What the US should change in its China policy over the next few years?

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Clarifying goals: The purpose of the following thoughts and suggestions would be to reduce confrontation and increase more mutual benefits for both the US and China.

Background:

Similar to many countries in the world, the Chinese foreign policy has its origin in domestic politics. Thus, paying more attention to the sources of policy making could be beneficial. There are two main sources of legitimacy for the Chinese state today, nationalism and economic development (as a modernizing authoritarian). These two sources of legitimacy influence Chinese foreign policy in very different ways. If the state is forced to rely more on nationalism, it could be tough to achieve collaborative outcomes. If the state could emphasize more on economic development as its source of legitimacy, there is more room for international collaboration and less conflictual relationships.

Suggestions:

1. Channel nationalistic legitimacy towards less conflictual issues/platforms, and give China more opportunities for “saving face.” Letting China host more events like the Olympics and G20 would make domestic nationalists feel respected. Also, during such meetings, China is more willing to collaborate, hoping more achievements would come out of them. After all, when China feels that it has “face,” the state actively makes attempts to protect it, and more collaborative and constructive dialogues could be created.

2. Prevent China from solely relying on nationalism for legitimacy by further facilitating China’s economic integration and further development. An isolationist approach does not work for the US and the Sino-US relations. The US could make some trade and monetary regimes more receptive to emerging global economic engines, including China. For example, granting more voice for emerging powers at the IMF might be more beneficial for both sides.

3. Create conditions for (rather than directly intervene in) China to facilitate its political reform. Political reform happens when there are will and condition. Having a less conflictual external environment for China might, in the long run, produce a better partner for the US. Political reform in China could also reduce the temptations or incentives for international adventures or aggression, providing more stability in the region.

4. Use terms that both sides are comfortable with, preferably not yet politicized, to deal with existing disputes and disagreements. That would make both the US and
China free from heavy domestic influences, and make collaborations more practical and constructive. The Mutually Assured Restraint (MAR) could be a very good start.