



# Understanding changes in Sino-U.S. relations from a historical perspective

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the development of China–US relations through an exploration of history. It contains three parts. The first part reviews the evolution of China–US relations from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, discussing how the differences in the two countries' social systems, values, geography, and international status have influenced the bilateral relationship. The second part sums up the historical experience of China–US exchanges, exploring how China–US relations affect the world at large, how the US has responded to changes within China and the dynamics of rivalry and mutual trust between the two countries. The third part uses historical comparison to analyze current disputes between China and the US, suggesting that it is still possible for them to avoid a zero-sum game and to reshape China–US relations through rationality, patience, wisdom, and creativity.

**Keywords** China–US relations · Historical experience · Strategic competition · Action-reaction

## 1 Introduction

It was not until the most recent decade that the relationship between China and the United States became regarded as the most important bilateral relationship in the world. As such, its future not only affects the respective development of the two countries but also has a bearing on the future of the world. The state of the world's most important bilateral relationship can be hugely consequential both in positive and negative terms. For instance, the Cold War stemmed from a confrontation between two major superpowers, the US and the USSR.

China–US relations have been deteriorating for some time (Wang and Hu 2019). Many observers believe that the relationship between the two countries has been

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permanently damaged over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> Increasing tension between the two nations, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, seems to have further exacerbated the divide. In light of these and other major changes, it is necessary to take a look at the history of China–US relations, which may provide insight for handling present and future situations.

This paper explores three issues: first, it places China–US relations and the differences between the countries in historical context; second, it discusses the lessons learned as China–US relations have evolved over time; and third, it develops proposed methods for handling China–US relations going forward with wisdom and creativity by incorporating these lessons from the past.

## 2 Placing China–US relations and the differences between the two countries in historical context

Viewed from a historical or realist perspective, China and the United States are two vastly different countries. To put it simply, China is an old and emerging modernizing country, while the United States is a young and established modernized country. All kinds of differences affect their mutual understanding, their policies toward each other, and the development of bilateral relations. Looking back at the history of China–US relations and objectively understanding the differences between the two countries is a prerequisite for rationally navigating the bilateral relationship going forward.

### 2.1 A brief history of China–US relations

The history of China–US relations is full of dramatic changes, as its impact on the world has grown slowly with twists and turns. With a brief review, we can see how the story of this bilateral relationship has changed with each new era.

For many years the China–US relationship was of much less relative importance in the scope of modern international relations. Only when the great powers were fighting each other in the Far East did scholars and others begin to take notice of China–US relations. Although the US joined other Western powers in their invasion of China in the second half of the nineteenth century, the US did not seek to divide Chinese territory, and instead focused on seizing “most-favored-nation” status. The US proposed the “Open Door Policy” at the end of the nineteenth century, which was less a China policy and more an exhortation to its allies. Nevertheless, in an era when jungle justice prevailed, the difference between the US and other powers won some favor from the Chinese people. Relations between the two countries remained distant until the 1930s, with each country on the margin of the other’s foreign policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was quoted by Radio France International in November 2018, “China-U.S. relations will never return to what they were. (Things) must be reoriented,” see DeAeth (2018).

The most critical feature of the China–US relationship back then was that both countries tried to preserve certain opportunities for the future.

The two countries became allies soon after the Pacific War broke out at the end of 1941. They both had great enthusiasm and expectations for each other. However, the alliance, with continued disputes and frictions, lasted only four years. After the end of World War II, the US-supported China as one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. But soon it turned to Japan as its main ally in Asia, which became an important topic of dispute between the US and China. In the late 1940s, a series of incidents resulted in long-term hostility and isolation between the two countries. These included: the beginning of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, the end of the Chinese civil war with the victory of the Communist Party of China over the Kuomintang, the US policy of containing and isolating the People's Republic of China (PRC), the outbreak of the Korean War, and the support of the US for the Kuomintang to defend Taiwan, which ultimately interrupted China's reunification process.

A historic turning point occurred in the early 1970s. With the start of the normalization of China–US relations, China restored its lawful seat at the United Nations and established diplomatic relations with most countries in the world. On January 1, 1979, China and the United States officially established diplomatic relations. China also embarked on the journey of reform and opening up. For more than 30 years since then, China–US relations have continued to develop, witnessing rapidly expanding economic and trade exchanges, frequent scientific, technological, and cultural exchanges, and cooperation on security and major global issues. China put its relationship with the US at the top of its agenda. The US implemented an engagement strategy toward China, believing that China's entry into the international system designed and dominated by the US would not only facilitate the balance of global power and the stability of the world but also would foster changes within China. Most of the friction arising between the two countries was resolved through negotiation. As for some longstanding issues, such as the controversy regarding the political status of Taiwan, the US was clear about China's position and bottom line and was acting cautiously. China also demonstrated its sincerity and patience in seeking a peaceful solution to the Taiwan issue. In general, the time period from 1979 to 2009 saw the most stable China–US relations in history and as a result the two countries received the greatest benefits from the bilateral relationship. Reform and opening up relationships with the West helped accelerate China's integration into the world.

In 2010, China became the second-largest economy in the world. Since then, although the countries began to drift apart, they maintained cooperation on some major global issues throughout the remainder of the Obama Administration.

In 2017, as President Donald Trump came into office, China was ready to maintain cooperative relations with the US, but the US dramatically changed its policy toward China. The United States declared China a "strategic rival" and "competitor" (The White House 2017). Problems that had surfaced in the China–US relationship continued, including economic and trade frictions, disputes over intellectual property rights, technological decoupling, the Hong Kong issue, the Taiwan issue, and disputes in the South China Sea. The shift in approach was fast and unexpected, and

its effects have been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning of 2020, China–US relations have deteriorated at a faster pace. Official relations between the two countries are almost frozen, and the mutual antipathy among the two peoples is unprecedented (Silver 2020). China–US relations are now in the most serious situation since the normalization of diplomatic ties in the early 1970s. What will happen next is hard to predict.

## 2.2 The role of cultural differences

The strained relations between China and the US cannot be entirely interpreted as a clash of their respective interests. Often, in the history of China–US exchanges, keeping a distance has led to affinity; coming too close sometimes brings disappointment.

The differences between the two countries have created a special relationship between China and the US on the one hand, but also a series of misunderstandings and conflicts on the other. Americans seem to have a “Chinese dream” and a desire to transform China to fit the US model, regarding China as a market with unlimited business opportunities and vast potential. Meanwhile, the Chinese people seem to oscillate between viewing the US as a teacher and friend, and seeing the country as their enemy. At the same time, both countries’ policies toward each other have tended to shift between idealistic and realistic. Recently, however, the US seems to have adopted an unprecedentedly negative posture toward China.

There are many reasons for the ups and downs in China–US relations, but the differences between the two countries play a role that cannot be underestimated. These differences are multi-faceted and include history, culture, religious traditions, ethnic make-up, population, geography and regional environment, as well as social, political and economic systems, their levels of development, and other dimensions (Kissinger 2011). In light of the history, current status, and prospects of the two countries’ exchanges, the differences in the following four aspects are most worthy of attention.

First, it is no secret that the social systems (including political and economic systems) of China and the United States are radically different. Apart from the fact that the two countries’ systems are rooted in their respective historical and cultural traditions, it is particularly important to note that China’s social system has been under constant change since the twentieth century. Driven by revolutions and reforms, the changes have been dramatic and profound. Although the current socialist system with Chinese characteristics has long been in place, it is still not mature and reforms continue. In contrast, the social system of the US is more stable and has undergone several major revisions over the 200 years since its founding. In the exchanges between the two countries, different social systems undoubtedly result in increased costs in terms of communication and mutual trust. For this reason, every diplomatic step forward in the relationship requires tremendous effort.

From a historical perspective, changes in leadership and the evolution of the social system in China pose another challenge, as they have interrupted the process of mutual understanding between the two countries. Each generation of officials in

both countries have approached the relationship and challenging situations differently. The lack of coherent and systematic accumulation of knowledge and inheritance of experience has prevented bilateral exchanges from going deeper. The two countries have a superficial understanding of each other's systems and operating mechanisms. These factors have made it difficult to resolve some otherwise resolvable disputes, resulting in a lack of foresight and effective management of potential risks. When tensions flare and mutual trust disappears, differences in social systems become the most convenient excuse for each country developing increased hostility toward the other one.

Second, differences in social values have influenced bilateral relations between the US and China. When it comes to human rights, the Chinese people, having suffered wars, natural disasters, and poverty since modern times, value the right to subsistence and development and are used to a collective mindset. Americans regard individuals as the foundation of society and value individual freedom and rights. As for the interpretation and pursuit of democracy, the Chinese people put more emphasis on reaching consensus through consultation among people with different views. Americans value the right to vote and freedom of expression. In terms of views on public power, the Chinese traditionally see public power as a force for good, respect it, and trust it with all kinds of responsibilities. Americans regard it as an indispensable evil that should be checked and restricted. The differences caused by these deep-rooted gaps can be seen everywhere in the social life of the two countries. However, with China's modernization and social changes, these differences are narrowing, if not disappearing.

Third, although China and the United States have similarly sized territories, their national strategic security environments and approaches to foreign relations are vastly different. China has the most complicated regional environment among all the major countries in the world as it is surrounded by many neighbors in all directions. The vassal-state system established in ancient China was designed for defense rather than expansion, and the traditional way of promoting national prestige was to seek "Being Sage Inside and Being Kingly Outside" (Only when domestic governance is virtuous and orderly, can it establish prestige in the outside world). Throughout history, the Chinese have devoted much energy to handling relations with neighboring countries leaving little time to explore and understand the wider world. The invasion of Western powers forced the Chinese to get to know those distant countries. China was struggling and slow to break from its self-isolation and interact with the world. It was not until the 1990s that China established diplomatic relations with the vast majority of countries, including some of its neighbors. Today, China still has disputes with some of its neighboring countries over territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, particularly in the South China Sea. In contrast, the geographic environment of the United States is very simple, with the Atlantic Ocean and Pacific Ocean on the east and west, respectively, bordering only Mexico to the south and Canada to the north. The unique geopolitical conditions not only provide a security barrier to the continental US but also facilitate its overseas expansion in ways that are different from those of the old colonial powers. From the perspective of national strategic security, the status of China-US relations has an important impact on both countries, but geographical conditions dictate that its impact on

China is more direct. What's more, the security structure in the Asia–Pacific region is still centered on the US, and to a large extent excludes China.

Finally, the experiences of China and the US are very different in terms of the evolution of international status. Generally speaking, the change in China's international status has been presented as a U-shape curve from the mid-eighteenth century to today, shifting from a country with strong national strength to one in decline, and then quickly gaining influence around the world. The brilliant achievements of the PRC's independence, reform and opening up relationships with the West, have inspired national pride and patriotism among the Chinese people.

After it became independent in 1776, America's international status continued to rise. After two world wars, the US finally became the leading power in the world by the middle of the twentieth century, leading to the reconstruction of the post-WWII international order, in spite of the Soviet rivalry. Following nearly half a century of confrontation, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War made the US the only superpower in the world. Neither its "hard" power nor its "soft" power could be matched by other countries. However, the US might now be seeing for the first time in its history a decline in its international status.

The above differences strongly affect the perceptions and mindset of China and the US in the context of the bilateral relationship. Both countries judge each other based on their own experiences and values.

### **3 Evolution of China–US relations: historical experience**

China–US relations have gone through estrangement, alliance, confrontation, stalemate, detente, cooperation, and friction. Such a rich history contains many valuable lessons. When the future of the bilateral relations is uncertain, reviewing the past experience and lessons may help the two countries to be open-minded and avoid potentially disastrous confrontations. After analyzing the ups and downs in the history of China–US relations, we find three aspects are most worthy of attention.

#### **3.1 China–US relations in a global context**

The China–US relationship has never been just about the bilateral relationship between the two countries. To understand its evolution, we must put it in the context of a multilateral framework and global perspective, with particular focus on the connection and interactions between China and the US.

History shows two different scenarios. In the first scenario, changes in China–US relations are mainly affected by third-party factors. For instance, Japanese invasion and expansion was the most important factor that brought China and the US closer from the 1930s to the 1940s. The US–Soviet Cold War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War mainly contributed to China–US confrontation and stalemate from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. The collapse of the Sino–Soviet alliance and the US's preparation for withdrawal from Vietnam made China–US reconciliation possible. In the second scenario, changes in China–US relations drive many changes in

the world. For example, the normalization of China–US relations facilitated China’s return to the United Nations and China’s establishment of diplomatic relations with many other countries, and China–US–Soviet relations and the international landscape have also changed as a result. Most importantly, these shifts had a domino effect, as the substantial improvement of China–US relations provided an enabling external environment for China to realize peaceful development, and China’s development greatly changed the global economic landscape. Of course, multiple interactions came into play in the historical chain of events, and other scenarios existed in the same era.

We are now in a different age. The reversal of China–US relations in recent years was not just attributed to bilateral factors, but also to other changes in the world. The recent wave of economic globalization driven by high-tech and information technology has caused a series of new challenges, including the rapid flow of capital, the rapid transfer of manufacturing, the decentralization of industrial supply chains, replacement of some traditional jobs by AI, intensified competition among countries, growing economic and social disparity within and among countries, and the rise of populism, nationalism, and racism. These emerging problems have resulted in many black swan incidents in the world and have led to the decline of this wave of economic globalization. The global challenges we face are more diverse, complex, and important than ever before.

In terms of China’s relationship with the world, the country’s peaceful development is mainly attributed to its integration into the existing international system and seizing of the opportunity brought about by globalization. The modernization of a country with a population of nearly 1.4 billion is unprecedented in human history and thus exerts unprecedented influence on the existing world system. The impact is so great mainly because of China’s size and speed of development, but the country’s system of governance is also an important factor. Disputes exist not only between China and the US but also between China and other developed countries and even some developing countries. China’s development is indeed a contribution to the world, bringing new development opportunities for many countries including the US. But at the same time, China cannot overlook the problems its development has caused and should properly resolve them in a positive manner.

China’s GDP is currently approaching that of the US, and the two countries are increasingly competitive in the fields of science and technology, military, finance, and diplomacy. With structural contradictions becoming increasingly acute, it was inevitable that the US would substantially adjust its China policy. The Trump Administration has defined China as a strategic rival and is likely to consider this viewpoint when formulating policies toward other countries. This new outlook on China will cause ripples in diplomacy that go far beyond bilateral relations between China and the US. At the same time, China’s strategies and China–US relations will become more intertwined with foreign policy in other parts of the world. All countries, including US allies, will have their own considerations and won’t simply take sides. In fact, since the end of the Cold War, many countries’ foreign policies have shown greater independence than before. When responding to the changes in the US’s China policy, China’s bilateral relationship with the US isn’t the only consideration. Rather, Beijing must also consider the overall diplomatic landscape, and incorporate its vision of building a global

community and a shared future for mankind. The true picture of the complex interplay between China–US relations and other bilateral and multilateral relations is unfolding in new ways right now.

### 3.2 US responses to changes within China

As China changes, so do China–US relations. Historically speaking, China’s changes, though occurring internally, are both deeply influenced by the outside world and have a role in shaping it. The attitude and response of the United States to China’s internal policy changes has, therefore, become an important part of the interaction between the two countries and their relationship.

Generally speaking, the US tends to have the upper hand in China–US relations, because the two countries have different national strengths and different standing in the international system. However, the status of China–US relations at a deeper level depends on the situation within China. Many major events within China in the twentieth century have had a profound impact on the evolution of China–US relations, including the Revolution of 1911, the Great Revolutionary Movement, the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the conflicts between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party and the ensuing civil war, the victory of the Chinese Revolution, the division of China and the Soviet Union, the reform and opening-up and the rise of economic modernization. The status of US–China relations has depended largely on America’s stance on and response to these events, be it a wait-and-see approach, intervention, opposition, or support. It should be emphasized that for a country as big as China, it is impossible to copy any foreign model. Its development path can only be determined by its own national conditions and internal forces, and the reform and progress of its social system depends on the Chinese people’s own experience and practices. History has shown that foreign or external forces have limited influence in China (Zhang 2012).

Compared to China’s internal development, the two countries’ expectations for the future of the world play a larger role in the evolution of the bilateral relationship. These perspectives and expectations are extraordinary because both China and the US see that each country has an important part to play in shaping the future. With the rise of China, China carries more and more of the burden of fulfilling the expectations of both countries. In fact, “the China factor” is becoming more sensitive and salient in major countries’ expectations for the future of the world. When discussing China–US relations, leaders of other nations pay attention to whether the interests of the two countries are aligned or contradictory. If China and the US share the same vision for the world, cooperation would be a natural choice; if they disagree about the world’s future, one would expect them to adjust their policies toward each other accordingly. Seeking common ground, therefore, is particularly important in efforts to get China–US relations back on track.



### 3.3 China–US rivalry vs. China–US mutual trust

There is an old saying in China: “No discord, no concord.” In a sense, China and the US have improved mutual understanding through confrontation and rivalry. The most important thing is to identify each other’s strengths and limits. Only in this way can we be reassured and build mutual trust.

Tough policy on one side often suggests fear on its part. To eliminate fear, major countries must recognize each other’s strengths and limits. Rivalry for a period of time is the prerequisite for building mutual trust. For example, after the founding of the PRC, China was worried that the US might launch an armed aggression, and the US was worried that China might engage in Communist expansion in Asia. This mutual fear was one of the main reasons for the long-term stand-off between the two countries. In the 1970s, China was surprised that the US could not even win the Vietnam War, while the US saw many of China’s internal problems caused by the “Cultural Revolution.” Understanding each other’s limits led to both countries relaxing with regard to the potential threat posed by the other. It was an important prerequisite for the easing and improvement of China–US relations.

Strategic competition between China and the US has occurred several times in history, mostly after the founding of the PRC. The US, as the country with the upper hand, has been used to the strategy of applying maximum pressure; while China, as the country on the defensive, always fought back with caution and restraint, preparing for the worst. China has never been the first one to provoke. Although the rivalry between China and the US was sometimes fierce, even resorting to force, both countries carefully maintained policy flexibility and allowed room for readjustment, because neither country saw any hope of eliminating or completely defeating the other. Leaders of both countries were fully aware that no matter how they fought, the two major countries would one day establish diplomatic relations (Deng 1994).

This pattern can be seen in the aftermath of many events that occurred from the mid-1940s to the late-1960s. For example, in the Chinese civil war, the US “unconditionally” supported Chiang Kai-Shek, but avoided directly getting involved in the war. The Communist Party of China firmly opposed the US, but carefully avoided conflicts with the US Army. The US and China fought each other in the Korean War, but President Truman decided not to extend the war to the Chinese territory. When shelling Jinmen for the second time, Mao Zedong demanded that Americans should not be hurt. When Chiang Kai-Shek later attempted to attack the mainland and the Vietnam War escalated, China and the US, without formal diplomatic relations, managed the crisis through the ambassadorial talks in Warsaw and other channels, avoiding another direct confrontation. Both sides held the bottom line, leaving room for China–US relations to turn around (Tao 1999).

The mutual trust between the two countries after the establishment of diplomatic relations was built on the huge gap in their comprehensive national strengths, the mutual needs in the security sector, and the complementarity in the economy due to different levels of development. Other reasons mutual trust was able to last for 30 years included: China followed Deng Xiaoping’s diplomatic policy of “keeping a low profile” and “never taking the lead,” while the US hoped that China would become a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system (Zoellick 2005). In

addition, the leaders of the two countries maintained constructive communication during times of crisis, increasing economic exchanges anchored the bilateral relationship, and the two countries maintained coordination when facing security threats and challenges such as the global financial crisis, climate change, humanitarian disasters, global health challenges and epidemics, and nuclear nonproliferation.

Now for the first time, the US fears that China might catch up and sees China as a main challenger. Similar fears have occurred three times in America's history: fear of Germany, Italy and Japan during World War II, of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and of a fast-growing Japan after World War II. The US experience and practices in dealing with these challengers will influence its current China policy. It will take time for China and the US to find each other's true intentions and power limits through competition.

## **4 Rationality and wisdom is needed in handling China–US relations**

China and the US will be forced to face their emerging structural disputes. Rivalry is inevitable. The outbreak of COVID-19 and measures taken by the Trump Administration left no buffer zone for policy adjustments. There is no going back to previous China–US relations, so we must look ahead to find a clear path leading to the future.

### **4.1 Characteristics of the US–China disputes**

In the competition or rivalry between the US and China, the US seeks to maintain its global dominance, while China seeks to maintain its own right to development. The disputes between the two countries happen when the national strengths of the two countries converge. These dynamics will determine the outcome for China–US relations and the broader world.

The Trump Administration defines China as a strategic rival based on three considerations. The most important consideration is that the Administration believes China's development challenges America's global leadership. The other two considerations are the fact that the US's engagement policy has failed, and China is believed to be "revisionist" to the current global system. As a result, the US has highly politicized the economic and trade disputes, high-tech competition, and the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 as a tool against China.

From the perspective of China, accelerating development and realizing socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics is the long-cherished aspiration of the Chinese nation. But China has neither the intention nor the capability of replacing the US as the sole global superpower. China believes that there is room for improvement of the existing international order and international governance system, but the reform can only be conducted in a step-by-step manner with consultation and cooperation among countries. In fact, compared with China, many US behaviors are more like "revisionist" to the international system.

Will the current rivalry between China and the US develop into a zero-sum game like the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union? Many people are

concerned. The possibility does exist. However, if we take a deeper look, we will find that today's world is very different from the world of the Cold War. The possibility of avoiding a zero-sum game between the two countries also exists.

There are three main differences between the current China–US disputes and the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union. First, instead of reconstruction after World War II, the pressing issue now is the reform and adjustment of the current world order, which requires the joint participation of China, the US, and other countries. The China–US disputes will undoubtedly undermine the advancement of reform and adjustment. Second, the key reason the US–Soviet Union Cold War developed into a zero-sum game was the two countries battled over the supremacy of political systems and ideology. The collapse of the colonial system and the emergence of a large number of independent countries after World War II provided a huge market for the rivalry. Both the US and the Soviet Union regarded each other as a representative of an evil international force rather than a nation-state, believing failure would mean the destruction of an entire lifestyle, including material and spiritual aspects. But things are different now. The so-called “China model” only appeals to some developing countries due to China's enviable economic growth. When it comes to ideology, China always stresses that different countries should be allowed to have different ideologies, while the US is more ready to export its own ideology. Finally, the Cold War created two world economic systems led by the US and the Soviet Union, respectively, but now China and the US coexist in one economic system. The fight between two parallel economic systems is significantly different from the fight within one economic system, in both form and content.

The above-mentioned differences objectively leave some room for China and the US to avoid a zero-sum game. Both countries have some leeway in the rivalry. If the US comes to realize that the decline in its global influence is attributed to its own internal factors and its errors in foreign policy rather than China's challenge, and if China recognizes that safeguarding its own right to development is the theme of its disputes with the US and sticks to this theme while balancing its domestic and international interests, firmly deepening reform and opening-up, and always centering on the improvement of people's well-being, then China and the US can avoid the Thucydides Trap and ultimately achieve a win–win situation through competition and cooperation.

Although China and the US may avoid falling into the trap of a zero-sum game, the struggle itself is never easy, especially for China. The US envisions a certain degree of “decoupling” from China. The primary goal is economic decoupling, as the US seeks to re-write trade rules to squeeze China's share in the world economy, exerting pressure on China from all sides. Although China hopes to maintain contacts with the US that have been established since the beginning of the reform, partial decoupling, especially in the high-tech sector, is highly likely. The US will push even harder through its policy of exerting maximum pressure. China must prepare for the long run and withstand the pressure of the US.

Historical experience shows that significant changes in US foreign policy usually take a decade of preparation. Once these changes are instituted, major adjustments will take at least another decade. Due to the personality of President Trump and the sudden outbreak of COVID-19, the US now only has a rough policy toward China,

which is unique in terms of US policy changes. For some time to come, it will be difficult for the US to change its current policy direction. The US may make major adjustments in its strategy and ease some tensions in certain aspects, but overall it will be tougher and tighter. Only when the US realizes, after some period of rivalry, that this policy cannot contain China's development and the cost will be huge, will it change course. The most remarkable aspect of this unfolding scenario will be the strategies adopted by the two countries to realize their goals, and how they will revise those goals and adjust their strategies.

## 4.2 Reshaping China–US relations calls for patience, wisdom, and creativity

Reform and opening up relationships with the West made China a remarkable emerging power. The relationship between China and the outside world has never been closer and more complex. China is going through a stage of increased external pressure, an inevitable stage in the rise of a major country. The situation is epitomized by the current China–US relations.

Since the beginning of reform and opening-up, a major change in China's attitude toward diplomacy is that it recognizes the diversity of the current world and believes that different parts of the diversified world are both conflicting and interdependent. Countries, especially major countries, have common interests in dealing with many international issues. They should and can cooperate.

Objectively speaking, China has become an important variable in international relations, and the mode of China's interaction with the world has undergone significant changes. When analyzing the international situation and handling diplomatic affairs, China should not only look at the world from its own perspective but also learn to see China from the global perspective. When interacting with other countries, China needs to become accustomed to listening and stepping into the shoes of others. When elaborating on its own foreign policies and propositions, it cannot just think about itself and should understand other countries' views and feelings. As an emerging country, China has received support in its development from many countries including the US, and still needs to learn from other countries. Therefore, China must always maintain modesty and prudence, increase its transparency and affinity, and strive for broad international cooperation in a way that can bring mutual benefit and returns to other countries. Chauvinism is the last thing China needs as it would cause great damage to the country.

The hyped-up notion that China will replace the US as the primary global superpower is a false proposition. The world in the future is bound to be multi-polar and diverse. It will definitely not follow the path of the twentieth century. The existing model of the US as the only superpower will not last. The real issue is that China and the US, two major countries, have established extensive ties and share common interests in many aspects, but their systems are extremely different. How do these two countries face the future world under competition? Can they cooperate? It is not only a challenge to the two countries, but also to the world at large. Reforming and adjusting the existing international system and establishing rules and orders acceptable to all countries will require the involvement of multiple parties as well as a lot

of consultation, negotiation, and cooperation. In this process, China and the US can put forward different proposals so as to play a constructive role, but mutual cooperation is needed.

When great changes occur in China–US relations, both sides need to remain calm, restrained, and forward-looking. First, the two countries should have patience, and maintain communication and negotiation to avoid the escalation of tensions; second, if escalation cannot be avoided, both sides must try their best to avoid confrontation; last, no matter how bad their relationship becomes, they must leave some room for a turnaround. In particular, the US must be acutely aware that if it involves China's core interests as a bargaining chip, it will seriously damage the foundation of the bilateral relationship. When handling bilateral relations, neither side should forget that the national conditions of the two countries are vastly different and they must continue to deepen mutual understanding. It is not only about avoiding and reducing misjudgments, but also about making and adopting more effective policies. A zero-sum game in today's world will only end up damaging both sides.

It takes patience and wisdom as well as the courage to think outside the box to shape a situation in which China–US relations meet the needs of the times. There are many similar examples in the evolution of the normalization and development of China–US relations. To cope with the current predicament and build China–US relations for the future, more wisdom and greater creativity is needed. As two great countries in the world, China and the US should have insights and capabilities that reach beyond the constraints of history.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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