

An alternative approach to China

China policy: More Michael, less Sonny

Get tough, but be smart and strategic. That's how to approach China.

There is broad consensus we need to “get tough” with China. Certainly some push back is overdue. But tough isn't enough. We need to be strategic in order to minimize collateral damage and be effective.

Let's get tough on China!

It seems everyone agrees—time to get tough on China. It is probably President Trump's most popular position. Democrats agree in principle, if not in execution. The Europeans agree, even after the US pulled out of the climate deal and the Iran nuclear agreement and threatened tariffs. Even businesses that disagree with the overall tariff policy agree with the idea of pushing back on China.

Getting tough is easier said than done

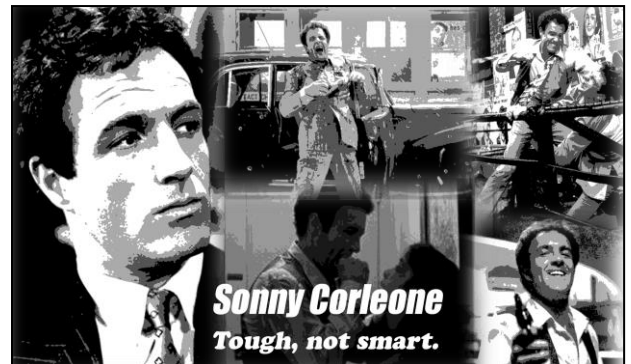
Now that most of us agree that we need to “get tough” on China, we have to ask the next question—how do we do that? The US has “gotten tough” with other countries and it doesn't always work out. (More on that later.) Tough is fine. But we need to be effective as well. That means considering many factors beyond “how do we inflict pain.”

There's more than one way to get tough

A few weeks back, as we were watching a cop show on TV, my wife referred to a character by saying, “He's such a Sonny.” Of course, I knew exactly what she meant—Sonny Corleone, eldest son of Vito Corleone.

Sonny is a hothead, known for being impulsive, overly emotional, saying too much, easily angered by petty issues, and acting without thinking which ultimately results in Sonny falling for a trap set by his adversaries and being assassinated at a toll booth. Sonny is tough, but he isn't smart. In the end, he fails.

Plus, Sonny tends to think anyone who isn't like Sonny is a Fredo—weak, passive, trivial, a pushover on everything. But there is another option—Michael Corleone.



When it comes to being tough, Michael is the alternative to Sonny

The youngest of the Corleone's, no one could ever say Michael isn't tough. In fact, he can be downright ruthless (just ask Fredo). But, in his toughness, Michael is also thoughtful, careful, and strategic. He sees the big picture and pursues critical, overarching objectives, undistracted by petty grievances. He understands his adversary's strengths and his own weaknesses, not just the other way around. He plays the long game, not lured by the immediate gratification of superficial, short term “victories.” He builds alliances when necessary and never starts a fight he can't win.



In short, while Sonny is “tough,” Michael is “tough and smart.” That’s what we need with China, and relative to foreign policy in general.

Iraq: The US was tough but not smart

Regime change in Iraq is an excellent example of how tough needs to be smart. The US got tough with Saddam Hussein and knocked him off his throne quickly and decisively—a great example of toughness. Then, despite the fact that Iraq and pretty much the entire Arab, Muslim Middle East has no experience with democracy whatsoever, the US decided that the best post-regime-change strategy was to install “democracy,” starting with elections, apparently giving little thought to the possibility that centuries of bitter, sectarian violence might overwhelm the meager democratic impulses and institutions which could be quickly established. The result was a bitter civil war, ISIS, contributions to regional instability, and a prolonged military presence which wore on the US.



It was the post-invasion strategy that America got wrong

Many would react to this by saying the US should not have invaded Iraq in the first place. That is certainly open to debate but it is not the point here. WMD's or not, there should be no love loss for the Butcher of Baghdad, a villain who oversaw the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people.

The point is that getting tough is not enough and getting tough without getting smart is an invitation to disaster. The US plan for Iraq after Saddam was terrible—built on false premises and executed shoddily. If the US would have simply focused more on the potential factions and rivalries that could arise, and placed less confidence in the supposed universality of democratic institutions, perhaps a better post-war strategy would have been hatched.

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Less developed countries have long been a weakness in US foreign policy

Iraq points to a longtime weakness in US foreign policy that transcends both parties—dealing with less developed countries. We tend to not understand conditions on the ground, the challenges those countries face relative to stability, prosperity and freedom, and we overestimate the impact that democratic institutions can have in the short term.

We need to avoid the same kind of mistake with China

It is exactly this blind spot that could foil the plan to get tough on China. To succeed, we need to understand what matters to China, China's strengths and weaknesses and ours, and how we can be effective in getting results. Tough for toughness sake won't work. Frankly, we're not off to a good start. Please look for more articles in our “The Godfather on China” series as we explain how to more like Michael and less like Sonny with China.