

[This article](#), published by the South China Morning Post, I originally titled “Trading Places,” because it highlights how China’s maritime expansion emulates what Japan did earlier and continues to do.

One of the great sources of global support for American leadership has been the reputation we’ve had for providing a public service, namely peace, that benefits everyone. Even China at one time acknowledged the enormous value of the U.S. alliance system in keeping the peace in places like Korea. There is a fundamental difference between providing a public good and just being leader of a gang. In the attached article I highlight the way in which historically we Americans have, while maintaining our alliances and fundamental loyalties, prioritized providing a public good.

The distinction between provider of public good and gang leader has never been black and white but America’s priority has historically been clear. Under Obama and Trump there has been a decisive shift toward gang leader, nowhere more decisively than in our backing of Japan’s 2012 breach of its peace understanding with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. In the long run, that undercuts U.S. leadership. Ironically, it was paired with our equal and opposite failure in that same year to provide decisive military backing to the Philippines in its conflict with China over Scarborough Shoal, which was formal Philippine territory more than a decade before one of Chiang Kaishek’s Chinese officials drew what was then an 11-dash line claiming the whole South China Sea.

Parenthetically, there were important details behind the 2012 Japanese government purchase of the Senkaku/Diaoyu rocks that opened space restrictions forced me to omit. When you include those, the problem gets worse. An extremist right-wing Tokyo governor, Ishihara, who hates the U.S. as well as China, needed to mobilize his declining base, so he proposed to buy the Senkakus. To preempt this nationalist gambit the central government bought them instead. China of course reacted and the U.S. responded that it would go to war to defend Japan’s diplomatically indefensible position. The bottom line was that Washington delegated to a right wing Japanese nut job the right to trigger war between the U.S. and China.

The shift toward a gang leader mentality was important under Obama and has become virtually total under Trump, who ironically has also undermined all our alliances. Recent speeches by Pompeo, Barr and two others paint China as demonically evil and harmful to the U.S. while ignoring the benefits of the US-China relationship and the problematic aspects of our allies. It does not absolve China of any of its very important transgressions to acknowledge complicated realities, including that Japan triggered gratuitous conflict with China and that China saved General Motors by being open to American cars when the Japanese market was largely closed to them. When driving in Shanghai, you’re always within sight of a few Buicks. In Tokyo you can drive all day without seeing an American car. Barr and Pompeo would never acknowledge that, nor would their Democrat counterparts.

The gang leader mentality ignores these realities. One can call them nuances, but the word nuances undervalues them. They are core realities. We ignore them at the peril of making decisions in an unreal black and white world. We ignore them at the cost of our global leadership, because the rest of the world is intensely conscious of the complexity.

My previous article about Huawei (<http://www.theoverholtgroup.com/media/Articles-China/Trump-versus-huawei-EAF-published.pdf>) highlighted a vitally important conflict with China that we Americans must confront. The attached article highlights a problem caused by our tendency to demonize China and whitewash an ally. I write not to be partisan, not to be Sinophile or Sinophobe, but to wrestle with

complex truths in the service of our country's interests and the interest of peace. Americans need to choose our battles carefully, and we need to expand our common interests.

-Bill Oveholt