We are really getting it wrong in our approach to China. The winds have shifted sharply over the past three years. Anti-China intellectual gales sweep through Washington. Yesterday we hit a low point. An important, but not powerful figure in the Department of State said at a conference that the competition with China is a “fight with a really different civilization.” She went on to say that “the Soviet Union and that competition, in a way was a fight within the Western family. It is the first time we will have a great power competition that is not Caucasian.”

Race baiting anyone or anything, especially a country like China, is morally wrong, contrary to American values, and strategically unsound. We have just given China propaganda leverage over us, in addition to damaging the US brand.

On top of this, we are generally on the wrong track in how we approach the US-China competition. During the past half year, we have seen the US government increasingly block visas for visiting Chinese scholars and academics. There is no question some of these people are spying for Chinese intelligence services. I personally assume that every Chinese delegation has a standing order to debrief to intelligence services.

There is no question we are now in a great competition with China. Personally, I think China is putting in place the foundation for a competing international economic system. They don’t intend to confront or fight the prevailing US-led international order at this time because they benefit from it. But they are building the foundation stones to operate their own parallel system. This is a real and threatening competition.

But I don’t know why we would intentionally limit our knowledge about it or our capacity to understand it. To characterize it as a racial competition is wrong, in my view. This is a competition between a “rule of law” system of nations versus a “rule by law” set of authoritarian states. This is what the Cold War was about. It is a familiar struggle, so to make it a racial debate isn’t helpful.

In a larger sense, why are we limiting our knowledge of the opponent? Why are we making it harder for long-standing Chinese policy experts to visit America to explain what is going on? Yes, some of them are spies, to be certain. But they know the evolving policy landscape in China, and it is helpful for us to learn about that. And restrictive actions here are used by China to rationalize their own restrictive policies. It is hard for us to confront them about their growing restrictiveness when we are doing petty things to block their visitors coming to the US. And we are denying ourselves a chance to transmit important messages back to China.
America needs a strategy for dealing with rising authoritarian states. They have the efficiency of police-state tactics and closed decision-making to move more quickly and aggressively. And they are using covert means to undermine institutions in the West, attacking the legitimacy of courts, government agencies and the press to promote dissention and tension in our society. Authoritarian states have mastered social media where western democracies are failing.

But that hardly justifies doing stupid things that ultimately hurt our ability to understand the opponent and project the strongest positive image of America and the West.

To be sure, visiting Chinese delegations have become far less informative and worthwhile. Chinese scholars and policy experts are so afraid of the ruthless new authoritarianism in Beijing that they largely mouth only the approved talking points in official meetings. But the unofficial conversations are rich with insights. All of that is now in danger of being lost as we compete here in Washington for who can be the most harsh and negative about China.

Our problem is that our campaign to see who can be toughest on China tends to reflect our domestic rivalries, not a well-developed strategy. Policy analysts within one party are competing to win the support of the president or the secretary. They also intend to insulate the party from criticism of the other party of being “soft” on the Chinese threat. This politically charged competitive environment tends to favor superficial interpretations of developments and harsh policy choices. Obviously, this leads the Chinese to draw conclusions about our genuine policy objectives and the motives for policy alternatives.

Let me be clear. I do believe our competition with China is the most important geopolitical development that will dominate the rest of my life. We are in a global competition. But we are handicapping ourselves by the way we are defining the problem and limiting our ability to understand it. If we think our values are universal and beloved in the world, we do not need to be so paranoid in how we talk about China or interact with them.

As I said, I think it is profoundly stupid to introduce ethnic or racial concepts into this situation. It is hard enough to be objective and open minded when so much is at stake and making race a dimension of this only constrains us further and gives countless talking points to China about our true intentions. While we have the time, we need to step back, take off the glasses of paranoia and develop viable long-term strategies for this long-term competition. Knowing more about the thinking of our opponent and being more positive about our own values should be the starting point.

I welcome your insights and feedback. Please drop me a note at JHamre@csis.org.