No one does more to hurt America and help China than Trump

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China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, says the U.S.-China relationship is at its lowest ebb since the two nations reestablished diplomatic relations in 1979. He blames the United States for a policy that is “fraught with emotions and whims and McCarthyist bigotry.” Meanwhile, many U.S. commentators — not all of them right-wingers — blame China for what is increasingly being described as a new Cold War.

Who’s right? I’d say China is largely to blame for the confrontation — but President Trump is entirely to blame for our self-defeating response.

President Xi Jinping has amassed more power than any Chinese leader since Mao Zedong, and he is acting more recklessly than China did in the days when it had a collective leadership. Chinese troops clashed in June with Indian forces along their border in the Himalayas. China is redoubling its efforts to assert sovereignty over the South China Sea in violation of international law; its coast guard recently sank a Vietnamese fishing boat in disputed waters. China’s repression of the Uighurs, a Muslim minority, is rising to the level of genocide. And China has trampled on Hong Kong’s autonomy in violation of its 1984 handover agreement with Britain.

In the past, when China was criticized, its response was usually muted. Not anymore. These days it practices “wolf warrior” diplomacy. When Australia called for an international inquiry into the origins of the novel coronavirus, China retaliated with trade sanctions and suspected cyberattacks. After Canada detained the chief financial officer of the Chinese technology company Huawei on a U.S. warrant in 2018, China imprisoned two innocent Canadians. “We treat our friends with fine wine,” says China’s ambassador to Sweden, “but for our enemies we have shotguns.”

China’s behavior is thuggish and unacceptable. But Trump has also contributed to the fraying of ties. While lavishly praising Xi — and reportedly approving of his crackdown on Uighurs — Trump has waged a trade war against China and falsely accused China of intentionally spreading the coronavirus (which he calls, with his trademark racism, “kung flu”). Now he is demonizing China in order to smear Joe Biden as a Manchurian candidate.

Some of the steps that the administration has taken to push back on China make sense. For instance, it ended Hong Kong’s preferential economic treatment, imposed sanctions on some Chinese officials for the mistreatment of Uighurs, lobbied U.S. allies to reject Huawei’s 5G technology, rejected “most” of Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea and sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to the South China Sea.

But Trump’s trade war cost U.S. consumers billions of dollars and did not result in meaningful changes in Chinese trade practices. It’s not clear whether Phase 1 of the trade deal, with China promising to buy more U.S. goods, will ever be fully implemented, and Trump has lost interest in a second phase, because it’s more politically advantageous to fight with China.
Trump will harm U.S. universities if he kicks out more Chinese students beyond the approximately 3,000 to 5,000 who have had their visas revoked because they were affiliated with universities tied to China’s military. Imagine if China retaliated by barring students from the hundreds of U.S. universities that have Defense Department contracts.

Already, Trump’s decision to expel 60 Chinese journalists in retaliation for the expulsion of three U.S. reporters from China has backfired, leading Beijing to kick out more U.S. journalists. One of the journalists who was expelled wrote that “the American press corps in China” has been “gutted.” That makes it harder to understand what China is doing.

Now Trump is weighing a travel ban on all members of the Chinese Communist Party and their families — as many as 270 million people — most of whom have no say in Xi’s decision-making. This is nativism masquerading as a “get tough on China” approach. If Trump really wanted to hurt China, he would offer to take in the beleaguered people of Hong Kong, as Britain has already done.

More broadly, Trump helps Beijing with his anti-globalist agenda. Who benefits when Trump pulls out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Iran nuclear deal? You guessed it: China. Trump is creating a power vacuum that Xi can fill. China is promoting an Asian trade agreement that excludes the United States, playing a more prominent role in the WHO and negotiating a strategic pact with Iran that could lead to $400 billion in Chinese investment over 25 years.

If we are serious about confronting China, we need to reassert U.S. global leadership and get our own house in order. We are losing the competition to China when, as on Monday, China had 22 new coronavirus cases and we had more than 62,000. China’s economy has already started growing again while the U.S. economy continues to tread water.

Effectively competing with China abroad will require improving governance at home — and that starts with voting Trump out of office. There’s a good reason many observers think Beijing wants another Trump term: No one does more to hurt America and help China than our feckless president.