

From Past to Future: Rethinking the Evolution of China-U.S. Relations

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Abstract: China and the United States have one of the world's most important and complex bilateral relationships. For decades, the differences in the two countries' social systems, trade disputes, Taiwan's international status and the South China Sea, as well as other issues have influenced the bilateral relationship. This paper analyzes the evolution of China-U.S. relations through an exploration of history. It contains three parts. The first part reviews the historical evolution of China-U.S. relations. Based on history, the second part analyzes the current problems that impede the development of bilateral ties. After summing up the historical experience of China-U.S. exchanges, the third part predicts the possible endgames of China-U.S. relations.

Keywords: China-U.S. Relations; Trade War; Dispute; Cooperation; Diplomatic Relations; Taiwan; South China Sea; Covid-19.

1. Introduction

Their relationship can be dated back to the 18th century when Americans first arrived in China. But until 1844, the two countries established official ties. During the World War II, military developments drew Chinese and Americans closer together. However, following the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), anticommunist hysteria prevailed in America, and the U.S. officials began their decades-long isolation policy against China. During the 1970s, sign of warming relations between Washington and Beijing emerged gradually. Although China-U.S. relations had been deteriorating for some time, bilateral relations developed positively for the next following decades. However, after Donald Trump took office in 2017, the two nations have experienced periods of tension and over issues including trade, COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, human rights, the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Rising tensions fed a sense of fatalism that the countries were heading toward the abyss of outright economic decoupling and a disastrous military conflict. The future relationship between China and the United States is one of the mega-changes and mega-challenges in today's world. This paper aims to analyze the historical evolution of China-U.S. relations and predict the possible development of bilateral relations in the future.

2. Historical Evolution of the China-U.S. Relations

The history of China-U.S. relations were full of dramatic changes. China and the North America had trading relations that long predated American independence. But then trade with the North American Continent was monopolized by the British East India Company. After the American Revolutionary War, the U.S. determined to expand its foreign trade in China. When the Empress of China, the first American merchant ship to voyage to China, anchored at Guangzhou in 1784, China and the U.S. had their first encounter. The success of this venture ignited a strong desire among New England merchants to widen its markets in China[1].

Throughout much of the 19th century, the United States played a limited role in Chinese affairs. In the early years of the nineteenth century, some American merchants involved in the opium smuggling in order to reap high profits. After the Qing government signed the humiliating Treaty of Nanking in 1842, the U.S. government appointed the Massachusetts Congressman Caleb Cushing as its first ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to China. In 1844, Cushing negotiated an original China-U.S. trade deal with the Qing Empire, known as the Treaty of Wanghia[2]. Although on the basis of inequality, the Wanghia Treaty established formal diplomatic relations between the two countries. After the conclusion of the treaty, the United States maintained diplomatic representation in China at Guangzhou. Meanwhile, American missionary work, such as establishing factories, colleges and hospitals, grew in the treaty ports[3].

In World War I, as previously active European powers withdrew forces and resources from China, the U.S. made efforts to expand its share in Chinese market. During this period, Americans were more concerned about maintaining their own commercial access and were prepared to do little in practice in supporting Chinese sovereignty. In 1937, Chinese and Japanese forces clashed on the Lugou Bridge near Beijing, throwing the two nations into a full-scale war[4]. However, the U.S. officials didn't take a strong stance to help China for fear of provoking Japan. It was until that the United States watched Japanese forces sweep down the coast and then into the capital of Nanjing, popular opinion swung firmly in favor of the Chinese. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the World War II, the United States repeatedly sought to use China for its own strategic purposes. After Japan's defeat, the U.S. forces flew tens of thousands of Kuomintang (KMT) troops into Japanese-controlled territory and allowed them to accept the Japanese surrender[5].

On October 1st, 1949, Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong declared the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Meanwhile, Chiang Kai-shek and his forces fled to Taiwan to regroup and plan for their efforts to retake the mainland. However, the U.S. government took steps that allied it more firmly to Taiwan. Therefore, Washington lost chance to open Sino-American relations in the immediate aftermath of the founding of the PRC. It was until 1972, when

the U.S. President Richard Nixon visited China, initiating a years-long process to establish formal diplomatic ties with China. During his visit, on February 28th, Washington and Beijing issued a joint communiqué, known as “the Shanghai communiqué”. This communiqué established that the two countries should abide by the “one China” principle, which provided the basis for the normalization of China-U.S. relations[6]. A new era began with a rapprochement during Richard Nixon’s presidency. When Jimmy Carter took office in January 1977, a significant improvement in China-U.S. relations seemed far from inevitable. During his presidency, the most dramatic moment in Sino-American relations occurred on December 16, 1978, simultaneously published the Joint Communiqué of the People’s Republic of China and the United States Concerning the Establishment of Their Diplomatic Relations. Starting from January 1st, 1979, the two countries officially established diplomatic relations, marking a historic turning point in the bilateral relations. However, in April 1979, the U.S. Congress rewrote and passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), treating Taiwan the same as “foreign countries, nations, states, governments, or similar entities[7]”. The TRA also guaranteed arms sales to Taiwan to “maintain the island’s self-defense capability”, diluting the glow of the Normalization Communiqué.

During the 1990s, China-U.S. relations were dominated by Taiwan, non-proliferation and allegedly “unfair trade practices” by China[8]. Worse still, in 1999, bilateral relations underwent a major downturn as a result of the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May, provoking large anti-American protests in China[9]. Despite tensions, the final years of 1990s witnessed positive developments on the Sino-U.S. relations since both sides recognized that they needed to work together to achieve environmental, trade, and diverse other non-security goals.

George W. Bush became president in 2001 with a reputation of toughness toward China. During his presidency, economics provided a vital glue for the bilateral relationship. However, in 2005, bilateral relations took a turn for the worse because of rising economic conflicts. Washington began impose unilateral trade bullying and double trade standards on China, primarily over China’s currency policies, Intellectual Property Rights obligations, Chinese government subsidies and safety of Chinese goods[10]. Moreover, diverse tensions linked to the Taiwan issue deteriorated Sino-U.S. relations, such as Washington’s efforts to increase high-level U.S.–Taiwan government interactions and its initiatives to strengthen U.S.–Taiwan military ties. To maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits, Beijing adopted the anti-secession law[11], posing a tougher posture toward Washington. Even so, cooperation dominated the two superpowers under Bush presidency.

In the beginning of his administration, President Barack Obama followed the legacy of Bush administration in maintaining its relations with PRC where he gave a robust weight on cooperation. However, as China was rising and becoming more prominent in Asia and world affairs, the U.S. leaders were increasingly see China as a foe of the United States. On the one hand, China’s economic growth was dramatically affecting global and regional economy. For example, China’s increasing economic strength helped to maintain world economic stability in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis thus hindered Washington’s leadership. On the other hand, Washington claimed that, China’s rising influence in the political and military dimensions damaged

Washington’s efforts in the Asia-Pacific Region. Therefore, in early 2009, the Obama administration sped up the adjustment of foreign strategy based on the concept of “smart power[12]”. Meanwhile, members of the ruling team visited Asia-Pacific countries for many times, stressing repeatedly the great significance of the Asia-Pacific to the U.S.

3. Bilateral Relations in a New Era

In the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, 2012, Xi Jinping assumed the role of president, China-U.S. relations stepped in a new area. From 2013 to 2016, during Barack Obama’s presidency, as Chinese scholar He Yafei put it, the China-U.S. relations face a “deficit of trust[13]” for both sides distrusted each other on a variety of issues, including Taiwan, the South China Sea and cybersecurity. However, both leaders reaffirmed the overall direction of the bilateral relationship and reassured each other that both sides wanted to move it forward. Thus, when tensions between the two countries seem to be growing, China and the United States were able to reach agreements to reassure each other of their mutual commitment to stable, constructive bilateral engagement and explore avenues to manage disagreements such as nuclear non proliferation, and the South China Sea, and prevent severe disputes.

However, from 2017 to 2023, after Donald Trump took office, China-U.S. relations experienced a linear downward spiral. Both China and the United States are involved in a prolonged stand-off over trade, and in competition that is spilling from political and military areas into a growing number of other spheres, including COVID-19 pandemic, technology and Russia-Ukraine war, severely straining ties of bilateral relations.

The status of Taiwan is among the biggest flash point in China-U.S. relations. Since the establishment of China-U.S. diplomatic ties in 1979, Washington has been hollowing out the one-China principle and spreading false narratives about Taiwan. For example, American leaders are using more descriptive to modify its one-China policy, including its unilaterally-concocted Taiwan Relations Act and Six Assurances that have never been recognized by China. Additionally, regardless of the condemnation from China, Washington and Taipei deepened their official contact. Both then-House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in 2022, and former Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen’s transit through the United States in 2023, bolstered the collusion between the anti-China hawks in Washington and pro-independence forces in Taiwan. Worse still, the U.S. arms sales to China’s Taiwan region have been setting new status quo for China-U.S. tensions. For example, the U.S. officials formulated the so-called “porcupine” strategy -bristling with “a large number of small things” to enhance its military contact with Taiwan. Washington’s flagrant moves seriously harmed China-U.S. relations and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

The South China Sea is unarguably another major dispute in China-U.S. relations. In fact, the United States, as a non-party to the South China Sea issue, has no rights to intervene in maritime issues with China. However, Washington has been instigating tensions in the South China Sea, making itself a disrupter of peace and stability in the region. On the one hand, Washington has been repeatedly hyping up on the “freedom of navigation” and frequently undermines regional security in the South China Sea. For example, in recent years, Washington repeatedly flaunts its power by frequently

sending ships and aircraft there. On multiple occasions, China urged the United States to stop provoking confrontation in this region. Nevertheless, the U.S. Navy hinted these missions were “routine”, implying that such regular provocative harassment by U.S. forces in the South China Sea would continue. On the other hand, the U.S. has been trying to launch a new round of public opinion warfare regarding the South China Sea. Amid the rise in tensions with China, Washington strengthened its partnerships with other Indo-Pacific neighbors. For instance, the United States has signed deals to increase base access, joint exercise training, and weapons transfers with Philippines[14].

In addition to clashing on Taiwan and the South China Sea, the Trade War is another great concern in China-U.S. rivalries. In 2018, China-U.S. relations took a nosedive since then U.S. president Donald Trump imposed punitive tariffs on China. These tariffs were followed by restrictions on both China’s access to high-tech U.S. products and foreign investments involving security concerns and by allegations of “unfair Chinese commercial practices”. After Joe Biden took office, his administration largely preserved Trump’s tariffs. Even worse, the Biden administration slapped major new tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, advanced batteries, solar cells, steel, aluminium and medical equipment. From discriminatory policies like the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act, to tariffs, export controls and investment reviews, Washington’s protect agenda is focused squarely on stalling the Chinese tech sector and “decoupling” the two economies more broadly. However, despite U.S. “de-coupling” attempts, trade links between China and the United States remain tight. On a simple basic level, the trade war has been a negative both for America and China. For the past five years, the Trade War has complicated global supply chains and raised costs.

Covid-19 pandemic is a new domain of conflict in China-U.S. relations. After the outbreak of Covid-19 virus, American officials have been politicizing the pandemic and floating unfounded theories that China was the source of the virus. For example, the then-House minority leader, Kevin McCarthy, and other elected officials have named Covid-19 the “Chinese virus” and one White House official reportedly called it the “Kung Flu”[15]. In response, Chinese officials suggested that the U.S. military could be to blame for the virus. This blame game undermined diplomacy between both countries. It is widely acknowledged that, calling Covid-19 the “Wuhan Virus” or “China Virus” is totally inaccurate and xenophobic. Moreover, it is disrespectful for Washington to promote the “lab leak” theory time and again without any evidence at all[16].

After the outbreak of Russia-Ukraine war, the views of Chinese and U.S. governments diverged the most. Beijing and Washington held opposing views concerning the reasons and solutions for the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Beijing believes that the first thing to do is to secure a ceasefire and to prevent the escalation to a wider war, especially a nuclear war. China’s policy regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict is stated in the 12 points of “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis[17]”. This statement has garnered widespread support and response from the international community. By contrast, Washington is crowded with allegations against China regarding the Ukraine crisis. On the one hand, after Moscow and Beijing declared a “no limits” partnership in 2022, Washington has been hyping up “China-Russia axis” and fabricating facts that China provided military support to Russia. For example, the U.S. officials

asserted that Chinese industrial exports like machinery and semiconductors have helped Russia increase its production of weapons. However, the fact is, China did not provided Russia with arms for its war in Ukraine. Normal trade between China and Russia should not be disrupted or restricted. From China’s perspective, the United States is principally responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis. The war is prolonged by American arms transfers and funding for Ukraine. Moreover, Washington intensified its efforts to press its allies to commit weapons and financial aid to Ukraine, at the risk of pushing the region to the brink of limbo. On the other hand, on the pretext of “aiding Moscow’s war in Ukraine”, the Biden administration use new sanctions as diplomatic leverage to contain China.

4. The Possible End Games in China-U.S. Relations

The term “endgame” arises from chess theory. This theory indicates that the shape of an “endgame” is largely influenced by players’ opening moves and the choices they make in the “middlegame” of a match. Applying to China-U.S. relations, each sides’ “middlegame” moves would largely structured the the parameters of bilateral ties. The inevitability of armed conflict between Beijing and Washington has long remained a matter of hot debate. Since China’s rise is undeniable, quite a few scholars used the “Thucydides Trap” - the historical pattern of conflict that occurs when rising powers challenge ruling ones, to describe fractious China-U.S. relations. For the past decade, as China-U.S. relations have been turbulent, even in a number of areas on the brink of red lines, the notion of a “hot war” between Beijing and Washington has a high-profile airing. The cross-strait tensions, Chinese balloon incident and the war in Ukraine, all prompted the normally cautious to highlight the risk of China-U.S. war. Some scholars even fear that, if other countries – including Russia, Iran, and India – get involved, the world would be on World War III. Under such circumstances, they balk at the prospect of returning to a world where the threat of imminent nuclear annihilation hangs overhead.

However, some strategists both from Washington and Beijing suggested that China and America are not destined for war largely because any military conflict between the two would quickly turn nuclear. Most Chinese scholars agreed that China is not intent on displacing the United States as the world’s dominant military power and is unlikely to present a global military challenge in the near future. On the economic front, China and the U.S. are deeply intertwined. Neither the United States nor China can unilaterally or jointly provide global economic leadership. While the likelihood of near-term conflict is low, some American leaders proposed the notion of “a new Cold War”. They contended that a China-U.S. conflict would almost certainly take the form of a proxy war, rather than a major-power confrontation[18]. After the outbreak of Russia-Ukraine war, it is a commonplace that a new Cold War has begun. In this new Cold War, China and Russia promised no-limits cooperation to counter the United States, as well as other Western countries. More importantly, American analysts see the Sino-Russian partnership as an attempt to upend the global order built by Washington and its democratic allies in Europe and Asia.

Some scholars suggested the nature of China-U.S. tensions might not necessarily result in a Cold War as its fundamental feature is not geopolitical competition. Furthermore, proxy

wars are no longer reliable indicators of the global order. However, it is indisputable that Beijing and Washington are currently competing in every domain, from semiconductors to submarines and from blockbuster films to lunar exploration. Based on this analysis, scholars argued that the shift to a new bipolarity, with the United States and China as key competitors, grows inevitable. Such argument could be well illustrated in the policies and remarks of Biden administration. One example is, when asked about the end state of U.S. competition with China, the Biden administration has identified three lines of effort in U.S. relations with China: investing, aligning, and competing[19]. As tensions between the United States and China continue to escalate, the prospects for investing in or aligning with China are dim. Thus, the only portion of the Biden administration's China strategy that explicitly centers on China is competition. Another example is, the Biden administration has long described its desired relationship with China as one of competition. For instance, while introducing his 2022 National Security Strategy, the U.S. President Joe Biden promised to "win the competition for the 21st century". Likewise, one U.S. official described China as a "pacing threat"-meaning "the only country that can pose a systemic challenge to America economically, technologically, politically and militarily[20]".

Undoubtedly, China and the United States are competing in some fields, particularly in economic and trade area. However, some strategists claimed that competition does not amount to an objective in itself, but rather a description of current China-U.S. relations. Additionally, China does not accept the notion that their ties should be solely defined by competition. From China's perspective, Washington's perceptions of China as a long-term strategic competitor and "most consequential geopolitical challenge" are deeply flawed[21]. Because the world needs both China and the United States to work together to minimize the dangers of global problems. Thus, China has been pursuing healthy competition that fosters mutual improvement, rather than rivalry aimed at mutual destruction. For instance, during the China-U.S. presidential summit in 2013, China's President Xi called for a "new type of major-power relationship" as a framework for future bilateral relations. He implied that, China and the United States should avoid conflict, cooperate, and develop a win-win relationship in the age of economic globalization. While meeting the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Xi told the top U.S. diplomat that the two superpowers "should be partners rather than rivals" and should help each other succeed rather than hurt each other[22]. Although Beijing and Washington have different views on the competition of bilateral relations, there is one thing in common - if relations between the two economic giants further deteriorate in the coming years, the endgame is a "lose-lose" situation for both sides.

5. Conclusion

For the past decade, the United States and China managed to reduce the worst negative tail risks, including outright decoupling and military conflict. However, in the face of Washington's increasingly aggressive moves, the risk is still high that Washington and Beijing may clash in some ways. Therefore, most urgently, every effort must be taken to avoid an escalation of tensions and outright conflict in the Taiwan

Strait and South China Sea. Meanwhile, it will be equally important that both sides move forward with cooperation on all fronts, including on trade, technology, artificial intelligence, climate, and security issues. Creating sound and stable China-U.S. relations requires efforts from both sides. As Chinese officials pointed out that, a healthy and stable China-U.S. relationship requires the right perception of each other and tangible actions from both sides, consistent with the consensus of the two heads of state.

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