

## Preserving U.S.-China Relations Through the Coming Presidential Campaign

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Last week, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was a triumph for General Secretary Xi Jinping. He turned what has historically been a two-term post into a likely life-time hold on the position. Moreover, his authority appears to approach that of Mao Zedong, who held singular roles in both revolution and government.

Xi had no warm words for Washington. Although he did not mention the U.S. by name, he obviously had America in mind when he told party members: “Confronted with drastic changes in the international landscape, especially external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade and exert maximum pressure on China, we have put our national interests first, focused on internal political concerns, and maintained firm strategic resolve.”

The Washington-Beijing relationship is deteriorating, with no course-correction in sight. Policymakers on both sides can, and do, cite a succession of perceived slights, insults, betrayals, disappointments, and threats.

Indeed, both sides are finding it hard to even talk with one another. Although President Joe Biden would like to halt the slide, his policies and rhetoric—trade restrictions and promises to defend Taiwan, to start—leave no doubt that Washington’s objective now is to contain the People’s Republic of China. Hostility toward Beijing in Congress, especially among Republicans, is even greater.

A plethora of interest groups, including labor unions, human rights groups, and military hawks, have long criticized the PRC. Still, the U.S.-China relationship remained relatively solid even then, resting upon a strong foundation of trade established by corporate America. However, in recent years many U.S. businesses, frustrated by legal disabilities and unfair treatment, have turned hostile, some throwing their support behind President Donald Trump’s trade war.

Perhaps most ominously, the American public, usually only minimally aware of international affairs, has also shifted against the PRC. According to the Pew Research Center, 82 percent of Americans now have an unfavorable view of Beijing, up six points from last year. Popular attention and dissatisfaction guarantee that China will be an issue in the upcoming presidential election.

The 2020 campaign featured bipartisan demands for a tougher approach toward the PRC. That is likely to repeat when the contest begins again next year. Indeed, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, an undeclared presidential candidate, already appears ready to wreck bilateral Sino-American ties—urging diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, for instance. And with former president Donald Trump and several Trump-wannabes in the political wings, other Republicans might follow Pompeo. Then the Democratic candidate, whether Biden or someone else, would be loath to appear “weak” in dealing with the PRC.

The risk of accelerating deterioration in relations is exacerbated by intensifying military activity in East Asia-Pacific waters. Although no one desires war, despite often harsh rhetoric and fever-pitch rage on social media, an inchoate feeling of inevitable conflict mixed with rising antagonism, and increasing numbers of planes and ships in the same space, would create a particularly dangerous environment. Toss in looming elections and one could imagine a violent incident acting as a modern Sarajevo 1914, triggering a confrontation and even conflict.

Xi’s reappointment ends Beijing’s political uncertainty and frees him to again focus on governing. With Biden likely to be sucked into presidential politics by the end of next year, Xi should attempt to engage Washington in an effort to lower the international temperature before the onset of the U.S. presidential campaign. The purpose would be largely short-term, to defuse dangerous situations that could get much worse amid passions inflamed by political imperatives. Doing so also would preserve space for longer-term negotiation in search of appropriate *modi vivendi* for different issues. Objectives should include:

- Tame rhetoric on both sides about the bilateral relationship. This is not the first and will not be the last time great powers have to work together despite conflicting interests. Trust might be in short supply, but publicly denouncing each other’s motives and character will make accommodation and cooperation more difficult.
- Increase communication over contentious issues, seeking to clarify red lines and explore possibilities for mutual forbearance when fundamental interests come into conflict. Continuing to push seemingly insoluble issues, such as Taiwan, into the future is one way to avoid conflict and preserve opportunities for eventual peaceful resolution.
- Expand military contacts and exercise joint restraint in military operations to reduce the potential for another aerial collision, like that during the George W. Bush administration, or similar naval incident. World War I offers a terrible reminder of how the unexpected can pull great powers into war despite recognition and that the results are likely to be catastrophic.
- Restrain Chinese interference with U.S. citizens and residents, such as pressure on American firms to change their business practices, threats against dissident expats, and

efforts to restrict academic freedom of discussion. Such incidents offer only minimal benefit to Beijing, but do much to poison not only official relations, but the American public's view of the PRC.

- Seek to resolve issues with the greatest political salience. For instance, trade in non-strategic goods. An accommodation, involving repeal of the Trump tariffs and improved market access for U.S. companies, should be possible. Perhaps a dialogue over human rights, in which Washington takes its harshest criticisms private while Beijing tempers the severity of its policies (releasing some prisoners for time served, for instance).
- Develop areas of potential cooperation. It might be possible to set aside COVID to promote greater global health resiliency before another pandemic arises. Environmental issues, starting with climate change, warrant international collaboration. Reducing the political temperature might facilitate coordination between China's economic development programs, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the familiar Bretton Woods institutions and later additions.

Of course, even these issues would not be easy to resolve, especially if the mid-term election delivers a Congress hostile to the Biden administration. Nevertheless, the best chance for progress is during the coming months before the presidential contest fully erupts. And even modest successes might help insulate bilateral ties from the worst political excesses likely during the campaign.

Indeed, the latter is vital if the world's two most important countries are to maintain a passable working relationship. If bilateral relations continue to spiral downward, China and America face a difficult, even threatening future, with the possibility of falling into a new Cold War, and perhaps even coming to blows. No one wants a conflict between the world's two most powerful conventional powers, armed with nuclear weapons.

Presidents Biden and Xi together have a responsibility to create a different and better future. Americans and Chinese might not find it easy to remain friends. But it is vital that they not become enemies.

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