The Trump Effect: China’s New Thoughts on the United States

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Over the past several decades, the United States adopted a policy of engagement to encourage China to join the US-dominated international system and to shape China’s development direction. Meanwhile, for achieving modernization, China endeavored to integrate into the West-dominated international system. On this point, the United States and China together constructed a grand consensus on “integration-engagement” in bilateral relations. However, after the 2008 global financial crisis, the “integration-engagement” framework began to collapse due to two major factors. The first was a change in China’s foreign policy, which was criticized to be more assertive. China not only began to more openly display its national power on issues related to the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas, but it also demonstrated the scope of its international ambitions through the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The second was that, as a result of China’s strength and foreign policy changes, many American elites began to alter their perception of China around 2015, viewing the engagement policy as a failure and believing that the United States should adjust its China strategy. During Trump’s presidency, the fundamentals of US-China relations changed, and China was clearly defined as a strategic competitor.

To compete with China more vigorously, the Trump administration conducted a policy of maximum pressure, hoping to force China to compromise on a series of issues. Theoretically, maximum pressure is a classic strategy of coercive
diplomacy. According to US political scientist Alexander L. George’s definition, coercive diplomacy is a defensive strategy used to deal with an opponent’s effort to change the status quo in its own favor. However, the intention of an action is sometimes difficult to determine: for example, the defensive behavior of the United States may be an offensive behavior in the eyes of China, which means US coercive diplomacy would be perceived as blackmail. If we take no account of intention, but the connotation, maximum pressure is closer to what economist Thomas Schelling called “compellence”—initiating a harmful action that will only cease if the opponent responds.

The United States’ continuous application of maximum pressure has put an unprecedented strain on China, and the way to deal with it has become an important issue. Since its founding in 1949, the People’s Republic of China has faced many difficulties. For a significant portion of its history, the PRC was relatively weak, which has shaped its responses when faced with external crises. Mao Zedong, for example, would mobilize the country to various ends, including the use of force abroad but also domestically, by manipulating the threat of an opponent. In one extreme case, China launched a nearly 20-year construction campaign in strategic mid-Western areas of the country to safeguard its national security.

As the United States has come to view China as a strategic competitor and exert maximum pressure, China once again finds itself in great peril. In this context, how has Trump’s maximum pressure campaign affected China’s thoughts about the United States? And how will US and Chinese policymakers, particularly under the new Biden administration, handle the US-China relationship going forward? The purpose of this paper is to answer the above questions and deepen our understanding of China’s behaviors.

**How has Trump’s maximum pressure campaign affected China’s thoughts about the US?**

Starting in 2017, the Trump administration launched a campaign to contain China in trade, economy, high technology, people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and areas such as the South China Sea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. Faced with Trump’s maximum pressure, China has flexibly used national power and carried out extensive, active, and strategic mobilization in order to block the Trump administration’s intentions, which were to lock in China’s position in the global supply chains and disrupt the pace of China’s
development. It has resisted pressure from the United States and improved its own viability, and at the same time it has taken the initiative to change the current situation into one more favorable to itself through three primary tools: narrative, supply chain, and the military.

Engaging in Narrative Battle

The Chinese government has worked to engage in a narrative battle with the United States, particularly under the Trump administration. In present-day international politics, the power of narrative should not be underestimated. This new phenomenon in the US-China rivalry has attracted the attention of scholars in China and the United States. The zero-sum narrative between the two countries, especially the United States’ narrative construction of China as a revisionist power and a country that will not play by existing international rules, has exacerbated tensions. During the past few years, the narrative dispute has focused on two areas: the trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic. China has mainly countered Trump’s stigmatization aiming to change its unfavorable narrative status.

China has launched a fierce counterattack against America’s stigmatization of China. On the issue of trade, the United States gradually formed a perspective on China, which evolved into aggressive narrative systems targeting China. The Trump administration’s intensification of the narrative of stigmatization led Chinese news outlets such as The People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and CCTV to make targeted responses to these views. For example, on October 4, 2018, then-Vice President Mike Pence delivered a speech on China policy at the Hudson Institute in which he declared, “in the past 25 years, we have rebuilt China.” This argument caused great backlash in China. The People’s Daily criticized the United States, stating that Pence’s argument “exposes the arrogance, ignorance and distorted mentality of some Americans, and is a reflection of a deep-rooted savior mentality.”

As another example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China and the United States have been playing a blame game. In the initial stages of the epidemic, while the virus was still mostly confined to China, then-President Trump repeatedly praised the Chinese government for its response and containment efforts. However, as the pandemic in the United States continued to worsen, US-China relations became increasingly tense. Tom Cotton, a Republican senator from Arkansas, has repeatedly attacked China, claiming that the new coronavirus originated in the P4 laboratory in Wuhan, as well as threatening to impose sanctions upon China. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also strongly criticized China’s pandemic control efforts. On March 12, 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian posted a tweet speculating that the US military
might have brought the virus to Wuhan, causing a significant backlash in the United States. After Zhao’s accusations, Trump began to attack China more aggressively, calling the new coronavirus the “Wuhan virus.”

Meanwhile, in response to the public opinion attacks from high-level officials in the Trump administration, China tried to alter the narrative about the COVID-19 pandemic and what it means for the US-China relationship, hoping to shift the narrative back to one of science and professionalism rather than continuing to engage in political debates. In an interview with American media outlet Axios on March 22, 2020, Chinese Ambassador Cui Tiankai advocated instead for allowing scientists to work on tracking the virus and its source and trusting their expertise. On May 6, 2020, Cui Tiankai published an article in The Washington Post calling on the US side to end the blame game.

In the process of anti-stigmatization, the Chinese government has used two means. The first is to resolutely crack down on American media outlets that discredit China in the US-China narrative war and to impose costs on these media outlets. For example, on February 3, 2020, Walter Russell Mead published an article in The Wall Street Journal claiming that China is the “real sick man of Asia.” China’s Foreign Ministry retaliated against the biased reports in The Wall Street Journal by revoking the press cards of three of its reporters. The second means of anti-stigmatization is making full use of new media to declare China’s position, using Weibo and Twitter to spread China’s own ideas and construct diplomatic narratives.

## Safeguarding the Supply Chain

The fundamental driving force of the US-China trade war is that the two countries are competing for the dominant position in global technology. For the United States, preventing China’s development in high technology is crucial to maintaining its economic advantage. Therefore, the Trump administration mobilized the whole United States to suppress Chinese high-tech companies, such as Huawei, in an attempt to push China out of its leading position in the 5G field. To counter US tactics, China has adopted two strategies.

The first is that China will promote innovation through additional capital investment, so as to strengthen weak links in the supply chains, develop the core technologies, and prevent being choked by the United States. Emerging countries, such as China, are faced with the need to innovate to overcome the structural challenges of middle-income countries by acquiring and developing
new technologies.\textsuperscript{19} In fact, as early as June 24, 2014, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of China released the \textit{Outline of the Program for National Integrated Circuit Industry Development}, trying to accelerate independent innovation in the semiconductor field. This outline called for the creation of the National Integrated Circuit Industry Investment Fund (the so-called “Big Fund”), which uses its billions of yuan in assets to enhance China’s innovation capability in the field of semiconductors.\textsuperscript{20}

China’s second response strategy is to strengthen its ability to retaliate against the United States. Trump repeatedly used or threatened to use sanctions to exert pressure on China, forcing it to fight against the United States. After ZTE and Huawei were added to the United States’ Entity List, China learned the strength of the US sanctions system. On one hand, China has carefully studied the relevant laws and regulations of the United States and learned to build an American-style sanctions system, which led to the establishment of its own “Unreliable Entities List” in May 2019.\textsuperscript{21} On June 8, 2019, China announced the establishment of its national technological security management list system to counter US supply interruptions and technology restrictions against Chinese high-tech enterprises.

China has also strengthened its supervision of US companies, which has enhanced its ability to impose sanctions in the future. After the United States upgraded its sanctions against Huawei, the \textit{Global Times} revealed that in order to deal with further meddling from the United States in Huawei’s operations, “China will carry out countermeasures, such as including certain US companies into its list of unreliable entities, imposing restrictions on or investigating US companies such as Qualcomm, Cisco, and Apple and suspending purchases of Boeing aircraft.”\textsuperscript{22} In the future, China and the United States will likely continue to spar in the high-tech field, and China will become increasingly skilled in fighting back against the United States through sanctions.

\textbf{Increasing Military Deterrence}

In the past four years, Trump tried to build up US armaments, continuously took a more aggressive military stance in Taiwan Strait and South China Sea and put severe pressure on China. On the Taiwan issue, the United States has increased its coercive threats toward China, such as making Taiwan Strait patrols public in 2018\textsuperscript{23} and announcing 11 arms sales to Taiwan. On the South China Sea issue, the United States has intensified its military operations and adjusted its strategy and tactics. For the purpose of enhancing the deterrence capability, the US
military devoted itself to strengthening the bases around South China Sea, promoting the flexible military deployment, and increasing in the frequency and intensity of forward posture. Since 2009, the United States has substantially strengthened its naval and air presence. According to Chinese international relations expert Hu Bo’s statistics, “U.S. aircraft sorties increased by 100 percent to about 1,500, and surface ship presence increased by 60 percent to around 1,000 ship days per year.”

In response to military actions from the United States, China has also made a series of adjustments. Over the past decade, China’s military spending has risen sharply, and the distribution structure of military spending has become a major strategic issue. The question of how to allocate military expenditure is related to the design and development of equipment; military equipment is also related to the adjustment of the entire national defense system. In the 13th Five Year Plan (2016–20), China’s priority of national defense is civil-military integration. In the last five years, China mobilized tremendous civil enterprises to devote themselves to the weapon equipment development. In the 14th Five Year Plan (2021–25), China will take strategic competition as an important factor into consideration and stress the importance of enhancing strategic capacity to safeguard China’s sovereignty, security, and development interests.

China used to learn from US warfare experiences, especially the concepts of operations in the Gulf War and the War on Terror. However, with the changing state of US-China rivalry, relying on learning from US experience has shown to be insufficient to meet China’s practical needs. Therefore, China will be committed to thinking about new war-related operational concepts and dealing with possible future conflicts among major powers. In order to deal with US competition, China has increased its military presence and strengthened its strategic deterrence toward the United States. In response to US Freedom of Navigation Operations, China mobilized DF-26 missiles to deter US warships in the South China Sea. Moreover, China has further strengthened its maritime militia and mobilized more forces to cooperate with its national strategy.

**China’s New Thoughts on the United States**

Looking back on the US-China rivalry over the past few years, China had many concerns and misgivings in the early stages of the trade war, but it has now adapted to the maximum pressure from the United States. More importantly, in the course of its struggle with the United States, China has gained endurance and self-discipline, gradually forming some new thoughts about the United States. These new thoughts will have a profound impact on the Biden...
administration’s China policy and are bound to fundamentally change US-China relations. Generally speaking, there are currently three new thoughts about the United States in China.

**Reciprocity**

Since China’s Reform and Opening Up starting as early as 1978 and revived in 1992, China has often given preferential conditions to foreign investment, or the so-called “super national treatment,” in order to attract foreign investors. In other words, China has not pursued the concept of reciprocity often in the past several decades. It is Trump, ironically, who has brought the concept of reciprocity back to front and center of US-China relations today. In the trade war, the Trump administration had always claimed that the United States wants equal treatment, but in reality it is trying to force China to make unequal concessions and give the US preferential treatment. This behavior has inspired China and made Beijing pursue the principle of reciprocity.

Compared with the past, China is paying more attention to the pursuit of reciprocity in bilateral relations. In the new *Foreign Investment Law of the People’s Republic of China* adopted by the National People’s Congress on March 15, 2019, China emphasizes the equal national treatment of foreign investment. On May 11, 2019, US-China trade negotiations began to break down, and China believed that the United States was hoping to “put pressure on China and test the limits of the Chinese side, so as to gain a negotiating advantage.” Liu He, vice premier of the State Council of China, stated that the negotiations failed because the United States refused to respect China’s bottom line. He said that the agreement must be equal and mutually beneficial, that China will never give in on major issues of principle, and that China has three core concerns that must be resolved: abolishing all tariff increases, ensuring that trade procurement figures reflect reality, and working toward a more balanced text in any trade agreement.

China’s emphasis on a balanced text essentially reflects its understanding that US-China economic and trade negotiations should embody the concept of reciprocity.

China has also used reciprocal retaliation in countering the maximum pressure of the United States. In the trade war, China adopted the principle of reciprocal retaliation against US tariffs. Then the principle extended to other areas. On February 18, 2020, the US State Department put five Chinese media outlets (Xinhua, China Radio International, CGTN, China Daily, and Hai Tian

Trump’s coercion by using the principle of reciprocity stimulated the painful memory of China’s resistance to imperialism, which is linked with power politics. The trade war, the maximum pressure of the Trump administration, and the voices of some countries demanding compensation from China after the outbreak of COVID-19 have all impacted China’s perception of the outside world. The historical memory of the invasion and partition of China by the leading powers from 1840 to 1945 has reappeared. Under the liberal world order, China’s attitude toward power politics was moderate and did not excessively pursue the principle of reciprocity.

In the era of great power rivalry, however, China will compare its historical memory with the actual environment and pursue equal status in dealing with its relations with the outside world. On May 24, 2020, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, when answering questions from Chinese and foreign journalists about possible lawsuits against China related to the coronavirus pandemic, stated, “Today’s China is not what it used to be a hundred years ago, nor is the world anything like the one a century ago. If anybody thought they could use some ludicrous lawsuits to undermine China’s sovereignty and dignity or deprive the Chinese people of their hard-won gains, they’d be daydreaming and bring disgrace to themselves.” It is not difficult to realize that the greater the external pressure China faces, the stronger this thought will become, which also means that the US exertion of pressure and punishment is not likely to work as intended.

Struggle
The biggest challenge to China’s diplomacy brought by maximum pressure is the sharp reduction of policy space, and the main coping method has changed from “cooperation” to “seeking cooperation in the struggle.” This method is a new phenomenon rarely seen in the development of US-China relations in the past 40 years. On September 3, 2019, Xi Jinping declared in a speech that great struggle must be carried out in order to realize the great dream, so China must “maintain a fighting spirit and strengthen its ability to struggle.” The core of
this new thought is that China should dare to struggle in its diplomacy with the United States. The purpose is to safeguard China’s core interests and major principles. Specifically, this new conception of struggle includes three aspects.

First, China must adhere to its bottom line, or those issues on which it is not willing to compromise. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, China has strengthened its conception of its bottom line, in which “when dealing with problems, China should not only work toward making progress in a positive direction, but also prepare for the worst.” The United States has strengthened China’s adherence to this bottom line. Trump once tried to renegotiate the One China Policy in early 2017, and the Chinese government adhered to the bottom line principle and sent a clear signal to the United States: “The One China Policy is the political basis of US-China relations and is non-negotiable.” This refusal forced the United States to give up the efforts to negotiate or deal with China on the Taiwan issue. The conception of China’s bottom line has played a positive role in stabilizing US-China relations and clarifying the strategic intentions of the two countries. However, it also has some problems, namely the dichotomy between bottom line issues and non-bottom line issues. In China’s policy to the United States, bottom line issues are often overemphasized while non-bottom line issues are ignored.

Second, China must demonstrate resolve. In the face of the United States’ maximum pressure, it will be difficult for China to safeguard its national interests if it compromises. China has studied the institutional design, strategy, as well as tactics of the United States and has learned much from its rival. Thus, China knows that it must adeptly use its national strength, adhere to its own position on specific issues, and demonstrate its uncompromising resolve to the United States through a series of measures. China wants to send a signal that to “blackmail, block and exert maximum pressure on China will lead nowhere.”

Taking recent issues in Hong Kong as an example, during the Two Sessions in 2020, China promulgated the “draft decision on HK national security legislation submitted to NPC.” In response, the United States threatened to impose sanctions on China. The Global Times declared in an editorial, “when China announced the plan, it meant Beijing had already evaluated how Washington would respond and has been prepared for possible challenges. The possibility of China retreating under US pressure is zero.” Subsequently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China stated, “The Chinese government is firm in its determination to safeguard China’s sovereignty, security and development interests, to
implement the principle of One country-Two systems and to oppose any external interference in Hong Kong affairs. If someone is bent on harming China’s interests, China will take all necessary measures to hit back.”

Third, China must take retaliatory measures. In the past, China had a fixed conception of how to manage US-China relations, insisting on promoting the stable development of the bilateral relationship. However, as Chinese international relations scholar Gao Cheng has argued, a major problem in this thinking is that “once the stable development of US-China relations is regarded as the key to solving a whole set of diplomatic problems and difficulties related to China’s rise and becomes the goal that guides China’s diplomatic practice with the United States, the stability and improvement of US-China relations may become a bargaining chip that the United States will use to repeatedly blackmail and extort China, and China’s strategic reputation and influence in its surrounding areas will also be damaged.”

Under the premise that the United States will exert maximum pressure upon China, China’s strategic basis for promoting the overall stability of US-China relations has disappeared. China is no longer afraid of the deterioration of US-China relations, and it is willing to more frequently use retaliation measures against the United States. Under the assault of maximum pressure from the United States, China has many more flexible options about how it may retaliate, which fits in with Mao Zedong’s strategy of “you fight in your way, while I fight in mine.”

**Plan B**

After being added to the United States Entity List, in an interview with Chinese media on May 21, 2019, Ren Zhengfei noted that Huawei has always had a Plan B to cope with any extreme situations. Plan A, for example, means Huawei relies on the components of US suppliers normally; Plan B is a “spare tire” plan in the supply chain that ensures the business can continue running through independent innovation under US economic sanctions. Similarly, China as a whole has long been thinking about a Plan B to avoid being choked by the United States and its attempts to contain China’s high-technology industry. In the semiconductor industry, for example, China is facing a more prominent risk of being choked by competitor countries. Therefore, solving this problem will become key to China’s industrial development, a view that enjoys a high degree of support both at the national level and from the public. In China, there is even a force called the “industrial party,” which advocates that China should build up the country through industry and win the final victory in high-tech competition by modernizing China’s industrial chain.
China’s Plan B aims to solve the shortcomings of its supply chain through independent research and development (R&D) supported by the state. China has learned a profound lesson from the high-tech war in the past few years, which is that China must master core technologies through independent innovation.\textsuperscript{46} Lu Feng, a Chinese industrial policy expert, believes that independent innovation is the only way for Chinese enterprises and industries to gain competitive advantages and achieve technological breakthroughs. He also sees it as the only effective weapon with which to overcome the threat of technological blockades or decoupling and maintain international cooperation.\textsuperscript{47} This view has become the consensus of the Chinese government and society.

In the past decades, China’s supply chain highly depended on the United States. However, facing the Trump’s technology sanctions, China has adopted a series of measures to increasing the secure, reliable, and independent supply chain, which also means that Plan B thinking is shaping China’s choices. On August 26, 2019, at the fifth meeting of the Central Finance and Economic Committee, Xi Jinping called for “efforts to leverage the country’s institutional strengths and super-scale market advantages to boost basic industries and modernize industrial chains.”\textsuperscript{48} After the United States upgraded the sanctions against Huawei, Xi Jinping declared at a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CPC Central Committee on May 14, 2020 that China must create a new development pattern of “dual circulation” covering domestic and international markets,\textsuperscript{49} aiming to promote China’s economic resilience and comprehensively upgrade China’s industrial chain. The US sanctions on China’s supply chain has deepened the rift between the two sides, which has stimulated China’s aspiration of ensuring a secure and reliable supply chain. China has given priority to independent innovation in its national strategy and has made plans to safeguard its supply chain. Under “dual circulation,” this will undoubtedly reduce China’s dependence on overseas technology.

**A New Racetrack for US-China Competition**

The old framework between China and the United States has collapsed and cannot be recovered—the new framework of US-China relations will be about how to compete. The new thought of China and the United States toward each other will be an unavoidable challenge. In such a stressful time, Biden’s election will bring a fragile window of opportunity for both sides to forge a new racetrack.
Changed Paradigm Already

Trump has already changed history. According to Henry Kissinger, “Trump may be one of those figures in history who appears from time to time to mark the end of an era and to force it to give up its old preconditions.” After Trump triggered the flare gun of strategic competition, the United States launched the trade war, high-tech war, and rhetorical war against China, forcing China to fight back and retaliate. In the Trump period, strategic competition was disorderly, with imposing costs on China and damaging each other as the basic form. If the competition between China and the United States is regarded as a race, there are no rules, and it can be regarded as a kind of negative strategic competition. In other words, this is an atypical strategic competition, lacking restraint and elegance.

Facing the already dilapidated state of US-China relations, it will be hard for Biden to reverse from strategic competition to engagement, and it is even more difficult to restore the public feelings in the United States and China that were shaped by Trump. If the Biden administration wants to restore or reset future US-China relations, three fundamental changes in China must be addressed in the future.

First, there has been a fundamental change in the thinking of the Chinese people toward the United States during the past four years. China has changed and has a deeper understanding of America’s China policy and the cruelty of international politics. In the past, common people admired the American way of life, and the United States was regarded as a shining example. However, recently, most Chinese people have clearly seen the attitude of the United States toward China. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese people have a stronger identification with the CPC and the Chinese regime and a large number of Chinese people have changed their perceptions of the United States. According to Toluna-Blackbox Index of Global Crisis Perceptions, China gets the top score across 23 countries as citizens rank their governments’ response to the pandemic. A survey from China Data Lab at UC San Diego indicates that Chinese support for its regime during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased from 8.23 in June 2019 to 8.65 in February 2020, then to 8.87 in May 2020 on a scale of 1 to 10. Meanwhile, Chinese average favorability toward the United States dropped from 5.77 in June 2019 to 4.77 in May 2020. To the public, this is primarily because the Chinese people have experienced Trump’s maximum pressure and deeply understand the hostility of the United States to China.

Second, China’s policy planning has continuity, which implies that once new thinking appears, it will inevitably be enduring, even for decades. In fact, China’s
new thinking has already generated some new policies. The US-China trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic have actually compelled China to rethink and readjust its supply chain. Even if Biden fundamentally changes America’s policy toward China in high technology, China will still follow the existing road by increasing domestic capital investment and China’s ability to avoid being choked by the United States to ensure the safety of the supply chain. On November 3, 2020, the CCP released its recommendations for meeting its national economic and social development targets, describing China’s policy priorities for the near-term. The document shows clearly that China will intensify its national strategic strength in science and technology, make major breakthroughs in core technologies, and improve the overall efficiency of the innovation chain, with the goal to build an entirely controlled supply chain empowered by homegrown innovation. Made clear in the annual Central Economic Work Conference on December 12–16, 2020, the security and stability of industrial and supply chains is the priority of China’s economic work in 2021 and has been regarded as the foundation of forming a new development paradigm. These policies and plans show that the pursuit of a secure, reliable, and independent supply chain will be China’s near- to medium-term strategic goal.

Third, the fragile trust between China and the United States in the supply chain has been devastatingly damaged. Since the reform and opening up, China has responded positively to the expectation of the United States, actively integrated into the international system, participated in the global industrial division, and achieved great success in economic development. Moreover, economic success has strengthened China’s trust in the United States regarding industrial division. However, this trust is very fragile. As a weaker country, once sanctioned in the supply chain, China’s psychology of preventing being choked will become a key factor affecting policymaking. The worst effect of the Trump administration is that America has proved China’s long-held concern about the supply chain. Recently, President Xi Jinping’s appeal at the Davos conference committed to openness and inclusiveness and refused to “willfully impose decoupling, supply disruption or sanctions, and to create isolation or estrangement,” which clearly shows China’s concerns. In a sense, China’s anxiety about the supply chain with the United States is subconsciously influenced by historical analogy, which coincides with the process of China’s pursuit of self-reliance since modern times.

These three changes mean that Trump’s legacy in US-China policy will be long-lasting—the effects of Trump’s maximum pressure campaign will outlive the Trump administration and shape US-China relations going forward during the Biden years. Especially after Trump’s bullying, China prefers a stable and predictable US-China relationship, desires a reciprocal relationship, and expects the
United States to respect China’s core interests. Neither the Chinese government nor the Biden administration can ignore these new trends.

New Racetrack Ahead

Biden and his advisers acknowledge an “extreme competition” with China. Biden believes that, as he wrote, “China represents a special challenge.”56 As a core member of the Biden administration, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has expounded that the US-China relationship has “adversarial aspects, competitive aspects, but also cooperative ones.”57 Policy expert Ely Ratner also acknowledged that, although it is not another Cold War, US-China competition is a new kind of confrontation.58 Although the Biden administration cannot ignore the competition between China and the United States, it can shape its form. For Beijing and Washington, strategic competition mainly concentrates on economy and technology, unlike the Cold War, “with its sharp ideological divide between two rival blocs.”59 Both sides should take each other’s new thoughts seriously and then negotiate a new racetrack of US-China relations together to frame the conflicts and to ensure that strategic competition between the two countries is more regular and more positive.

The first priority is to maintain at least minimal dialogue. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union had a smooth channel for negotiation. Compared with the Soviet Union, China has actively integrated into the existing international society and has not established an alliance system similar to the Warsaw Pact. Therefore, China and the United States can engage in dialogue around their conflicts. It is very crucial to fully face up to existing disputes. This dialogue will create political conditions for frank dialogue so as to lead US-China relations back to a more rational track. The reboot of conversation between China and the United States, especially Track I and Track II dialogues, will help to clarify the intentions of both sides, reducing emotional barriers and decreasing miscalculation.60

Beijing and Washington also should take stock of the parts of the US-China relationship damaged by Trump. The two giants have irreconcilable differences on trade, high technology, human rights, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. However, there is room for cooperation in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, people-to-people exchange, and climate change. China and the United States should further subdivide specific fields, formulate a list of interests and
check that list, then refine policies in different fields. In the future, a more reciprocal bilateral relationship will keep the competition on track. Beijing and Washington should respect each other’s core interests, then re-examine each other’s status and increase their reassurances to each other, rather than raise their coercive threats. As Chinese international relations scholar Wu Xinbo points out, “power-sharing has become an important part of the power dynamics between China and the United States.” For Biden, establishing how to balance adapting to China’s rising status and safeguarding the interests of the United States will be a challenging job.

Moreover, finding a right way will be vital. After Biden was elected, he changed the tone of competition with China and expressed his willingness to reshape US foreign policy. For Beijing and Washington, it is feasible to start with pragmatic cooperation in some areas. On February 1, 2021, China’s top diplomat Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of CPC, delivered China’s sincerity for cooperation with the United States in a conversation held by the National Committee on United States-China Relations as a friendly message for Biden. For the United States and China, the first half year is crucial. Whether the two countries can find the right way and seize opportunities is key for shaping the culture of competition.

Finally, the new racetrack between China and the United States should guarantee competition with clear rules. In the Trump era, the United States chose to punish China to win the competition. Biden plans to abandon Trump’s approach; he won’t punish China, but instead will require that “China play by the rules.” In fact, China is not opposed to competing according to rules. China’s top adviser, Fu Ying, elaborated in an article that, for the United States and China, “in the fields of economics and technology, rules and laws must prevail.”

The challenge is that China and the United States have very different understandings of the rules themselves. The Biden administration insists that China play by the rules, which were mostly designed and dominated by the United States. China’s understanding is that some rules should be designed by all the countries and that the developing countries should have a voice. On some issues, especially on COVID-19 vaccine distribution, China and the United States should work together to promote the international society to design new rules. In the future, the best way to solve this divergence will become key to building a new racetrack of US-China strategic competition.
New Tasks for Chinese Policymakers

Structure now has replaced choice as the main factor shaping US-China relations. The United States under President Trump’s four-year maximum pressure campaign has forced China to respond to its challenges. China’s choices have subtly shaped its own modes of behavior. New thoughts have appeared in China’s diplomatic engagement with the United States; there has been a shift from pursuing cooperation to preferring competition. This article provides some recommendations for Chinese policymakers to improve China’s position in the competition with the United States.

First, for China’s policymakers, new thoughts need new mechanisms. A well-run process for making China’s US policy will be crucial, so it is necessary to optimize the decision-making process. China’s policymakers must be aware that US-China relations are complex and require a high degree of professionalism to formulate professional policies. Policymakers should control nationalism and prevent nonprofessional factors from distorting Chinese foreign policy toward the United States.

Second, China should realize that its strategic thinking is changing rapidly. Policymakers should be clear on those changes and calibrate their own behaviors. China’s unconscious behavior may lead to overreaction from the United States. Therefore, the use of reciprocal retaliation should be cautious to avoid a sharp reduction in policy options.

Third, China needs to clarify the red lines and red zones when competing with the United States. One of the experiences of the Cold War is that because the United States and the Soviet Union knew each other’s red lines, they were able to devote themselves to crisis management. China needs to make its national interests clear, clarify its red lines and red zones, and avoid strategic misperception. Avoiding inconsistent words and actions will undoubtedly decrease conflict.

Fourth, never give up dialogue in security issues under any circumstances. Even if dialogue is fraught with disagreement, it is much better than not meeting at all. For both sides, negotiation is an important way to eliminate misunderstanding. Negotiation cannot be rejected because of views and positions—it is the basic requirement for maintaining mutual trust.

The re-emergence of a divided world is a cruel reality that we must face. The good times are over. The change in China’s thought toward the United States is a major trend worthy of attention and of great significance to the new framework of US-China relations that will last beyond the Trump administration’s years.

Notes


