

## Beijing Should Beware Illusions that Undermine U.S.-China Relationship

Doug Bandow

June 10, 2021

U.S.-China relations headed sharply downward during the Trump administration. So far, alas, little has changed under the Biden administration. The Anchorage meeting got the two sides off to a contentious start. Washington's sharp partisan divide is likely to limit President Joe Biden's willingness to make any serious concessions to the People's Republic of China.

Mutual illusions bedevil the relationship. On the U.S. side are several widely believed myths: for instance, Americans underestimate Chinese nationalism and overestimate their influence. However, Chinese officials and people also see the U.S. through a glass darkly, increasing chances of misunderstanding and conflict.

For instance, fueling a sense of Chinese triumphalism is the belief that the U.S. is divided and enervated. That America has peaked and is unable to compete in the future. This assumption reflects the truths of political madness, COVID-19 mismanagement, economic mistakes, and disastrous military interventions of recent years. However, Beijing risks making a serious mistake by underestimating America and its people.

The U.S. is a young nation. The first British colony was established on the North American continent in 1607. The United States of America did not come into being until 1789. In the relatively short time since America became the world's greatest economic and military power, dominating world affairs.

Although the U.S. is currently suffering through difficult times, its people always have demonstrated great resilience. The American system, decentralized down to the individual and family, encourages entrepreneurship, innovation, and adaptation. These virtues are most important when the challenges are greatest. Moreover, Americans' ingrained commitment to liberty is an important reason why immigrants the world-over come to the U.S. While President Donald Trump foolishly attempted to wall off the country, the Biden administration has begun to reverse the worst Trumpian excesses.

Still, especially after the Trump presidency, many Chinese assert the superiority of the PRC's political system. No doubt, the former has demonstrated greater stability, solidity, and competence of late. However, the coercion necessary to force agreement and conformity exacts a high price. Even top party officials refused to challenge decisions of Mao Zedong later recognized as costly in life and resources; this practice risks repeating itself today as Xi Jinping concentrates and centralizes power. Governments in democratic societies sometimes make grievous errors but are more likely to discover and correct such mistakes.

Moreover, democracy has important strengths. It involves more people in making decisions about the nation's future and holds accountable even the most powerful officials. The 2016 election revealed internal dissension that had been ignored and empowered those who felt left. The failures of the Trump administration led the public to correct America's course last November. Frustrated anti-Trump activists were heard and now have an opportunity to put their vision into effect.

Beijing mistakenly assumes that its growing economic strength assures success in its increasingly contentious competition with the U.S. Rapid economic growth has turned China into a commercial powerhouse and desirable economic partner around the world. With investment and especially trade—which surpasses America's commerce with an increasing number of nations—has come political influence. Confident that its economic advantage ensures a winning hand, Beijing has been imposing economic sanctions to advance geopolitical ends in Australia, South Korea, and other nations.

However, the PRC relies almost exclusively on this factor. Even though China is by far the older nation, Washington has longer and deeper political relations with most nations. The U.S. also has far more significant security ties with a score of countries. Ultimately, many people and governments prioritize defense over commerce.

Moreover, America has a welter of personal, familial, cultural, and historical ties around the globe. Relations between the U.S. and Seoul are far warmer than between Beijing and either South or North Korea. Many South Koreans moved to America, with extended families now spanning the Pacific. Ethnic Chinese also live around the world, but their presence, in contrast, often has complicated government-to-government relations.

In addition, past experiences, national values, and future expectations have created historical, emotional, and philosophical connections with other nations, something Beijing largely lacks. Although a country such as Australia often acts independently of Washington, the former is still drawn toward America by many ties beyond economics. Europe is similar.

The PRC discovered this reality in many nations' response to China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy and other coercive actions. Australia, despite significant commercial ties to China, reaffirmed its stance after the PRC targeted Aussie exports. Although South Korea refuses to criticize Beijing over human rights, the former has consistently emphasized its military relationship with America. At the same time, South Korean views of China cratered. Much of the same phenomenon is evident in Delhi: Despite its natural geographic and important commercial ties with the PRC, the former has moved much closer to the U.S. in recent years.

Perhaps Chinese leaders' most serious mistake is doubting America's will to fight. Years ago a Chinese general sneered that the U.S. would not risk Los Angeles for Taipei. There are important practical arguments against Washington intervening in distant territorial disputes, many of which I have raised. However, in the past Americans have not hesitated to act out of principle and loyalty rather than interest.

For instance, the issue of slavery divided the South and North in the U.S. Civil War. The Spanish-American War was triggered by Washington's demand that Spain end its brutal war against Cuban insurgents. President Woodrow Wilson took the U.S. into World War I hoping to protect freedom of navigation and promote a more liberal world order. Washington intervened in Kosovo and Libya in the name of protecting civilians. While some of these wars involved interest as well as principle, Americans demonstrated their willingness to put other considerations, including friendship, before security. Americans today are no different.

Relations between America and Russia are bad, but the two are very unlikely to end up at war. Although China and the European Union increasingly are at odds, Europeans are unlikely to follow up their military sorties to the Pacific with real action. However, the U.S.-China relationship is more important and less stable.

Washington and Beijing are contending for dominance over the same area, with both claiming to better represent the people of Asia. The result could be a costly, even catastrophic, collision. Such a result is made more likely by illusions held by both sides. Both governments must strive to see each other clearly. And to find ways to cooperate in the face of increasing public hostility.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.*