

## OPINION

# A Professor Who Challenges the Washington Consensus on China

Jessica Chen Weiss argues that Biden Administration policy is contributing to an “action-reaction spiral.”

By Ian Johnson

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*“Those who take that fatalistic approach have to ask themselves what kind of world they see,” Jessica Chen Weiss says. Photograph by Lauren Lancaster for The New Yorker*

Two years ago, Jessica Chen Weiss made a phone call to her mother that changed her career. Her mother, a cancer researcher who lives in Seattle, told her that rising [violence against Asian Americans](#) was making her fearful of going outside.

“She just didn’t want to walk around the streets,” Weiss said. “I was just shocked. It’s still something on her mind when she weighs whether to walk around downtown.”

Weiss wondered what was happening to her own country. “Growing up in Seattle, half Asian and half white, I never felt that my

ethnicity or her ethnicity were an issue,” she said. A political scientist and professor of government at Cornell, Weiss had previously studied how China had risen in prominence as a campaign topic in the 2010 midterm elections, especially in terms of blue-collar jobs leaving the U.S. But she felt that this new wave of concern about China was of a different quality: it had become an obsession that could warp U.S. society.

“We can’t agree on what we stand for; that’s part of the problem,” she said. “We are risking our vibrancy as a democracy and our ability to attract talent.”

That was the beginning of Weiss’s new role as a public intellectual. She wrote for the mass media and spoke out in public. She was due a sabbatical year and sought out a fellowship that would allow her to spend it as a senior adviser on the policy-planning staff at the U.S. Department of State in the Biden Administration, helping to shape U.S. policy toward China.

She is quick to say that the twelve months were a terrific learning experience, and that the Administration was open to her ideas. “The words are there, and the instinct is there,” she said. “But there is the outcompete-and-beat-China muscle and the what-do-we-stand-for muscle. I think that second muscle is weaker in this Administration.”

In August, the forty-one-year-old published her concerns in a *Foreign Affairs* article that catapulted her to the front ranks of the growing number of China experts concerned that U.S. foreign policy suffers from an unhealthy focus on China as a threat. Called “[The China Trap](#),” her piece details her worries that every interaction with China is now seen as a zero-sum game. Part of this is driven by China’s own actions, for example, in militarizing the South China Sea, [threatening](#) the democratic island of Taiwan, and failing to [open its economy](#). “But a complete account,” she wrote, “must also acknowledge corresponding changes in U.S. politics and policy.”

That includes a barrage of punitive measures that grows by the year, including [tariffs](#), [sanctions](#) on Chinese officials, and restrictions on [cultural exchanges](#). Some of those policies began in the Trump Administration, but [few have been changed](#) under the Biden Administration, which has added [new restrictions](#).

Most worrying to Weiss, President Biden also [appears to be](#) drifting away from a decades-long policy of “strategic ambiguity” toward Taiwan, which many in both parties now see as deserving almost unreserved U.S. support. On four occasions, Biden has spoken of the U.S. responsibility to defend it, which has been explicit U.S. policy since relations were normalized with China in 1979. Each statement was walked back by the White House, which has said that U.S. policy has not changed, but the repetition has made it hard to believe that Biden is simply misspeaking. “I think we are in an action-reaction spiral,” Weiss told me, with each side feeling the need for ever-tougher measures to signal its seriousness. “We’re heading toward a crisis and a catastrophe that will devastate the global economy.”

Weiss has emerged as a kind of loyal and measured opposition to a rare case of bipartisan consensus in Washington—that China must be countered at all costs. Just a decade ago, this view was limited to a small number of right-wing commentators and analysts, but, in one of the most dramatic about-faces in U.S. foreign policy, it is now the dominant way of seeing China. As Weiss noted in her *Foreign Affairs* article, “ever more vehement opposition to China may be the sole thing that Democrats and Republicans can agree on.”

In many ways, the shift is understandable. China has [militarized the South China Sea](#). It is building up a [blue-water navy](#). It is flooding global institutions [with its diplomats](#). It is threatening Taiwan. It has launched coercive campaigns to assimilate ethnic minorities, such as through brutal [reeducation camps](#) in the western region of Xinjiang. And it has cracked down on

peaceful protesters seeking an end to nearly three years of coronavirus lockdowns.

Many other countries have also [downgraded relations](#) with China, suggesting that the problem is not a creation of Washington groupthink. But the explanation that China has changed isn't entirely persuasive. As Susan L. Shirk documents in her meticulously researched new book, "[Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise](#)," China's aggressive foreign policy and domestic crackdown can be traced to 2006, when it began militarizing islands and implementing what became a permanent stifling of dissent, but the change in U.S. policy took flight only more than a decade later.

As Weiss points out in her *Foreign Affairs* article, the United States began to react in the Obama Administration, which [in 2011 announced a "pivot"](#) from the Middle East to Asia. Still, relations with China remained largely unchanged even after Trump took office. He used extreme language to describe China—saying it was out to "rape" the United States—but didn't unleash truly hawkish policies until after he took a drubbing in the 2018 midterms.

Trump's measures intensified when the coronavirus threatened his reelection. After initially praising [Xi Jinping's](#) handling of the virus, Trump turned on China, using crude language that seemed to drive anti-Asian hate. His Administration also took steps to cut points of contact with China, such as [killing the Fulbright academic-exchange program](#) and the [Peace Corps program in China](#), [reducing the number of Chinese journalists](#), and [closing a Chinese consulate](#). All invited [retaliatory actions](#). "In speeches," Weiss has noted, "senior U.S. officials hinted at regime change, calling for steps to 'empower the Chinese people' to seek a different form of government and stressing that 'Chinese history contains another path for China's people.'"

Many thought that Biden's election would change U.S. policy, but two things torpedoed that. One was China's own

belligerence. In 2020 and 2021, China became embroiled in renewed disputes with its neighbors: border skirmishes with India, incursions into Taiwan's airspace, and the sending of armed ships into Japanese territorial waters. But the Biden Administration also shunned direct contacts, preferring to restore U.S. alliances before talking substantively with China. The new Administration's first meeting with Chinese officials was a seemingly stage-managed spat between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi, in Anchorage, Alaska—Blinken launched a verbal attack on China, which prompted a furious response, all [in front of the international media](#).

"There is an ebb and flow of global enemies," Weiss said. "This Administration came out of the gate saying it was China but then had to revise National Security Strategy to reflect Ukraine. So now we have an acute and a long-term threat."

The harder line isn't entirely surprising given the team that Biden assembled. These include Kurt M. Campbell, the National Security Council's coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, [who has argued](#) that competition with China could help avert U.S. decline. Campbell and Ely Ratner, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, in 2018 [co-authored an article arguing](#) that engagement with China was a flawed strategy. Another key member of the team is Rush Doshi, the National Security Council's China director, who authored [an influential book](#) arguing that China has been plotting to overtake the United States for decades.

These are key members of a group of China-policy experts whom the sociologist David M. McCourt calls "strategic competitors." McCourt, a professor at the University of California, Davis, [identifies three other groups](#). One is the old "engagers" of years past who helped shape the dominant school of dealing with China from the nineteen-seventies to the twenty-tens; another is the "new cold warriors," who have long agitated for a tougher line on China.

It's the last group, the "competitive coexisters," from which Weiss and the new thinking stem. McCourt told me that he originally wanted to call them the "new engagers," but members begged him not to, so tarnished is the word "engagement" in Washington. Instead, they acknowledge that the United States is competing with China, but also that it must find a way to live peacefully with the emerging superpower. And they unapologetically argue for more contact with China.

A piece from November, co-authored by three fellows at the Brookings Institution, [asserted that](#) "it is a mistake to view the relationship solely through the lens of rivalry." That month, Harvard University held a conference, called Coexistence 2.0, that featured Weiss and others who, to varying degrees, call for a new approach to managing China-U.S. relations.

In the world of these skeptical voices, Weiss has become something of a star. She is invited to conferences around the world, appears on podcasts and in Twitter spaces, and regularly pens commentaries. "Jessica is giving voice to this newer, younger, policy-focused China-watching voice," McCourt said. "It's a new kind of group. It's not the old China hands."

On November 14th, President Biden and Xi Jinping [met in person](#) for the first time since Biden took office. By the low expectations of the current moment, the meeting was a success, with Biden declaring that he saw a low risk of an imminent conflict over Taiwan. The two sides also agreed to meet further, with Blinken due to travel to China in early 2023.

But in the longer term, signs point to deteriorating relations. The flipping of the House of Representatives to Republican control is [expected to unleash investigations](#) and hearings into China on, for example, whether one of its laboratories was the cause of the *COVID* pandemic. That will likely invite countermeasures by China, keeping ties between the two countries contentious, with neither

willing to make concessions for fear of looking weak.

"There is a growing effort to talk to the Chinese," Weiss said. "But so much time is spent on how to do so and how not to give the impression that we're giving an inch."

Weiss is careful not to single out the Biden Administration, where she hopes that her work may be read. The *Foreign Affairs* article, she says, was meant to encourage people in the Administration who have had a hard time making a case for a more measured approach because of the consensus to get tough. "I felt that oftentimes the private discussions were taking place in the shadow of a public discussion that made it hard to get things accomplished," she said. "One goal was to make it possible to have this discussion."

Specifically, Weiss thinks that the Administration should take steps to de-escalate the tensions. It should oppose efforts under way in Congress to raise Taiwan's diplomatic status, and discourage visits to Taiwan by senior officials, such as the recent trip by the outgoing Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. More broadly, the United States should be willing to offer rewards for better Chinese behavior, rather than solely a series of punishments, and set up more regular contact between Washington and Beijing.

While acknowledging China's actions, Weiss says the risks of a catastrophic conflict are too high not to make a full-court diplomatic press. "Those who take that fatalistic approach have to ask themselves what kind of world they see," she said. "I think it's too catastrophic not to test the proposition that there is an alternative."

For those who broadly share her views, Weiss is a welcome change from those who don't dare say what they think for fear of being seen as weak or soft on China. "She's extremely brave," said Susan Thornton, a retired senior U.S. diplomat and now a visiting lecturer at the Yale Law School. "It's really hard to criticize Biden knowing what else is out there, but the problem is

you can't do nuanced policymaking because anything you do will be ammunition for the other side."

Some China watchers are also skeptical that Xi wants dialogue. At the Harvard conference, Weiss was on a panel with several people who were asked what they thought of her article in *Foreign Affairs*. Andrew Erickson, a professor at the U.S. Naval War College and a visiting professor at Harvard, said he's seen no evidence that China wants to reciprocate, citing China's refusal to discuss meaningful arms control. "I don't see a basis for deep cooperation" with Xi's China, Erickson said. "I'm sad to say that."

Although she chooses to speak out, Weiss carefully calibrates how she talks about her concerns. She has seen how other Asian

American voices have been targeted for racial attacks and so tries to keep her argument as factual and policy-based as possible. Although she doesn't feel that she is a victim of racism, she is concerned that rhetoric and attacks in the United States could escalate. She limits her use of social media, for example, having seen how other Asian Americans have been attacked and accused of dual loyalty and a lack of patriotism. And, of course, her mother's fears remain on her mind.

"I don't want to become roadkill, but the stakes are too high to remain on the sideline of this conversation," she said. "Although I'm an academic, I'm also a citizen, and I fear very much for the direction of this country and the growing enmity and confrontation with China. I'm not seeking that tension, but I want the ideas to take flight." ♦