

# Opinion: How Calif. can survive the U.S.-China war

By Joe Mathews

California is trapped—in the dangerous space between two authoritarian regimes that want to fight each other.

One is in Beijing; the other is taking power in Washington, D.C. Viewed from the Golden State, it's striking how much they have in common.



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Both are so nationalist and bellicose they are spooking neighbors. Both express open contempt for human rights and undermine faith in elections and the free press. Both promote hatred of minorities (anti-Tibetan and anti-Uighur in China; anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant in the U.S.).

And both regimes are captained by swaggering men (President Xi Jinping in China; President-elect Donald Trump in U.S.) who tend to their own cults of personality and pose as corruption fighters while enriching their own families.

Most frighteningly for Californians, both regimes seem to see advantage in escalating conflict with the other. The incoming American administration is threatening to raise tariffs and label China a currency manipulator, actions that would likely start a trade war. The Chinese administration is provoking

confrontations in the South China Sea while the new American strongman embraces Taiwan—actions that could start a real war.

A sustained conflict between China and the U.S. could produce new restrictions on the flow of money and people, with devastating results for California. Our public universities rely on federal funds from D.C.—and top-dollar, out-of-state tuition fees from Chinese students to subsidize the education of Californians. So any Trump restrictions on foreign visitors—or retaliatory Chinese limits on overseas study and travel—could blow up the University of California’s business model.

Hollywood depends on moviegoers who live under both regimes, and Silicon Valley’s promising ventures in virtual reality and artificial intelligence rely on our ability to bring together manufacturers, investors and technologists from China and the U.S. A trade war would threaten those exchanges. Our tourism relies on Chinese visitors and our housing market relies on Chinese buyers, who spend an estimated \$9 billion a year on homes here. But will people still come if Washington’s anti-Chinese rhetoric fuels a racist backlash against Chinese nationals and Chinese Americans?

How can California handle such a conflict?

First, by protecting our people and institutional connections to China, with the same fervor we are rallying to protect our undocumented immigrants. This will be especially hard given the hyper-sensitivity of the autocrats in Beijing and D.C. to the slightest of slights; just as Trump lashes out at “Saturday Night Live” parodies, Xi sees the “Kung Fu Panda” films as American warfare.

And, second, by reminding both regimes—in friendly but firm ways—that we are opposed to conflict because the U.S. and China need each other more than they appear willing to acknowledge.

Californians who doubt this would do well to consult John Pomfret's new book, "The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to the Present". Pomfret, an American journalist long posted in China, writes "The two nations have feuded fiercely and frequently, yet, irresistibly and inevitably, they are drawn back to one another. The result is two powers locked in an entangling embrace that neither can quit."

California's role in this difficult period should be to tell the story of its own deep ties to China and to seek out new areas of productive cooperation, argues Matt Sheehan, author of the forthcoming book "Chinaformia: Working with Chinese Investors, Immigrants and Ideas on U.S. Soil".

"I think of California as a living laboratory for a more practical, productive version of U.S.-China relations," says, Sheehan who also publishes the weekly Chinaformia Newsletter.

But not all collaborations with China would be helpful. Our technologies companies shouldn't be aiding the U.S. surveillance state or assisting the Chinese government in suppressing human rights. And California labor interests should stop playing to anti-Chinese prejudice in opposing trade agreements and advancing union organizing. (The hotel workers' union, as part of an organizing campaign, recently claimed a possible sale to Chinese interests of the Westin Long Beach would threaten national security.)

One possible model for California's strategy might be Anson Burlingame, whom President Abraham Lincoln dispatched to Beijing to represent the U.S. during the Civil War. Burlingame's approach was to commiserate with the Chinese (we have our terrible rebellion with the South, you with the Taipings) as a basis for collaboration. His work produced the Burlingame Treaty, which welcomed Chinese students to U.S. educational institutions, and opened the way for Chinese immigrants to become American citizens.

Today, Burlingame's accomplishments are mostly forgotten, but his name belongs to a suburb in the Bay Area, a region boasting one of America's most prosperous populations of Chinese Americans.

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