

So is China a friend or foe?

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The United States has a record and rapidly inflating trade deficit with China, a rising competitor in the global marketplace.

Some observers closely watch the communist nation's large military buildup as it threatens war with democratic Taiwan, a U.S. ally, if it formally declares its independence.

They also criticize China's poor human rights record -- it has more executions annually than all other nations in the world combined -- and has for decades cracked down on the free flow of information in the press and on the Internet, years after the Tiananmen Square massacre of protesters in Beijing in 1989.

On the flip side, supporters say China played a key role in the United States' attempts to corral North Korea's development of nuclear weapons, and it offers a new market for American products as China's fourth-largest trading partner.

It's important to trade with China to maintain the peace, they say.

Friend or Foe?

So is China a friend? Or a foe? Some say it's open to interpretation.

The Chinese people "love Americans," said Danny Hsu, a Saginaw Valley State University assistant history professor who lived in China for three years.

Many Chinese view centralized government differently than Americans, which would explain why the Chinese are more willing to accept "draconian and repressive measures" from the state, Hsu said.

In the U.S., individual rights are viewed as sacred and fundamental, but in China a weak central government is a reflection of

weakness as a nation -- a sore point since the 19th century.

"If all you've known is weakness and exploitation by the West, you can understand why it's more of a priority for the nation to be strong than for it to be weak and have your rights," he said.

Of note to Washington lawmakers and U.S. military leaders, however, is the communist nation's rapid military buildup in recent years, reports say.

The large addition of submarines, aircraft and warships led U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to publicly question China's need to bulk up militarily when it has no serious outside threats.

In his book "Enemies," Washington Times reporter Bill Gertz documented "massive" Chinese espionage operations against the United States that have netted the regime highly sensitive U.S. nuclear weapons data and the most advanced, cutting-edge warship technology available, among other military losses.

Gertz has reported on China's "disinformation" campaign he says is geared toward misinformation targeted at Washington lawmakers and the White House to take a "soft line" towards the authoritarian government.

China has repeatedly warned Taiwan, a democracy and U.S. ally, it will invade the island nation if it declares independence. China says Taiwan is a renegade province started by nationalists who escaped mainland rule in 1949.

In 2005, a Chinese general warned the United States it could hurl nuclear-armed missiles at hundreds of U.S. cities if America targeted China to repel an invasion of Taiwan. U.S. officials dismissed the talk as saber rattling.

Hsu, who called the general's comments posturing, said China emphasizes it's rising peacefully. It remains far behind the United States in technological sophistication, he said.

While China has the ability to defend itself regionally, it isn't a global armed force but takes seriously its stand Taiwan remains part of China, he said.

Yet the country realizes it would face consequences for an invasion, Hsu said.

"It would just be ruinous for the economy, for its economy and the world economy," he said.

Human rights and the environment

In recent months, critics such as Amnesty International have raised concerns about Chinese executions, sending those who haven't faced charges to "re-education" labor camps, religious persecution, and allegedly harvesting the organs of members of Falun Gong.

Joanne Lau, an Amnesty International country specialist, said the executions are particularly troublesome. Exact numbers aren't known, but most experts believe it's higher than the more than 1,700 reported annually.

"They execute more people than all the world combined," she said. "In China, it can be (for) something as small as tax fraud or drug trafficking."

China recently announced it will have its Supreme Court review any death penalty case before punishment.

"We're not sure this will lead to any reduction in executions," she said.

The central state has controlled access to Internet content -- many Chinese reportedly do not know about the Tiananmen Square massacre -- and recently banned foreign

magazines unless they cover science and technology, press reports indicate.

Hsu said persecution of Christians has happened in a few regions, but it doesn't happen routinely.

While China has cracked down on the press -- including, Lau said, detaining at least 38 foreign journalists -- Hsu said it has encouraged regional television stations to root out corruption at the local level to increase public faith in the central government, but it strongly frowns on exposing national party leaders' missteps or wrongdoing.

"For the most part, Chinese peasants and the average citizen still has a fairly high level of trust in the central government," he said.

China has had tens of thousands of local protests in recent years, he noted.

Meanwhile, the central political party has extended membership to the middle class, he noted.

"The Communist Party realization is this: If we can keep the economy growing ... then we can stave off political discontent."

Critics also have criticized China for lax environmental standards that sent smokestack

pollution across the Pacific and spilled toxic chemicals into a Chinese river that flowed into a Russian waterway and threatened the drinking water of thousands.

Some critics say the United States agreed to make trade relations permanent with China in 2000, instead of a year-to-year review, because of pressure from Wall Street.

In the book "Speaking Freely," former Republican U.S. Rep. Joe Scarborough of Florida recalled while a member of Congress how he criticized U.S. companies in the mid-1990s that wanted to expand business ties with China, lured by a new "super market."

Scarborough told the book's author, "they were willing to overlook a country that was killing its own people and exporting nuclear technology to unstable regimes."

Now the host of the MSNBC program Scarborough Country, the former congressman said in the 2003 book federal lawmakers wouldn't have granted the trade status "if all these companies hadn't come flooding in and making campaign contributions and asking for people's support" while claiming open markets lead to open

societies.

Michael D. LaFaive, director of fiscal policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, is among those who say America shouldn't link trade to China's human rights record.

"We view the opportunity to bring more people together through trade as an opportunity to expand human rights," LaFaive said. "Walling ourselves off from China will do nothing to prevent China from changing its ways."

"As China gets wealthier, they are going to start demanding freedoms that they otherwise haven't had."

But Peter Morici, a University of Maryland international economist and a China economic scholar, dismisses the argument.

"It's a way of distracting you from what China is doing," he said. "As long as China is getting away with it, it will keep doing it. If it was going to change, why hasn't it happened?"

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