

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

America and China: Destined for Conflict or Cooperation? We Asked 13 of the World's Most Renowned Experts

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The future of the Sino-American relationship is deeply uncertain.

Though the United States will remain at the top of the international hierarchy for the foreseeable future, it is undoubtedly experiencing relative decline, while China is indisputably on the rise. The two titans of the 21st century maintain an uneasy rapport, conscious of each other's power, suspicious of each other's intentions, and covetous of the stature that accompanies global supremacy.

In its approach to China over the past few decades, U.S. leadership has oscillated between dismissive arrogance, sincere cooperation and brazen competition.

Tragic foul-ups, like the Clinton administration's accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the in-air collision of a U.S. spy plane with a Chinese fighter jet early in the Bush administration, are seen in Beijing as the hubristic blunders of an intemperate bully. More deliberate taunts continue to this day, exemplified by the Obama administration's pointless opposition to innocuous Chinese initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, overwrought anxiety toward the Belt and Road Initiative and President Trump's imperious trade war ultimatums.

Yet, on crucial diplomatic and security efforts, from the Six Party Talks and the Paris climate accord to post-9/11 counterterrorism cooperation and the Iran nuclear deal, the United States capitalized on overlapping interests while respecting China's position as a vital global player. Though less than perfect, the bilateral economic relationship has been immensely beneficial to both sides.

However, the U.S. approach at times appears to resemble outright containment. The cutthroat geopolitical undertones of the so-called Pivot to Asia were lost on no one. Washington's attempts to counter Beijing's claims in the South China Sea have, if anything, hardened China's

posture. And the Trump administration's blunt confrontational approach seems to have provoked even greater distrust across the Pacific.

Rising powers must be managed carefully. China's growing strength will surely translate into a more ambitious foreign policy, but how we deal with it is up to us.

So far, China shows no inclination toward aggressive territorial conquest. Nor is it clear that a Chinese-led order would differ much on the essentials than the U.S.-led order. Indeed, China's rise is more a threat to America's status as the indispensable nation than any tangible threat to national security.

Many great powers throughout history have let fixations about national prestige thrust them into destructive wars. If the Sino-American relationship is to remain peaceful, we must learn to forfeit such superficial pretensions and focus on narrow, concrete security and economic interests. Failure to do so may lock us into a costly cold war that neither country can win.

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