



US-China Strategic Competition in the Context of the Global COVID-19 Pandemic

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Since the end of the Qing dynasty, US-China relations have had a strong strategic dimension. Whether the two sides were allied in the fight against Japanese militarism, divided over Communism, or drawn together in an anti-Soviet rapprochement, strategic considerations have always played a key role. At times, engagement has emerged as both sides' strategic preference, while at other times, the dominant form of interaction was competition. As this paper will show, policymakers in the US rarely embrace engagement without reservation; skepticism and caution are persistent themes in Washington's China policy. Nonetheless, the balance of engagement and competition shifted toward competition after the Global Financial Crisis, and that trend has accelerated since

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2015. As China's economic, military, and political power have grown, its relationship with the US has deteriorated. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the tension between the two great powers.

There is no question that China's increasing power has contributed to the perception in the US that the nation that was once a benign player on the margins of international politics has become, in the words of the 2018 US National Defense Strategy, "a strategic competitor" (United States Department of Defense 2018: 1). Both sides' policies are shaped by interactions and "facts on the ground," but concepts and theories from the world of international relations (IR) theory have also contributed. We will argue that these theoretical perspectives have, at times, oversimplified complex drivers and motivations, reducing each side's perception of the other to caricature. The result is to make difficult challenges even more fraught. A more rational, evidence-based approach to the relationship—one that avoids unnecessary confrontation and conflict—requires abandoning a priori thinking and assumption-driven policymaking.

THE ERA OF (CAUTIOUS) ENGAGEMENT

The PRC entered the world in 1949 already at odds with the US. The US had been allied with the Republic of China (ROC) during World War II and it opposed the expansion of communism into China. Nonetheless, Washington was prepared to let the Chinese Civil War play out in the Taiwan Strait until North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel. The onset of the Korean War convinced the US to take a hard line against communist expansion in East Asia, even to the point of entering into a military alliance with the ROC on Taiwan. For thirty years, the US recognized the ROC/Taiwan as the legal representative of the Chinese nation and regarded the PRC as an ally of the USSR. Meanwhile, the PRC turned inward, concentrating on its own socialist transformation.

President Richard Nixon's 1972 trip to China transformed the relationship. Sino-Soviet relations had deteriorated to the point of open conflict, while the US was mired in an unwinnable war in Vietnam from which it hoped China could help extricate it. Both sides recognized a strategic opportunity to use US-China rapprochement to weaken the Soviet Union and shore up their security. In 1979, they finalized this process by normalizing diplomatic relations, a step which required the US

to end its recognition of the ROC. The option of recognizing an independent Taiwan was never on the table—not least because ROC/Taiwan leader Chiang Kai-shek would not entertain it.

The normalization of US-China relations coincided with the onset of China's domestic economic reform. Under Deng Xiaoping's slogan of reform and opening, Washington and Beijing discovered shared interests in economic cooperation, anti-Sovietism, and nuclear nonproliferation. Deng's economic reforms opened a wealth of opportunities to foreign investors as well as Chinese businesses and individuals. China's engagement with the outside world ultimately propelled its own domestic economic growth and inspired hope in the American policy community that China might become what one US official called a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system (Zoellick 2005). In the 1980s, Chinese citizens achieved personal freedoms that had seemed impossible under the Maoist leadership. Around the world, including in the US, many China watchers began to hope that over time, international engagement with China might combine with the domestic forces of change unleashed by growing prosperity to spark a liberal transformation of the country's political system. However, the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 interrupted those hopes, reminding everyone—inside and outside China—that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would not tolerate organized political dissent or opposition.

At first, it seemed the Tiananmen Crisis might break the fragile but growing links between the US and China. China turned inward again, even rolling back some economic reforms, while the US imposed punishing sanctions. During the 1992 presidential campaign, Democratic nominee Bill Clinton accused the George H.W. Bush administration of being soft on China; in accepting the nomination at the Democratic National Convention he promised not to "coddle tyrants, from Baghdad to Beijing" (Clinton, para. 102). Despite his fierce rhetoric during the campaign, however, President Clinton presided over a significant expansion in US-China economic ties once China resumed its reform trajectory. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping signaled his support for renewed economic liberalization in his "Southern Tour" of China's manufacturing and trade hubs, a move that touched off a new wave of foreign trade and investment. The US welcomed the revival of reform; according to US trade statistics, bilateral trade tripled between 1993 and 2001 (Huo 2022).

In the 1990s, US criticism was focused largely on China's internal behavior. Thus, when President Clinton began to press for Permanent

Normal Trading (PNTR) status for China, his critics were mainly human rights and labor activists. Clinton made the move because while China had been awarded most favored nation status on a temporary basis in 1994, the required Congressional renewals had become an annual ordeal in which American business battled Sino-skeptics from hardline anti-communists to human rights activists. Year after year, economics trumped other concerns, and the status was renewed, but only after a costly struggle. In part to end this annual spectacle, the Clinton administration advocated PNTR. The matter was ultimately resolved in 1999: Washington granted China PNTR in conjunction with bringing the PRC into the World Trade Organization. That process went forward despite a spike in tensions in May 1999, when the US bombed (accidentally, according to Washington) China's embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia during NATO operations aimed at stopping Yugoslavian attacks on ethnic Albanians.

Leaders in the US and the PRC designed their policies with their respective national interests in mind. For Beijing, that meant promoting economic growth while maintaining domestic stability and legitimacy. For the US, the goal was to reap the benefits of China's low-cost manufacturing while keeping some pressure on the PRC over issues such as human rights. Although interests were foremost, leaders also were guided by ideas about how their policies could shape relations in the future. For the PRC, Deng Xiaoping's guidance to "keep a low profile and bide your time" (*taoguang yanghui*) discouraged PRC leaders from challenging the US and encouraged them to seize the opportunity to build the nation's economic strength instead. Deng's guidance did not mean China was ready to embrace US goals. On the contrary, "[a]ccording to China's official guideline, U.S. policy toward China aimed to Westernize [*xihua*], divide [*fenhua*], and contain [*ezhi*] the People's Republic with ulterior motives" (Wachman 1994: 116).

For the US, the pragmatic considerations of the 1990s and early 2000s aligned with the Liberal school of international relations theory. Liberal approaches to international relations emphasize the potential for states to manage and even avoid conflict. Analysts from this tradition disagree with the Realist perspective that states' behavior is dictated by the distribution of power in the international system; instead, they emphasize the ways in which state behavior responds to three forces: economic and other forms of interdependence that raise the cost of conflict, domestic political trends that can either increase or decrease the incentive for leaders

to engage in conflictual behavior, and international organizations that promote cooperation and mitigate confrontation.

According to the Liberal strand of IR theory, economic interdependence increases states' incentive to cooperate and raises the cost of conflict. It also creates domestic constituencies that benefit from cordial relations. Those constituencies use their influence with policymakers to encourage friendly relations. This logic helped to inform the school of thought in US policy circles that promoted engagement with the PRC. As the theory predicts, constituencies in the US that benefited from economic ties—mainly the business community—were strong advocates for cooperation, but analysts who did not have vested interests in the economic relationship gave similar advice. They argued that engagement offered the best chance of drawing China out of the ideological, autarkic crouch it had occupied during the Mao era and into closer ties with the international community.

These perspectives are often dismissed as “dovish” or naïve, but those characterizations better describe a straw man version of engagement. It's fashionable today to dismiss advocates of engagement as idealists who believed that economic interdependence would lead China to become “just like us,” but this stereotype is unfair. Iain Johnston dismantles this notion in his 2019 article “The Failures of the ‘Failure of Engagement’ with China.” Johnston uses contemporaneous statements US policymakers made at height of the engagement era—the Clinton and Bush administrations—to show that even then, proponents of engagement were restrained in their optimism as to what the policy could accomplish. Madeleine Albright, President Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, said, in 1997, “It is our hope that the trend toward greater economic and social integration of China will have a liberalizing effect on political and human rights practices. Given the nature of China's government, that progress will be gradual, at best, and is by no means inevitable” (Quoted in Johnston 2019: 105). Johnston also points out that in many ways, the modest improvements engagement proponents hoped might happen did, in fact, transpire.

Advocates of engagement with China never expected a swift and smooth transformation of the PRC into a Liberal democracy, but they did believe the best way to shape China's behavior in a system-supporting direction was to include it in global networks and institutions. They saw the roots of Chinese foreign policy in both domestic and external factors, and their goal was to foster a desire for liberalism within China while

at the same time using incentives and sanctions to encourage Beijing to conform to global norms. In other words, they recognized that both internal and external drivers are constantly shaping state behavior, a position that is consistent with Liberal IR theory. It was with these ideas in mind that the Clinton administration pushed to resolve the problem of annual Congressional battles over China's trading status by supporting its inclusion in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The PRC's WTO entry in 2001 launched another uptick in the growth rate of US-China trade. Despite the caricatured image of engagement that is popular in some circles today, Clinton's decision to support China's economic inclusion did not end the debate within the administration over whether China's domestic behavior—including its poor human rights record—should rule out a closer partnership with the US. Nor did the Clinton administration expect that the mere integration of China into the global economic system would convert the PRC into a replica of the US. On the contrary, Clinton's position was that societal change in China had the *potential* to gradually produce political change, although such a transformation was far from guaranteed (Johnston 2019). The administration's conviction that only concerted pressure from inside China and from the outside world could create liberalized reform in China deepened America's pursuit of cooperation.

In his 2000 State of the Union Speech, Clinton acknowledged the uncertain effects of engagement, but he justified his decision to champion China's membership into the World Trade Organization on both economic and political grounds: "First of all, our markets are already open to China; this agreement will open China's markets to us. And second, it will plainly advance the cause of peace in Asia and promote the cause of change in China. No, we don't know where it's going. All we can do is decide what we're going to do. But when all is said and done, we need to know we did everything we possibly could to maximize the chance that China will choose the right future" (Quoted in Conley 2012: 338). Other Clinton administration officials were even more direct. In 2000, National Security Advisor Samuel Berger said, "Let me be clear: bringing China into the WTO is not, by itself, a human rights policy for the United States. The reality in China today is that Chinese authorities still tolerate no organized political dissent or opposition. Because the Communist Party's ideology has been discredited in China, and because it lacks the legitimacy that can only come from democratic choice, it seeks to maintain its grip

by suppressing other voices. Change will come only through a combination of internal pressures for change and external validation of its human rights struggle” (Quoted in Johnston 2019: 105).

As a presidential candidate, George W. Bush questioned the Clinton approach. The Republican platform adopted in 2000 identified China as a “strategic competitor” and “key challenge.” The Bush administration’s early criticism of his predecessor’s engagement policy centered on growing concerns over China’s intentions. Condoleezza Rice, who would soon become Bush’s National Security Advisor, borrowed terminology from scholarly theories of international relations to express those doubts in an essay for *Foreign Affairs* published in early 2000. She wrote, “China is not a status-quo power but one that would like to alter Asia’s balance of power in its own favor. That alone makes it a strategic competitor, not the ‘strategic partner’ the Clinton Administration once called it” (Rice 2000: 194).

Despite those early misgivings, in office, Bush gradually moved toward the same pro-engagement orientation as Clinton. The shift was driven in part by economic logic, but Bush also came to doubt the confrontational approach preferred by the Republicans’ neoconservative wing. On April 1, 2001, the Bush administration faced its first foreign policy crisis, a collision between US and PRC military aircraft in the South China Sea in which a Chinese fighter pilot died. The American craft crash-landed on Chinese soil, putting its twenty-four crew members into Chinese custody. The incident heightened the tension between the two countries that had simmered since the Belgrade bombing two years earlier, but it also demonstrated the value of keeping lines of communication open and avoiding confrontation. In the midst of the crisis, Bush phoned President Jiang Zemin to reiterate the importance of the two countries maintaining constructive relations. The crisis was resolved after eleven days, when the US issued a statement of regret that allowed China to release the Americans without losing face.

The September 11, 2001 attacks reinforced the need to avoid conflict with China. They also refocused Washington’s attention on Central Asia and the Middle East and underscored the value of Sino-US cooperation on threats related to global terrorism. Between 9–11 and the end of Bush’s first term, US and Chinese officials held eight meetings—an unprecedented density of interaction (Yu 2009: 89). Bush also aligned the US with Beijing on a central PRC concern when, in December 2003,

he publicly chastised the Taiwanese president for moving, in Bush's view, toward independence.

Over the course of George W. Bush's first term, his team evolved its own variant of the engagement approach, one that was spelled out early in his second term in a speech by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick. In an address to the National Committee on US-China relations in September 2005, Zoellick called upon China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system (Zoellick 2005). Zoellick's speech highlighted the benefits of US-China economic ties, saying "many gain from this trade, including millions of US farmers and workers who produce the commodities and capital commodities that China consumes."

Still, Zoellick's speech focused less on how China's economic integration would help the US, and more on how much China stood to gain (and in fact had already gained) by integrating into the global order. As Johnston points out, Zoellick's speech was about what China *needed* to do, not what would inevitably happen:

in one of the fullest statements of the Bush administration's engagement policy ... Zoellick essentially repeated the Clinton administration argument that engagement and internationalization would lead to social liberalization and bottom-up demands for political change: 'Closed politics cannot be a permanent feature of Chinese society. It is simply not sustainable—as economic growth continues, better-off Chinese will want a greater say in their future, and pressure builds for political reform.' But he did not say further political reform was inevitable. Indeed, he went on to tell the Chinese regime what it needed to do to liberalize. It was not a prediction or an expectation of automatic, smooth, inexorable evolution of political liberalization. (Johnston 2019: 107)

Although China's "peaceful rise/peaceful development" concept promises to transcend past patterns of interaction in favor of new rules of global engagement, (Zheng 2005: 18–24) Zoellick's speech underscored the fact that it was China that gained the most from its inclusion in Liberal institutions. The leniency of trade laws and the ability of wealthy industrial nations to easily move production to burgeoning export economies ushered in years of unimpeded global trade which aided Asia's rise in the early 2000s. Complex production networks formed, allowing export economies to have greater participation in the global system and accelerating the growth of their domestic economies. No country benefited more from this process than China.

THE RISE OF “COOPETITION”

Barack Obama’s presidential campaign broke with a pattern that had prevailed since the Nixon administration: He did not fault his predecessor for being too soft on China. President Obama’s desire to continue the positive trends in US-China relations under Bush was evident in his decision to meet with President Hu Jintao early in his presidency as well as significant policy statements from officials such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who promised to prioritize common interests such as addressing the Global Financial Crisis and climate change.

Unfortunately, the time was not right for such goodwill gestures: Washington and Beijing were out of sync. The Global Financial Crisis had altered China’s understanding of its own global position. Chinese analysts interpreted the domino-style collapse of Western economies which began in the US as a sign that the US and its allies were in terminal decline. Meanwhile, China was riding high, hosting the world in a dazzling display of wealth and strength in the 2008 Summer Olympics. Instead of seeing Obama’s hand reaching out in friendship, Beijing saw it outstretched in supplication, and instead of seizing the opportunity to improve relations with Washington, Beijing subjected Obama to a series of embarrassing setbacks. Obama responded by refocusing his administration on regional allies and by criticizing what he called China’s “free-riding” on the global economy. His new approach acquired a label in 2011 when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote an article in *Foreign Policy* signaling a “pivot toward Asia” in US foreign policy (Clinton 2011).

The pivot (later rebranded as a “rebalance”) was driven by many factors, chief among them a perception—which had been growing since 2009 among China watchers and the US media—that Beijing’s foreign policy had departed from “keeping a low profile” to become more assertive. China was leaning into the South and East China Seas, challenging its neighbors in two directions. American policymakers and others in the international community viewed those moves as evidence that China was no longer interested in becoming a “responsible stakeholder”; it was placing territorial claims ahead of regional stability. According to Iain Johnston, the use of the phrase “assertive China” in English-language blogs skyrocketed from fewer than a hundred in 2008 to more than seven hundred just three years later (Johnston 2013).

US-China relations took a critical turn in 2012, when Xi Jinping replaced Hu Jintao as the PRC’s top leader. Although the “assertive

China” narrative took hold even before Xi came to power, Xi, unlike Hu, encouraged this characterization. In 2013, Xi Jinping used a speech to the Chinese Communist Party to signal a shift in China’s foreign policy strategy from Deng Xiaoping’s “low profile” approach to “striving for achievement (*fenfa youwei*)”. Trends were not wholly negative, however; despite increasing tension, there also were positive developments, including the Paris Climate Accord and Iran Nuclear Agreement. In other words, while Xi and Obama acknowledged that competitive elements were an increasingly strong component in the relationship, they held space for cooperation on some issues.

Nowhere was the balance between competition and cooperation shifting faster than in the economic realm. The complementarity between the two economies that had been so evident in the 1980s and ‘90s eroded in the first decade of the new century, a development that became impossible to ignore after China became the world’s second-largest economy in 2010. The growing economic competition between the US and China extended beyond China’s skyrocketing GDP to include its investments in cutting-edge industries such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and quantum computing.

Meanwhile, Xi was staking out a new “China First” approach to economic policy. Previous Chinese leaders had viewed technology as a means to catch up to the West, but in 2014, Xi began calling for China to become a “cyber superpower.” His speeches portrayed technology as a driver of national rejuvenation that would make China a global leader (Medeiros 2019). This approach culminated in a broad-ranging policy known as Made in China 2025, released in 2015. For the US, China’s quest for global leadership in technology and investment in specific high-tech industries turned commercial friction into a national security concern.

In response to Beijing’s ambitious economic and political moves the US sought to further deepen ties with its allies. The most significant economic initiative was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP had been gestating since the Bush administration. It started in 2005 as an agreement among four Pacific Rim nations; by the time Bush left office there were twelve nations involved in the negotiations. The basic logic of the TPP was that it would create a strong bloc of Pacific Rim economies devoted to open markets and free trade; if the PRC hoped to access the bloc, it would need to meet its high standards. And unlike the WTO, China would not be able to evade the TPP’s requirements. The US stood to gain whether or not Beijing joined the bloc.

FROM COOPETITION TO DECOUPLING

When President Obama left office in 2016 the prognosis for Sino-American relations was far more negative than it had been eight years earlier. During those eight years, China watchers' opinions had coalesced around the idea that tension would outweigh cooperation for the foreseeable future. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Trump administration would take an even more cautious approach toward China. Still, until the COVID-19 outbreak became an important political issue within the US, the Trump administration continued to seek opportunities for cooperation, even as it rebranded China from "strategic partner" to "strategic competitor" (Tellis 2020).

Donald Trump identified China as a strategic competitor while he was still on the campaign trail; he wasted no time to capitalize on growing concerns within the US about cybersecurity and market access. His confrontational rhetoric suggested he would take a more decisive approach to managing the relationship, especially in comparison with Obama's mixed and gradual pivot. In the end, however, implementing a clear-cut policy proved impossible for the Trump team.

Trump arrived at the White House with no political or foreign policy experience, and immediately surrounded himself with a team of advisors whose knowledge and positions varied widely. The result was a checkered policy in which Trump oscillated between nationalist hawk and dealmaker-in-chief. Trump referred to China as a "strategic partner" at the G-20 Summit in 2019, a comment that reversed his previous statements and revealed the administration's lack of preparation and strategy. Instead of following a policy process and using the foreign policy tools available to him, Trump indulged his penchant for resolving issues—especially those related to trade—through personal interactions. His efforts to forge a close relationship with Xi Jinping eroded other channels of management. For example, four cabinet-level dialogues Obama and Xi had established in 2017 to address diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties were replaced by phone calls and personal meetings between Trump and Xi.

At the center of Trump's management strategy was his willingness to abandon strategic concerns in order to focus on reducing the bilateral trade deficit. The implication that he would intervene in the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou for violating sanctions on Iran, "if

it helped secure the largest trade deal ever made,” illuminated his willingness to abandon traditional internationalism and legal procedure to pursue economic gains for the US (*Financial Times* 2018). He abandoned traditional engagements across a range of issue areas, including withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris Climate Agreement, and the Iran Nuclear Deal. He also questioned the value of long-standing US alliances in East Asia and elsewhere, and demanded allies bear a larger share of the costs of collective defense. Trump’s use of targeted, unilateral pressure signaled a break with Obama’s use of institutions and multilateral agreements to achieve policy goals. As Evan Medeiros wrote, at the same time, Trump was throwing the US into a foreign policy identity crisis, Xi Jinping was working to legitimize China’s role in shaping the international order. These incompatible trends exacerbated the competitive nature of the relationship and darkened Beijing and Washington’s perceptions of each other (Medeiros 2019).

David Edelstein’s work on the value of time horizons—the period needed to identify and respond to a possible threat from a major power—captures one dimension of the changing dynamics of US-China relations (Edelstein 2017). In the past, US policymakers regarded China’s rise with tentative optimism, believing that if China’s strategy changed, the US would have enough time to adjust. Beginning in the second Obama presidency, however, negative views of China’s intentions and capabilities permeated Washington as a bipartisan consensus. Likewise, Xi Jinping’s rhetoric regarding China’s own capabilities and his conviction that China must resist US efforts to contain its rise reveals that Beijing is also re-calculating the power dynamics in the relationship. According to Medeiros, these changing perceptions may be best attributed to the fact that, “neither are status quo powers interested in maintaining the current international system, and both want to reform it, but for different reasons and in different ways” (Medeiros 2019: 103). US and Chinese policymakers share the perception that there is no longer time to adjust to the threats posed by the other. Despite these changing time horizons, Medeiros argues that China’s strategy toward the How about “US remains more consistent than not”. The “*don er bu po*” (struggle but not break) approach is frequently cited and discussed among Chinese scholars as a guide for managing US-China relations.

After three years of vacillating between his roles as nationalist hawk and dealmaker-in-chief, Trump’s China policy took a permanent turn toward the nationalist hawk end of the spectrum in the spring of 2020,

when COVID-19 emerged as a threat to American lives—and to Trump’s reelection hopes. On January 14th, the National Security Council met to discuss the new virus spreading around China. Information was scarce, but it was evident that something was seriously wrong. The next day at the signing of the Phase One trade deal between Beijing and Washington neither party said a word about the virus. It wasn’t until the first case of human-to-human transmission in the US that Trump and health experts enacted a travel ban on China. Beyond banning travel to China, Trump failed to take more serious steps to deal with the severity of COVID-19. Josh Rogin asserts that this may have been the result of Xi Jinping’s “voice in Trump’s ear” (Rogin 2021, para. 35).

On February 6, Trump and Xi held a detailed phone call during which Xi reassured him that China was managing the COVID-19 outbreak effectively. Persuaded by Xi, Trump brushed off the concerns of state governors at a White House meeting on February 10th, playing down the danger from the virus then spreading in China. Despite Trump’s reassurances, the administration could not ignore the sharp rise in COVID-19 cases in the US, which gave the lie to Xi’s reassuring claims. Trump shifted abruptly from uttering soothing assertions that China had COVID-19 under control to verbal blasts about Beijing’s failure to prevent the spread of what he called “the Chinese virus.” Chinese diplomats responded to Trump’s rhetoric with threats to suspend medical supply sales to the US, threats China made good on—even though some of the factories making the banned products were American-owned (Rogin 2021). For the first time, US-China economic interdependence became a liability, particularly the US’s reliance on critical supply chains in China. Trump solidified his hawkish policy as he began to pursue policies that pushed back on China’s bad behavior.

COVID-19’s emergence as a serious problem in the US ended the Trump White House’s vacillation on China policy. Once Trump realized that the pandemic threatened his reelection he abandoned his efforts to negotiate a trade deal and launched an all-out effort to persuade Americans that their COVID-19 nightmare was Beijing’s fault. Not surprisingly, US-China relations plummeted in the final year of Trump’s administration, while the administration itself ended in chaos and violence. At the same moment Trump supporters were attacking the US Capitol to prevent Congress from certifying the results of the election, Trump officials elsewhere in Washington were stalling the transition to his successor, Joe Biden. Their behavior delayed the new administration’s efforts to staff

the government—including foreign policy offices—and launch its own approach.

US-China relations deteriorated rapidly during Trump's final months in office, but the reasons for the souring relationship went deeper than Trump or COVID-19. Even before COVID-19 erupted, American China watchers and foreign policy experts' view of China was darkening already. Perhaps the most vivid example of this trend was the extraordinary fanfare that greeted the 2017 publication of Harvard political scientist Graham Allison's tome entitled *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* The book was lauded by policymakers (Henry Kissinger, Joe Biden) and scholars (Paul Kennedy, Amitai Etzioni); it was a best-seller and landed on multiple "must read" lists (Allison 2017). Allison's book used a historical metaphor to illuminate for general readers and ordinary citizens a scholarly consensus that had been growing since the Obama era. In a nutshell, in the US and in China, the Liberal logic of engagement had given way to a Realist logic of competition. Allison's book oversimplified both ancient history and contemporary politics, but it struck a chord because it offered a clear and inevitable-feeling explanation as to why US-China relations had soured so quickly.

In recent years, it has become common to hear the evolution of US-China policy described as the victory of Realist (or, all too often, "realistic") logic over a naïve and self-defeating desire for engagement with China. On the surface, this analysis makes a certain kind of sense. As we have shown, the US did engage China in the 1990s and 2000s, and the result was that China gained the material power that allowed it to challenge the US in the 2010s. But as Iain Johnston observes, there is no reason to assume that a different approach early on would have produced a better outcome for the US; on the contrary, refusing to engage China might have produced an even more conflictual scenario (Johnston 2019). Moreover, the way many of today's Realists describe engagement is an ahistorical caricature of the 1990s, and their Thucydides Trap logic—China's rise will draw the US and China into conflict—vastly oversimplifies the drivers on both sides and ignores important factors that militate against confrontation. Other theoretical approaches—both the Defensive Realist emphasis on the Security Dilemma and the Liberal consideration of domestic political factors as a driver of foreign policy—provide more reliable guidance for both understanding how the two sides arrived at the current, highly conflictual moment and imagining how they might reduce the tension before it's too late.

The debate over how to interpret and respond to China's rise includes policymakers, pundits, scholars, and more than a few consultants who seem to make their living promoting one or another view of China. Concepts, frameworks, and logical constructs from international relations theory permeate this discourse. These theoretical lenses are so pervasive, in fact, that it is sometimes hard to discern whether a particular point of view is an interpretation of empirical data informed by theory or a theoretical position festooned with confirmatory data points. Just as the Domino Theory drove US policy during the Cold War, IR theories (especially those of the Offensive Realist school) have become a strong influence on US policy toward China. Meanwhile, ideas consistent with Offensive Realism are also popular with IR scholars in China.

The main cleavage dividing the community of experts and policymakers in the US who focus on China is between Realist and Liberal perspectives, but within these schools of thought there is substantial variation and disagreement. A particularly hardline Realist view comes from John Mearsheimer, who has been insisting for many years that China's rise will lead it inevitably into conflict with the US (Mearsheimer 2006). In his view, the structure of the international system dictates that an existing hegemon will resist the rise of a peer competitor, and the peer competitor will not back down. The result, sooner or later, is conflict.

Mearsheimer's ideas overlap with Allison's deployment of the "Thucydides Trap" to explain US-China tension. According to Allison, conflict between the US and China is very likely because of a dynamic in international relations that has been recurring since ancient times: the rise of a new power (for Thucydides, that was Athens) into the strategic space occupied by a hegemonic power (i.e., Sparta) often leads to war. One important difference between these two views—which is often overlooked—is that while Mearsheimer asserts that conflict is inevitable, Allison intended his book to be a warning that could help the US and China avoid an armed clash. The Thucydides Trap is real, in his view, but it can be avoided through wise statecraft.

The theories Mearsheimer and Allison advance are related to a school of thought created by A.F.K. Organski known as Power Transition Theory (Organski 1959). According to this approach, some late developing countries experience such rapid growth that they begin to overtake the dominant global powers of their age. Some of these rising powers are satisfied with the existing international norms and institutions into which their growth propels them, and they settle into the existing status

quo. Others, however, are dissatisfied, and they seek to change the international order to make it more congenial to their own interests. Such powers, which IR theory labels “revisionist,” may even go to war with the dominant international power to impose their preferences on the system.

As Barbara Lippert and Volker Perthes have written, the idea that some countries are “status quo” countries and others are “revisionists” is influential in both the US and China (Lippert and Perthes 2020a, 2020b). Both sides accept the characterizations of the US as a hegemonic power (and the quintessential status quo country) and China as a rising power on track to overtake the US, although many Chinese scholars dispute the characterization of China as a revisionist power. For China, the policy prescription arising from this logic is to continue rising. It’s advisable to seek opportunities to reduce conflict, but only if those opportunities do not impinge on China’s ability to rise. For the US, the prescription is to contain China—to prevent it from rising—in order to protect the international system. All of China’s attributes of China that US analysts dislike—its authoritarianism, its statist economy, and its rapid military modernization—are understood to be evidence of its revisionist intent and examples of how its success would change the world for the worse. As Alastair Iain Johnston points out, US-China policymakers from both Republican (Michael Pillsbury, Aaron Friedberg) and Democratic (Michele Flournoy) administrations have embraced the idea of China as a revisionist state (Johnston 2019).

If China is a revisionist power bent on changing the world in ways that are good for China and bad for everyone else (Americans tend to assume their own preferences are universal), the policy implication is clear: China must be stopped. This is fundamentally an Offensive Realist position, rooted in the idea that states seek to maximize their power, and no state will ever stop accumulating power voluntarily. But other Realists warn against preemptive action. As Jonathan Kirshner puts it, “The theory of offensive realism offers dangerous and self-defeating policy advice to both China and the U.S.; in a world where politics matters and state choices shape systemic pressures, offensive realism is less a predictive theory revealing deterministic forces tragically beyond the influence of any state than it is an impetuous prescription that promises a dystopic, self-fulfilling prophecy” (Kirshner 2019: 59).

There is a Realist alternative to this dystopian prophecy: Defensive Realism, a school of thought that views states’ quest for security—not power—as the driving force in international relations. A central concept

for defensive realists is the Security Dilemma. The Security Dilemma refers to the vicious cycle that occurs when competing states view one another's defensive preparations as evidence of hostile and offensive intent. Each feels threatened by the other, leading them to invest more and more in defense, which only intensifies the other's feeling of threat, and *its* defensive investment. Unlike the dynamic in power transition theory, in which a revisionist state can never be appeased, the Security Dilemma can be managed. Conflict can be averted if states avoid miscommunication and take steps to mitigate the competitive spiral.

Wu Xinbo describes China's intentions in precisely these terms (Wu 2020). He urges the US not to view China's rise as an existential threat, writing, "China's sustained efforts to augment its economic and military prowess will surely narrow the power gap with the United States, but Beijing's aim is more about reducing its vulnerability than gaining superiority. In other words, China does not seek to catch up and overtake the United States in an all-around way, but rather seeks to improve its relative position. This is, in essence, a defensive, not offensive, posture" (Wu 2020: 101). Wu is hardly the only scholar to characterize the competition in Defensive Realist terms. Evan Medeiros, who is both a scholar and a policy maker, acknowledges the very real sources of conflict and competition between the US and China, but nonetheless concludes that the rapid deterioration in the relationship in recent years reveals a Security Dilemma dynamic (Medeiros 2019). Alan Misenheimer also rejects the idea that war is inevitable. Instead, he says, the two sides are destined, not for war, but for "difficult diplomacy" (Misenheimer 2019).

Before COVID-19, China's response to US-China strategic competition remained more cautious than confrontational. However, the pandemic and Trump's pugnacious rhetoric surrounding China steered both countries into what Ryan Hass describes as a tit-for-tat pattern (Hass 2021). Beijing began mirroring America's economic regulations; for example, it "developed laws and regulations for export controls, national security investment screening, policy-related visa sanctions, and extraterritorial provisions in laws and administrative regulations" (Hass 2021, para. 6). At the same time, they grew bolder at home, including in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Hass attributes these changes to Chinese leaders realizing that reducing dependence on the US was a precondition for achieving Beijing's foreign and economic policy goals. While Beijing may have initially viewed Biden's Presidency as an opportunity

to pursue its policy goals against the backdrop of renewed stability in US-China relations, Biden's adherence to his predecessor's economic policies and deepening regional alliances in the Indo-Pacific dashed these hopes. Haas concludes that Beijing is, "preparing for a long-term struggle with a declining but still dangerous United States" (Hass 2021, para. 15). Beijing, too, anticipates difficult diplomacy ahead.

DIFFICULT DIPLOMACY? OR WORSE?

President Joe Biden's first few months in office were spent responding to a raging pandemic and an economic recession; the tense relationship with the world's second leading power that he inherited has received less attention than those pressing domestic concerns. In the run-up to his election and inauguration, many observers speculated that Biden's foreign policy—including his dealings with China—would be "Obama 2.0": a repeat of the Obama administration's blend of engagement and competition. Once he took office, however, Biden defied such characterizations. He's shown that the idea of him as a "naive engagement advocate" who believes that cooperation will mollify the structural problems within the US-China relationship is spurious on two fronts: It misrepresents the nuances of engagement and it ignores Biden's tough approach to China.

Early statements from the Biden administration acknowledged that the US and Chinese economies have shifted from complementary to competitive, but Biden promised to move beyond the Trump administration's approach to deliver a more strategic China policy. That policy was designed with three key imperatives: improving the US's competitiveness (as National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan put it during the campaign, the US should "put less focus on trying to slow China down and more emphasis on trying to run faster ourselves"), strengthening cooperation with allies and partners, and reinvigorating diplomatic interactions with China (Quoted in Sanger and Crowley 2021).

The Biden administration has pursued these imperatives through the first two years of its existence, but that hasn't meant abandoning or reversing initiatives left over from the Trump administration. The Biden White House has so far maintained Trump-era tariffs on Chinese goods as well as Trump's "phase 1" trade deal. Biden's approach reflects the bipartisan belief in the US that efforts to engage China not only failed to change the PRC for the better, but also allowed Beijing to construct a slew of trade barriers that have left American companies unable to

compete. In October 2021, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said that neither multilateral nor unilateral dialogues had made headway against China's mercantilist practices. So while the Biden administration has placed strong emphasis on its "Build Back Better" plans for reviving US competitiveness, it has continued the Trump administration's critiques of Chinese trade practices.

Biden's alliance-driven approach has produced positive developments, including promoting global attention to Taiwan's predicament and strengthening regional partnerships. A July 2021 Japanese defense white paper characterized the Taiwan issue as a Japanese national security concern—the first such statement in 50 years. A few months later lawmakers from the European parliament proposed a resolution to deepen ties with Taiwan. The European Commission's Executive Vice-President Margrethe Vestager emphasized the need for the EU to "address China's assertiveness and attempts to intimidate Taiwan's like-minded partners" (Quoted in Bermingham 2021). Biden's focus on fortifying alliances bore fruit in a strong QUAD (a security agreement among the US, Japan, India, and Australia) and a new security alliance, AUKUS, in the Indo-Pacific among the US, UK, and Australia.

Biden's third priority—reviving diplomacy with Beijing—can be seen in a series of official meetings in his first year in office, including a phone meeting between Biden and Xi in September and another on the schedule. These diplomatic interactions have not been easy. The first high-profile meeting, at which four senior officials met in Anchorage, Alaska, was especially contentious. The US representatives startled their Chinese counterparts when they launched the meeting with hard-hitting complaints about PRC policy. The Chinese side responded with a statement one journalist described as an "unapologetic diatribe" (Quinn 2021). That inauspicious beginning did not derail the relationship, however. As US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, one of the participants in the Anchorage meeting, put it after meeting Chinese officials in October, "intense competition requires intense diplomacy" because the two sides need to "create a circumstance in which this competition ... can be managed responsibly, and does not veer into conflict or confrontation" (Emmott 2021).

Those who expected Biden to be Obama 2.0 assumed that President Obama had advocated Clinton/Bush-style Liberal engagement. As we have seen, that's problematic for Obama, and it is even less relevant to the

Biden administration, which came into office in a moment when Offensive Realists were ascendant in the punditariat and even IR Liberals were far more skeptical of China than they had been just a few years earlier. While it is impossible to predict the trajectory of Biden's foreign policy, events to date suggest it will be guided by a pessimistic form of Liberal thinking.

This sober Liberal voice is present in contemporary analysis of US-China relations, although it can be hard to hear it through the din of the Offensive Realists clobbering their straw man version of engagement. Robert Sutter, for example, in contrasting those who are "forecasting Chinese foreign policy contingent on circumstances and those seeing a well-crafted Chinese strategy seeking regional dominance and world leadership" associates himself with the first group (Sutter 2020: 3). In his view, while Beijing would have us believe that its foreign policy runs according to a master plan, in fact, it meanders about in response to events just like any other country's foreign policy.

Sutter rejects the idea that China is consistently one thing—including revisionist. As Johnston has shown, China is highly supportive of some aspects of the international status quo and highly critical of others. In fact, Johnston writes, "... there is no single, consistent liberal world order, but there are multiple orders, some of which China strongly supports, some of which it strongly opposes, and some of which it supports inconsistently. It does not make conceptual or empirical or even policy sense to take the variation in China's approaches to a complex array of various contradictory orders and aggregate these using an out-of-date binary—status quo versus revisionist—to conclude that China rejects a singular U.S.-dominated liberal "rules-based order" (Johnston 2019: 102). Those who are convinced that China is an implacable antagonist of the global order dismiss Beijing's "new type of great power relations" concept as window dressing. But Lam Peng Er reminds us that China has cooperated with the US on issues like nuclear proliferation and climate change—in fact, it is the US that turned its back on those arrangements (at least during the Trump years), not Beijing (Er 2016). Nor are those cooperative options necessarily dead forever: On November 10, 2021, the representatives of the US and China at the COP 26 global climate summit announced an agreement to work together on climate issues.

Wu Xinbo, a Chinese specialist on US-China relations, agrees that while China is not fully satisfied with the status quo, it is not looking to overturn it, either: "Although it is a major beneficiary of the current

international order, China does harbor reservations and dissatisfaction. Beijing complains that the prevailing system is ineffective at providing public goods in economics and security, runs short of inclusiveness in norms and institutions, and constrains the expansion of Chinese power and interests. As Beijing becomes more capable and confident, it works to reform the status quo” (Wu 2020: 107). Evan Medeiros extends this point to include both China and the US in the category of “selective revisionists:” “The core global governance challenge for US-China relations is that both countries are selective revisionists. Neither are status quo powers interested in maintaining the current international system, and both want to reform it, but for different reasons and in different ways” (Medeiros 2019: 103). Joseph Nye goes a step further, arguing that China is not opposed to the international order, *per se*, but branding it as American-led and liberal makes it difficult for Beijing to embrace it fully. He recommends describing it as an “open and rules-based international order” for managing interdependence (Nye 2020: 18).

China’s reluctance to detach from the international order (a reluctance that during the Trump era exceeded that of the US, which seemed to be detaching as fast as it could) reflects the degree to which interdependence, does, in fact, influence China’s foreign policy behavior. Nye stresses that interdependence, once established, is hard to unravel—and probably cannot be unraveled without significant damage to both sides. Even selective, limited economic decoupling aimed at punishing another state’s unwelcome behavior often produces unintended consequences: The target state finds a new way to accomplish the same economic goal, leaving the sanctioning state with less leverage than ever, and minus a trade relationship. Nye further points out that the US and China are interdependent across multiple dimensions—trade, investment, technology, capital and currency markets, human capital, and research—and which side has the upper hand varies across those dimensions. Thus, decoupling (the neologism for undoing interdependence) hurts both sides. Nye concludes, “The United States has high cards for managing the traditional competitive parts of our cooperative rivalry with China and does not need to seek to sever the relationship entirely by completely decoupling in a fit of panic” (Nye 2020: 19).

Analysts who reject the Thucydides Trap view of US-China relations risk being labeled “panda huggers” who ignore the threat China poses. But this criticism is unfair. The analysts in the Defensive Realist and Liberal camps all acknowledge the problems in the relationship, and the

degree to which many of them originate in China, but they reject the idea that the only way to respond to those problems is to drag the relationship deeper into conflict. A good example of an analyst who acknowledges the many ways in which China's foreign policy challenges—and even threatens—the US, but who nonetheless sees room for a less confrontational relationship is Ryan Hass. Hass is no “China threat” denialist. On the contrary, he rejects the easy optimism of those who blame Xi Jinping and Donald Trump for the downturn in relations. Instead, Hass attributes the tension to aspects of China's rise, which precedes both leaders: mutual dissatisfaction with the regional security situation; “China's emergence as a global rule-maker;” China's growing technological prowess, which has shifted the economic relationship from complementarity to competition; and “unresolved questions about the nature of ideological or systems competition” (Hass 2020: 1). (Regarding those unresolved questions, Wu Xinbo has this advice: “Beijing does try to win outside sympathy and even applause for its development model, but it has no intention of imposing it on others. As a result, Sino-US competition for international political influence should not be cast as an existential struggle for core values or a basic way of life” (Wu 2020: 102).

The sources of conflict Hass enumerates are daunting, but he does not conclude that conflict is inevitable. Instead, he advocates rebalancing the relationship, an undertaking that he says “will require reciprocal actions from both countries” (Hass 2020: 8). Regarding China, he recommends “moderat[ing] the way it is approaching issues that are aggravating key American constituencies” (Hass 2020). Taking this advice will not be easy for Xi and his government. The PRC leadership faces daunting domestic tasks, including navigating economic challenges, grappling with negative environmental and demographic trends, and engineering a smooth political process in 2022, when most analysts expect Xi will seek a third term in office. Some of the swagger in Beijing's foreign relations is likely aimed at a domestic audience of nationalistic citizens and ambitious politicians who push Xi to stand up to foreign critics.

For the US, whose leaders his essay seeks to advise, Hass has several pieces of advice. Echoing Nye's reminder that the US has “high cards to play” in some areas, Hass recommends “right-sizing” Washington's estimation of the China threat—taking into account its weaknesses as well as its strengths, and remembering that the US, too, has strengths as well as weaknesses. He writes, “A key challenge for the United States is regaining confidence that if it lives up to its own potential, it can protect

its vital interests in its competition with China. The United States does not need to defeat China, but it does need to maintain the capability to deter China, constrain the export of the more malign aspects of its system, and strengthen its own global competitiveness and attractiveness” (Hass, 2020: 12).

The Thucydides Trap narrative does two things, both very dangerous. First, it suggests that managing the conflicts of interest between the US and China is impossible, and the only options are surrender (which neither side is willing to accept) or war. If war is the only acceptable option, both sides will prepare for it, and chances are, they will get it. The second dangerous thing the Thucydides Trap narrative does is it implies that what governments do doesn’t matter, since the end of the story was written 2400 years ago, in *The Peloponnesian War*. But in fact, while there are real structural sources of conflict between the US and China, as Hass and others rightly point out, what governments do actually matters a great deal.

Whether the Biden administration will make policy based on the pessimistic predictions of the Thucydidean Realists or the slightly less pessimistic projections emanating from the sober Liberal camp remains to be seen. What is not in doubt is that the complementarity that once inspired a Liberal-inflected engagement—a strategic partnership—is no more. Today, and probably well into the future, competition is the dominant feature in the relationship between the US and the PRC.

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