

U.S. scholar says foreign policy with China hasn't failed

By: Meredith Omstead

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The United States' foreign policy in China has succeeded more than many people in Washington give it credit for, says a renowned professor of China in world affairs.

"Today's dominant narrative about the failure of engagement [with China] is ahistorical and simplistic," Alastair Iain Johnston argues in his 2019 article, *The Failures of the 'Failure of Engagement' with China*, in the Washington Quarterly.

Johnston, the Governor James Albert Noe and Linda Noe Laine Professor of China in World Affairs at Harvard University, will be speaking at a virtual summit on China-West relations on Friday. The summit, hosted by Boston University's Global Development Policy Centre, is addressing economic and political tensions that come with the search for a 21st-century global order.

The international community has widely criticized the 1997 Clinton administration's engagement strategy with China for not bringing the East-Asian country into the liberal world order that Washington aims to uphold. U.S. International Security documents from 2017 and 2018 labelled China as a revisionist state, leading many policymakers, both Republican and Democratic, to assume that China is a threat to the global democracy the U.S. has pushed to build.

Johnston, however, claims that there are eight categories within the liberal world order, and it isn't right to make a sweeping statement saying that engagement has failed overall. He says that China is on board with some orders, like sovereignty and territoriality, but has low support for others, such as democratization, liberalization and human rights.

"If on balance China is not challenging all these orders nearly as much as the dominant narrative claims, and other countries miss this, then their reactions may end up contributing to an avoidable intensification of security dilemma dynamics," concluded Johnston in his piece in the International Security Journal, *China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations*.

Many of the negative comments about China-West relations fail to consider the positive advances the U.S. engagement strategy generated. In *The Failures of the 'Failure of Engagement' with China*, Johnston explains that it is a problem to say that China is less economically open to trade, supportive of arms control regimes, committed to global counterterrorism, or committed to dealing with greenhouse gasses today than in 1997.

Without engagement, the World Trade Organization may never have brought in China, and the U.S. might not have built up the new economic competition. However, going forward, competition is not going to change the parts of China that engagement did not impact either. Today, China is the second-largest global power behind the U.S. and continuing to make strategic foreign policy is imperative if the U.S. wants to have a say in the future of geopolitics.