



# Changing the Narrative

## How Private Tech Cooperation can Overcome Washington's Cynicism Towards China

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### **ABOUT THIS REPORT**

This report is part of the Atlantic Council's ongoing endeavor to establish forums, enable discussions about opportunities and challenges of modern technologies, and evaluate their implications for society as well as international relations — efforts that are championed by the newly established *GeoTech Center*. Prior to its formation and to help lay the groundwork for the launch of the Center in March 2020, the Atlantic Council's *Foresight, Strategy, and Risks Initiative* was awarded a *Rockefeller Foundation* grant to evaluate China's role as a global citizen and the country's use of AI as a development tool. The work that the grant commissioned the Atlantic Council to do focused on data and AI efforts by China around the world, included the publication of reports, and the organization of conferences in Europe, China, Africa, and India. At these gatherings, international participants evaluate how AI and the collection of data will influence their societies, and how countries can successfully collaborate on emerging technologies, while putting a special emphasis on the People's Republic in an ever-changing world.

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*"We have a list. A black list. An "entity" list. If you are a Chinese company who has contributed to the mass internment of Uighurs in Xinjiang Province based on racial profiling with echoes from the holocaust, you are on that list. We will not trade with you.<sup>1</sup> There is no gray area, you have chosen a side. End of line."*

**That is the narrative** coming out of the current US Administration, and it is having significant effect on US public opinion towards China. According to Gallup, negative public opinion towards China has increased over 20% to an overall unfavorable rating of 67%.<sup>2</sup> Pew concurs, showing the drop in favorability to 26%, the lowest in decades.<sup>3</sup> Americans are increasingly suspicious of the Chinese, and it affects how we view Covid-19, 5G technology, and Hong Kong protestors. Some say it is justified, others wonder what has changed other than our own rhetoric and recent policies coming from the Executive. I was amazed by how my suspicions played out in my own psyche as I sat across from Chinese academics during my participation in an Atlantic Council convening with Artificial Intelligence experts, exploring potential areas of cooperation amongst the United States, the European Union, and the People's Republic of China.

Halfway through our round table discussing the dangers of Artificial Intelligence to society, the work force, and humanity as a whole, the conversation takes a hard turn. We have spent an hour of back and forth academic discourse covering ethical dilemmas, competing interests among stakeholders, and the role of government and civil society in AI oversight. The panel of Atlantic Council members, made up of a former intelligence analyst, a retired diplomat, an active senior military fellow, a recent college graduate, and a journalist, have asked some questions and participated in the pleasant, but rather theoretical debate. The two academics on the left have introduced themselves, one as a professor of AI ethics, another as a professor and researcher on AI policy. So far, they have done almost all the talking. However, halfway through, the other two members of the Chinese panel take over the conversation. They too introduced themselves at the beginning, but my initial reaction was to perceive them as out of place in the conversation, so I wasn't surprised when they remained mostly silent during the first hour. The older gentleman is a scholar focused on Israel and the Middle East, the other is a former cop recently returned from getting his doctorate in the UK and said he was just starting to teach at the local university with a focus on counter terrorism and big data.

As the conversation turns, I come to realize that there is no one out of place, instead that this panel has been chosen with both an agenda and a desired outcome. Cynically, I lean back, cross my arms, and begin almost a full hour on receive mode. They are desperate to explain themselves. They think there is some kind of cosmic misunderstanding or conspiracy theory. The topic is counter terrorism in Xinjiang province. The province is one of the most ethnically diverse and historically violent areas of the country. According to China Global Television Network, violent domestic terrorist acts were the norm for years, but since 2017 there have been zero.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/2a40927e-e946-11e9-a240-3b065ef5fc55>

<sup>2</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1627/china.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/13/19-striking-findings-from-2019/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-12-05/Fighting-terrorism-in-Xinjiang-MaNLLDtnfq/index.html>

The cop-turned-professor begins his pitch, explaining the strategic goal to preemptively counter radicalization and terrorist behaviors of a vulnerable Uighur population by leveraging AI technologies such as facial recognition, big data, and machine learning algorithms. He talks about poverty, unemployment, crime rates, and vulnerability of an ethnic minority to radicalization. He then spouts statistics about reeducation efforts, spends 10 minutes discrediting any western researcher who has written on the topic, and plugs his book as the only authoritative source on the topic. He is adamant that not only is the surveillance system in Xinjiang effective, it is justified and even beneficial. There have been no violent terrorist attacks since 2017. Crime rates are down, employment rates are up, vulnerable people groups are being helped. Why does western media decry Chinese domestic policies? Why does any Chinese company whose kit or software is in use in the province to build this hugely successful system have to pay a price on a US black list? This is a huge success story; how can outsiders not understand?

I realize I don't believe him. His facts are black, western accusations are white, and I have made my choice. I don't believe him the same way I don't believe that Chinese intentions in the South China Sea are peaceful. I don't believe him the same way I don't believe the J-20 fighter jet was built using Chinese developed stealth technology. I don't believe him because I have read a plethora of news articles that say "Uighur forced internment camps," "human rights violations," "IP theft," and the myriad of other accusations leveled over and over from the West. I have a problem of trust. But what if the situation isn't black and white, and the truth lies somewhere in the gray?

The reason this really matters is because the problem of trust is between governments. Ministries of commerce, foreign affairs, energy, and especially defense have absolutely no trust for one another. Government officials and legislators have bought into the very bipartisan rhetoric that we have "woken up" to the Chinese threat. The private sector, on the other hand, rejects it outright. At the beginning of this research project the question was posed if there is any room for AI cooperation between the United States, China, and the European Union. This question itself, however, is misleading. There already is a huge amount of AI cooperation amongst all three. Go to Shanghai's "silicon valley" and you will notice that half of the buildings have a foreign company's logo on the side. Go read any AI academic paper, it is likely coauthored between a western and Chinese researcher. AI cooperation is full throttle. The question is not can we cooperate, it is how do we continue to cooperate given the change in official rhetoric, politics, and chasm of mistrust.

Subsequently, as I start to reassess my perspective on this topic, I need a frame of reference. So I go to where I am comfortable: The United States has spent 18 years in Afghanistan and I have personally spent years of my life either in theater or working in direct support, all in the name of counter terrorism. One of the definitions of success has been the absence of 9/11-type attacks during that timeframe — is that at least comparable? When the United States is accused of war crimes and killing civilians, and our presence is described as an invasion both in Iraq and Afghanistan, our response is to justify our actions and explain to the world that they don't understand, what we are doing is good, and right, and justifiable. "Freedom is good, we are championing human rights, we are the good guy." That sounds a lot like what the ex-cop-professor just said, just replace "freedom" with "stability" and "human rights" with "collective good." Maybe this is just a question of values. Their values aren't bad, they just aren't ours. They also aren't the values solely held by the Communist regime, but of the entire culture. Perhaps we would do well to attempt to understand their perspective, not solely criticize it.

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Not many US military members get to sit down across a table from members of the People's Liberation Army, Chinese Foreign Ministry, and Academia to debate the theoretical and practical concerns of operationalizing emerging technologies on our societies and the future of humanity. Without a doubt, the current course we are on is troubling and requires a correction before theoretical dangers become practical consequences.

### ACTION POINTS

- **The private sector needs to get much more vocal.** Public opinion on China is increasingly driven by Washington rhetoric, and Silicon Valley needs to have its voice heard. Not all Chinese news is bad news, but that is all we see inside the corridors of the Pentagon and coming from the Executive Branch. Voices from the private sector and industry and even the publisher of this piece, the Atlantic Council's GeoTech Center, need to provide perspective to *balance the narrative*.
- **The US Defense Establishment needs to relook at the threat assessment.** The confrontational stance taken by the current administration encourages the DoD to interpret every Chinese action as escalatory and every intention as a challenge, from Covid-19 response to computer chip development. This provides justification for DoD plans and budgets for an all out global war and encourages arms race dynamics. I recently heard a senior military officer entreating his compatriots to help him "drum up a sense of urgency on this China thing." The US military need not be the loudest voice decrying the Chinese threat.
- **The United States Executive Branch needs to return to leading the global order**, not eschewing it, and return with confidence to our place *advocating for open markets* and the benefits of *globalization*.

I returned from the above trip melancholy on the current state of affairs, and discouraged about the present vector particularly of my sector, the Department of Defense. However, the saddest part of this whole relationship is how we have missed the good. Economists with one voice will acknowledge that 700 million people in China have gone from below to above the poverty line between 1981 and 2012.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese middle class is flourishing and the lives of the majority of Chinese people are improving. The United States should pat itself on the back and happily take some credit. Our belief that a rising tide will raise all boats, and our leadership to incorporate China into international institutions has changed the lives of literally millions of people. Our disillusionment with their domestic system and criticism of their methodology misses the good of an integrated, growing global economy. We have lost that sentiment, we have eschewed global leadership, and we refuse to accept the good we have done because we feel taken advantage of. It will take loud voices of influential entrepreneurs to remind us that we can make the pie bigger, not just pursue selfish behavior to getting the biggest slice for ourselves.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/01/17/509521619/whos-lifting-chinese-people-out-of-poverty>



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colonel John W. “Coke” Blocher is a Senior U.S. Air Force Fellow at the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security of the Atlantic Council. Colonel Blocher received his commission from the United States Air Force Academy in 1999. He is a senior pilot with over one thousand five hundred flying hours in the A/OA-10 “Warthog” and the AT-38 including one hundred and fifty combat hours in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. He deployed as a Battalion Air Liaison Officer (BALO) with the third infantry division in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Col(s) Blocher’s accomplishments as a BALO and as a joint terminal attack controller, fighting the moving battle to downtown Baghdad in March 2003, earned him both the Bronze Star for heroism and the Air Force Commendation Medal with Valor.

Colonel Blocher most recently served as the military assistant to the Commander of NATO’s Allied Joint Force Command, Brunssum, overseeing NATO’s Resolute Support mission and Enhanced Forward Presence forces, as well as serving as higher headquarters for the NATO Response Force. He has previously served as commander of the Thirteenth Air Support Operations Squadron, as a flight instructor and examiner, and wing executive officer. He completed the Olmsted Scholar program, attending Corvinus University of Budapest and earning a master of arts degree in international relations in 2011.

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