

## **When America's Election is Over, Americans Will Have to Address China**

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Earlier this year, President Donald Trump hoped to make China one of the key issues in his reelection campaign. After the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crash ravaged his administration, he tried to turn popular anti-China sentiment into a magic elixir to revive his electoral chances.

However, Trump's effort floundered. Although the public was open to his criticisms of Beijing, he earlier had lavished praise on President Xi Jinping, including the latter's efforts against the advancing coronavirus. Moreover, Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden similarly attacked China, narrowing differences between the two candidates.

The American people soon lost interest. Polls indicated that U.S.-China relations fell down the list of voter priorities. Although opinion of the PRC has turned sharply negative, due to both American political rhetoric and maladroit Chinese actions, the issue didn't likely affect who most voters supported.

With the election over, both nations should put the campaign behind them. Chinese officials recognize the unique challenge posed by the election and have largely ignored the sharp attacks from American presidential and congressional contenders alike. This strategy worked in the past. In 2012, Mitt Romney and Barack Obama both launched competing ad wars over trade with the PRC. After the vote, the Obama administration promptly forgot the issue.

This time, however, the controversy will not be so easy to set aside. First, the American public thinks more about the PRC these days and thinks badly about it. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs' latest survey found: "For the first time in nearly two decades, a majority of Americans describe the development of China as a world power as a critical threat to the United States...At the same time, American feelings towards China have fallen to their lowest point in Council polling history, dating back to 1978. Reflecting these changing attitudes, Americans are now split on whether the U.S. should cooperate and engage with China or actively seek to limit its influence."

More seriously, American elites have reached a new, much more negative consensus on American relations with China. Concern over human rights has spread from Left to Right, with both sides demanding a U.S. response. Complaints over Chinese commercial and economic

practices also have spread from Democrats to Republicans, with important members of the business community, frustrated with Beijing policies, joining the call for countervailing American action. Finally, many on the Left sound indistinguishable from those on the Right when expressing concern over Chinese aggressiveness in East Asian waters, including the treatment of Taiwan.

Helping draw together these disparate grievances is COVID-19. Even Democrats critical of President Trump's handling of the pandemic blame Beijing for the disease's spread. Although Republicans have taken the lead in Congress in drafting anti-Chinese legislation, such measures could collect many Democratic votes as well.

This means both governments will have to work hard to maintain a civil, cooperative relationship amid rising public discord. With the political campaign over, American interlocutors, whether Trump officials expected to continue in office or Biden transition officials tasked with reviewing policy and choosing personnel, should meet with their Chinese counterparts to chart a course to rescue the bilateral relationship from descending into a kind of cold war, which would benefit neither side.

The transition, even if merely from one Trump term to another, could be used by both Beijing and Washington to take a breather and allow political waters to calm. However, disagreeable issues should not be allowed to remain unaddressed for long. Although there is a tendency in Washington to allow the urgent to push out the important, the incoming president must prioritize relations with China. The issue will never go away, but it would be dangerous to allow antagonisms, misperceptions, misunderstandings, and disagreements to compound.

The next step should be to plan detailed talks on issues that divide the two governments. Among the many challenges: trade, commercial practices, cyber conflict, Belt and Road Initiative, human rights, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and navigational freedom/territorial claims. The objective would be to clearly set forth opposing claims, understand the most important "red lines," and highlight disputes most likely to build tensions and spark retaliation.

At the same time, both sides should lower their public rhetoric. "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" has matched American political charges and both are counterproductive. They encourage retaliation, rile popular nationalism, and anger even responsible officials. Both governments might perceive domestic political benefits, but the international cost could prove high. Finding a *modus vivendi* over contentious issues is difficult enough without pouring rhetorical fuel on policy fires.

The two governments should look for areas of potentially quick progress. For instance, a downward spiral in visa access, academic exchanges, and media presence undermines the broader relationship. Absent the presence of serious security concerns, both sides should commit to increased contact between populations. Where problems are highlighted—e.g., the impact of Confucius Institutes on university practices—appropriate changes should be agreed to maintain contact. Part of this discussion should be about reciprocity, which remains essential, even while recognizing that the U.S. begins as a more open society and thus is generally more accepting of foreign contact.

Over the long-term, the two governments should look for areas where cooperation is possible, and perhaps even mandatory—environmental and health care issues, for instance. On other matters, it might be possible to conduct a dialogue amid significant disagreement, such as over human rights. Some conflicts might require the two sides to accept incompatible opinions which inevitably lead to responses and consequences on both sides, as with Hong Kong.

Of greatest concern will be security issues, which require careful thought over what interests are regarded as truly essential, what controversies can be finessed or delayed, and what sensitive questions, such as territorial sovereignty, can be sidestepped through cooperation and joint action, such as resource development. More broadly, how the U.S. and PRC relationship can evolve without forcing individual countries and the entire Asia-Pacific to take sides.

Political campaigns are hard work. But not nearly as difficult as repairing relations between the world's existing and potential superpower. The two governments should decide that a new cold war is not an option, and concentrate on finding solutions to prevent one from occurring.

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