S. officials have ritually averred that China is at an inflection point in its relationship with the outside world, and that America must refrain from behavior that will incline Beijing to strident nationalism and hostility. Treat China as a friend, the thinking goes, and it may become a friend. Treat it as a threat or rival, and it will surely reciprocate. “If you treat China as an enemy, China will become an enemy,” remarked Joseph Nye, who served as assistant secretary of defense, in the 1990s. “It will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

This concept, too, has endured across administrations: one can find numerous examples of officials from the George W. Bush and Obama eras voicing the same sentiment. “We don’t want to fence them in,” said Adm. Timothy Keating, then the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, in 2008. “We want to draw them out. . . . and assure them we mean them no ill.”

This is a noble sentiment, and one that was never entirely misplaced. It was originally meant to prevent a security dilemma in which actions taken by one country to protect its own interests seem threatening to another country, triggering a spiral of hostility and leading ultimately to conflict. It reflected an accurate perception that the prospects for international peace and stability would improve dramatically if China and the United States could avoid military conflict. In early 1990s, at a time when China was still relatively weak and American dominance was unchallenged, it made sense to go the extra mile in trying to reassure Beijing that Washington did not think the relationship was destined for conflict. In recent years, however, the problems and limitations of this concept have become painfully apparent.

For one thing, the “self-fulfilling prophecy” warning has sometimes encouraged an unwillingness even to discuss honestly the problems that China poses. In 2016, for instance, the White House reportedly ordered the Pentagon to stop using the term “great-power competition” to characterize the relationship, despite the obvious fact that such a competition was well underway. At other points, this concept has thwarted sharper and potentially more effective measures to curb Chinese expansionism. As Ely Ratner, who served as deputy national security adviser to Vice President Biden, has written, the United States repeatedly responded to Chinese island building and coercion of neighbors in the South China Sea by denouncing that behavior, while simultaneously looking “for ways to reduce tensions and avoid conflict whenever possible.” That stance succeeded in avoiding an unwanted military conflict. It also allowed China “to reach the brink of total control” over that crucial waterway.

Finally, this concept has had the perverse outcome of effectively denying agency to the Chinese themselves, suggesting that the most important factor driving Chinese behavior is not what China wants but what America does, and therefore assuming that if Beijing is treated as a friend it will not view Washington as an enemy. Neither of these things is necessarily true; both, in fact, are doubtful. “Because China and the United States have longstanding conflicts over their different ideologies, social systems, and foreign policies,” the Chinese military reportedly argued as early as 1993, “it will prove impossible to fundamentally improve Sino-U.S. relations.” And given how determined China has appeared in recent years to assert its own power and will in the Asia-Pacific, the notion that the relationship is a lack of American reassurance. The idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy may have been worth testing in the 1990s, but it has passed its expiration date by now.

SO HAS a fourth idea that has dampened the U.S. response to the rising threat in the East: the notion that America should be more concerned about a weak China than a strong China. International-relations realists would find this idea quite odd—wouldn’t America want its principal geopolitical rival to be as weak and inhibited as possible? Yet even today, many informed observers insist that Chinese debility is more dangerous than Chinese strength. “We have more to fear from a weakened, threatened China than a successful rising China,” Barack Obama explained in 2016.

"If China fails; it is not able to maintain a trajectory that satisfies its population . . . then not only do we see the potential for conflict with China, but we will find ourselves having more difficulty dealing with these other challenges that are going to come."
The logic of this idea, as Thomas Christensen has written, is that China has become "too big to fail." If China experienced economic collapse or even prolonged economic stagnation, the world would struggle to maintain global prosperity and growth. If China fell into political turmoil, it could cause a humanitarian catastrophe within that country and destabilize large swaths of Asia. A faltering China would also, presumably, be less capable of helping to solve critical global problems. And in a worst-case scenario, a China plagued by economic and political upheaval might channel its frustrations outward in a fit of international aggression. "One of the worst possible Chinese futures from a U.S. perspective would not be China's continued rise but its stagnation or even internal collapse," Christensen writes. U.S. policy must therefore focus on encouraging continued Chinese growth, self-confidence and global influence, rather than seeking to thwart China's rise or, worse still, to undermine its economy and polity.

This concept fits nicely with America's preference for a positive-sum global order—one in which U.S. interests and the system as a whole benefit from the strength and prosperity of its members. Moreover, no one can dispute that a failed or failing China would indeed create grave problems for its neighbors, the United States, and the entire global community. Yet this idea, too, is becoming less and less adequate to addressing a U.S.-China relationship that appears more competitive every day.

If taken literally, of course, this precept would cause U.S. officials to focus more on empowering China than on restraining its more dangerous impulses—even as those impulses become more and more disruptive to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, this idea has frequently led observers to understate the risks associated with China's ascent. For instance, former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who once counselled against the "containment" of the People's Republic of China—just as China develops the coercive capabilities and refines the assertive practices that are increasingly allowing it to challenge that system. And as grave as the difficulties caused by a weak China would be, those caused by a strong China, a potential peer rival that is already seeking primacy along its periphery and may well harbor long-term ambitions that are greater still, could be even graver. After all, could there be any threat starker than a revisionist authoritarian power with roughly four times the population of the United States?

Chinese debility may indeed have been more threatening than Chinese strength in the 1990s, or even a decade ago. Today, however, a weaker China no longer looks so bad.

The FINAL illusion that needs dispelling is that China is the adversary of tomorrow, not today. For many years, U.S. observers have seen the China challenge coming. Yet they have consistently argued that the challenge remains on the fairly distant horizon. "China is like that long book you've always been meaning to read," a U.S. official once told me, "but you always end up waiting until next summer."

The reasons for this tendency have been multiple. Some American observers have mentally pushed the Chinese threat into the distance because they doubt that Beijing will ultimately be able to maintain rapid economic growth or hold its authoritarian political system together. In other cases, U.S. observers have simply underestimated how quickly China would advance in developing high-end power-projection and antiaccess/area-denial capabilities. "In the past decade or so," Adm. Robert Willard, the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, acknowledged in 2009, "China has exceeded most of our intelligence estimates of their military capability and capacity, every year." In part, this is just because China is a devilishly difficult intelligence target; in part, it is because some U.S. analysts could hardly imagine that a country that was so recently poor and underdeveloped could threaten America's dominance. "Officers and analysts reared during the Cold War," observed James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "found it hard to shed the image of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) as a backward force."

The United States has also found it difficult to confront the China challenge because other threats keep getting in the way. Prior to 9/11, the Bush administration was gearing up for a concerted effort to maintain U.S. military and geopolitical advantages against a rapidly modernizing China; the Pentagon's 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review depicted the emerging antiaccess challenge as a critical problem to be overcome. After 9/11, however, American observers have only become more worried as the nation has become as the nation has become as the nearly two decades of military conflict in the greater Middle East. To be fair, the Bush administration still took modest steps to strengthen U.S. capabilities in the Asia-Pacific, but as time went on, the diversion of attention and resources began to tell. By 2009, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was reducing or canceling investments in critical high-end capabilities such as the F-22 fighter and a new stealth bomber in favor of lower-end capabilities crucial to ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. "We must not be so preoccupied with preparing for future...conflicts," he wrote, "that we neglect to provide all the capabilities necessary to fight and win conflicts such as those the United States is in today."

Yet if China was a problem for the future in 2001 or even 2009, yesterday's future has now arrived. China may or may not be able to sustain its economic and political trajectory in the coming decades; its growth rate has already declined substantially from the double-digit norm of the thirty years before 2010. But it would be Pollyannish in the extreme to count on the wheels coming off soon enough, and completely enough, to avoid a serious geopolitical challenge—not least because that challenge is already here. China's gray-zone coercion is not some hypothetical problem of tomorrow; it is reshaping the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific in real time. China's "incremental salami slicing tactics," writes Patrick Cronin, are progressively adding up to "major changes in the status quo." And while China is still reluctant to hazard military confrontation with Washington, U.S. advantages in that realm have also eroded alarmingly.

According to RAND Corporation, the United States may already face grave challenges in defending Taiwan at an acceptable price. Those challenges are growing in other contingencies, as well. In 2014, Frank Kendall, the undersecretary of defense for acquisition, technology and logistics, warned that U.S. superiority was being "challenged in ways that I have not seen for decades." He added, "This is not a future problem. This is a here-now problem."

And in 2017, the normally circumspect chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, told Congress that America might lose its ability to project power into contested regions within five years, absent corrective measures. The worst of the China challenge may or may not still lie in the future, but the challenge is plenty severe today.

The FACT that the five ideas discussed here face mounting doubts does not mean that U.S. officials were knaves ever to have entertained them. It was a bit of wishful thinking—but not absurd—to think that China would evolve toward democracy at a time when so many authoritarian regimes were making that transition; it was certainly worth testing whether a nation of more than one billion people could be made a satisfied member of the international system.

The United States could afford to emphasize reassurance and engagement in dealing with Beijing in the 1990s or even the early 2000s; there was a time when the China challenge was indeed far less immediate than other pressing dangers.

The trouble with the ideas that have guided America's China policy, then, is not that they were clearly wrong to begin with. It is that they have now outlived their utility. As China's revisionist ambitions and growing assertiveness become more pronounced, these concepts serve principally to obscure the nature and dimensions of the challenge, and to weaken the impetus to a sharper response. Ideas that seemed reasonable enough in their time have become increasingly dangerous today.

None of this is to say that America should precipitously shift from a strategy featuring strong elements of engagement to one that represents a caricature of Cold War-style containment—an approach that seeks not simply to stymie China's geopolitical ascendency, but to halt its economic growth, destabilize its political system and isolate it diplomatically. Such a strategy is unworkable, given China's economic heft, significant diplomatic influence and status as a primary trading partner to many U.S. partners and allies. Indeed, it is an ironic effect—call it a catastrophic success—of decades of U.S. and international engagement of China that containment of that country is now impossible.

Fortunately, such a policy is also unnecessary, because there are myriad intermediate steps Washington can take to compete more effectively: increasing military spending and accelerating development of capabilities that can puncture the Chinese A2/AD bubble; helping U.S. allies acquire cheap and plentiful A2/AD capabilities of their own to constrain Chinese maritime advances; impositions of greater discipline—diplomatic and economic costs—in response to gray-zone expansionism; limiting Beijing's investment in sectors critical to national security and otherwise reducing the vulnerability of America and its friends to Chinese economic coercion; and investing more in the geoeconomic elements of statecraft. These steps all entail a willingness
to court increased tensions with Beijing, but they are not inherently incompatible with continued commerce or cooperation on issues of mutual concern. If the United States and the Soviet Union could collaborate on nuclear nonproliferation, arms control and the eradication of smallpox amid the Cold War, surely a more competitive strategy toward China would not preclude all forms of engagement today.

Regardless of how America responds to the Chinese challenge, however, its policy must be rooted in reality. Preventing an increasingly confident great power from remaking the East Asian order, and perhaps challenging U.S. interests globally, will be the defining challenge of American statecraft in the twenty-first century. Meeting that challenge will be hard enough even if America dispenses with its China illusions; doing so will probably be impossible if it does not.

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Image: China's President Xi Jinping holds a welcome ceremony for U.S. President Donald Trump at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China November 9, 2017. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

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