

Overview of U.S. Foreign Policy towards China and Uncertainty under Donald Trump and Joe Biden Administrations

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Abstract

In this paper, the author aims to investigate the U.S. foreign policy toward China and uncertainty under the Donald Trusmp and Joe Biden administrations. The United States has upheld the principle of the One China Policy for decades and stated that regarding cross-strait relations, the U.S. opposes any unilateral changes to the status quo from either side, does not support Taiwan region independence, and expects cross-strait differences to be resolved by peaceful means. The geopolitical, economic, and technological challenges and opportunities will influence U.S.-China relations in the next decades. The various factors will be weighed when evaluating the future trajectories of US-China foreign policy between each country, domestic and external factors might have a greater impact on how the relationship of these countries will be in the future. The U.S. leaders' approach to policy is pragmatic; China's is conceptual. America has never had a powerful threatening neighbor; China has never been without a powerful adversary on its borders. Americans hold that every problem has a solution; the Chinese think each solution is an admission ticket to a new set of problems. Americans seek an outcome responding to immediate circumstances; the Chinese concentrate on evolutionary change. Americans outline policies of practical "deliverable" items; the Chinese set out general principles and analyses where they will lead. Chinese thinking goes along the Communism principles but embraces a traditional Chinese way of thought to an increasing extent; neither is intuitively familiar to Americans.

Keywords

Geopolitical, Foreign Policy, Uncertainty, Security Dilemma, Power Transition

1. Introduction

The United States has pursued an engagement strategy toward China for almost four decades. Former United States President Nixon aimed to integrate China into the international system regardless of party affiliation (Sempa, 2002, “Geopolitics: From Cold War to the 21st Century”). That decision has been and continues to be one of the greatest American foreign policy successes post-World War II era. The U.S. engagement strategy toward China and alliance relationships in the Asia-Pacific region made it possible for Asia-Pacific nations to focus on economic development at home instead of strategic competition abroad (Sempa, 2002, “Geopolitics: From Cold War to the 21st Century”).

Now, nearly 5 decades after U.S.-China normalisation, China is an upper-middle-income nation. China’s economic growth allows it to expand its military capabilities and foreign policy ambitions. That is a natural expansion (Houghton, 2017). Beijing is increasingly unwilling to sit on the sidelines and watch other nations shape international norms. Today, instead of biding their time, Chinese leaders are experimenting with new ways to use their nation’s growing strengths to shape the international environment in China’s favour on some issues, those efforts dovetail with U.S. interests, so China’s new global leadership is opening up new opportunities for cooperation. Where U.S.-China interests are not aligned, however, Chinese actions are reheating old frictions and creating new ones. Those frictions—notably in the South China Sea—are triggering new debates in the United States about the overall foreign policy strategy toward China (Kant, 1997: pp. 251-300).

Some U.S. observers discount the new opportunities for cooperation and argue that because some challenges in the U.S.-China relationship appear difficult to navigate, the United States should scrap the entire engagement strategy and begin treating China as a strategic rival. Those arguments are misguided (Hassan Hamdan AIAKim, “U.S. President Joe Biden’s towards the Gulf”).

The fundamentals of the U.S.-China relationship are the same today as in the 1970s when the United States first reached out to turn this former rival into a strategic partner (Atallah S. Al Sarhan, United States Foreign Policy and the Middle East).

Chinese leaders put domestic economic growth and stability above all other policy goals; they still view the U.S.-China bilateral as China’s most important foreign policy relationship and want that relationship to be peaceful and cooperative.

The Chinese military still focuses first and foremost on defending the Chinese Communist Party’s right to govern the Chinese mainland and its territories. These fundamentals have not changed. What has changed in recent years is China’s capabilities and the tools Beijing is using to further its domestic and foreign policy interests. Those changes call for some tactical adjustments on the U.S. side. Those changes do not warrant an abandonment of the engagement strategy that has brought and can continue to bring, decades of enduring peace in Asia-Pacific

nations, including the United States.

2. Levels of Analysis of US Foreign Policy

One of the key questions in the international system and foreign policy is how you examine state behaviour.

2.1. System-Level Analysis

The system-level analysis examines state behaviour by looking at the international system. In this level of analysis, the world system is the cause and state behaviour is the effect. Characteristics of the global system cause states to behave the way they do. Change in the international system will cause a change in state behaviour. The key variable in the international system is the power of a state within the system (Busse, 1995). Some states are powerful; others are weak. So for example, the Cold War had two powerful states. Therefore, the central cause of all state behaviour in the Cold War was that the US and USSR were the two powerful states in a bipolar system.

The current international system is the unipolar system, one superpower (or hyperpower), and that defines the behaviour of all other states. (See neo-realism below). So this level of analysis might explain the US intervention in Iraq, Libya, and Syria and the military support for Ukraine against Russia and Israel's military backing towards Palestinian as a matter of the US, the only powerful state, flexing its muscles to police the world against states that threaten it.

2.2. State-Level Analysis

The state-level analysis examines the foreign policy behaviour of states in terms of state characteristics. For example, some scholars say that all democracies behave a certain way; they don't fight with other democracies. Some scholars might look at the different behaviours of weak or strong states; states that live in rough neighbourhoods (Germany or France) vs. states that live in more benign surroundings (the US) scholars might say that the foreign policy behaviour of every state is a cultural characteristic, defined by the historical legacy of the state, the religious or social traditions, or the economic and geographic nature of the state itself (see constructivism below). State level of analysis might explain the US intervention in Iraq as a function of the missionary quality of US foreign policy.

2.3. Organizational Level Analysis

The organizational level analysis examines how organisations within a state function to influence foreign policy behaviour. States do not make decisions, organisations bargain with each other to create a foreign policy that is a compromise between competing organisations.

2.4. Individual-Level Analysis

Individual-level analysis focuses on people. People make decisions within nation-

states and therefore people make foreign policy. Scholars might look at the roles of different leaders. This level of analysis might explain World War II by examining the role of Hitler. It might look at the end of the Cold War by studying Gorbachev. It might suggest that the economic reforms in China are a result of the transition from Mao Zedong's leadership to Deng Xiaoping's rule.

3. Factors That Influence the U.S. Foreign Policy towards China

The United States foreign policy is an expansion of domestic policy affairs, the domestic economic and social structure of the United States has undergone dramatic changes in the 21st Century. The international system is gradually shifting from a world dominated or led by the United States to a world of "Multiple power players" (Posen, 2016: p. 555). Trump's foreign policy in the foreign policy of the Biden administration, and the influence of domestic politics in the United States on foreign policy making.

4. Liberal Optimists

In foreign affairs, most Americans are liberals. As regards the prospects for peace, cooperation, and understanding among nations, most liberals are optimists (Keohane & Nye Jr., 1972). The future of US-China relations and more generally, regarding the future of world politics, liberals believe in the pacifying power of three interrelated and mutually reinforcing causal mechanisms: economic interdependence and international institutions.

5. Economic Interdependence

Liberals believe that bilateral economic exchange creates shared interests among states. The greater the volume of trade and investment between two countries, the more both sides will have a strong interest in avoiding conflict and preserving peace. The current state of bilateral relations in agriculture, services and NEVs underscores that engagement and cooperation underpinned by self-confidence and mutual trust are essential prerequisites for a more promising future in China-U.S. Relations (Keohane, 1977). The economic exchange between the U.S. and China has increased dramatically since the onset of market reforms in China in the late 1970s. From the start of reform in 1978 to the end of the twentieth century, the value of trade between the two countries grew by more than two orders of magnitude, from 1 billion to almost \$120 billion annually. By 2004 that had doubled to a reported total of \$245 billion.

As China enters the World Trade Organization (WTO) and opens its markets even wider to foreign goods and capital, the density of commercial linkages between the US and China will increase. Economic interdependence has already helped to create a strong mutual interest in peace between the two Pacific powers opening its markets even wider to foreign goods and capital, and the density of commercial linkages between the US and China will increase. Economic

interdependence has already helped to create a strong mutual interest in peace between the two Pacific powers.

6. International Institutions

US-China relations, liberals noted that since the end of the Cold War, there has been a proliferation of regional institutions in East Asia (Lake, 1999). APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum), the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). China has also sought entry into several important global institutions, including the WTO (World Trade Organization) and the nuclear nonproliferation regime. In addition, China has begun to play a more active and prominent role in the United Nations (UN). The growth of international institutions in Asia and the expansion of both the US and China's participation in them will promote contact, mutual understanding, and even trust, reducing the likelihood of gross misperception (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

7. Realist Pessimists

In contrast to liberals, most realists are pessimists. Where liberals see progressive forces leading the world ineluctably to ever-higher levels of prosperity and peace, realists see inescapable laws of nature compelling a recurrent struggle for power and survival. For realists, it is a vicious circle. The reason, most contemporary realists claim, is the persistence of international anarchy. In the absence of higher authority to resolve disputes and impose order, peace has usually proved fleeting and conflict has been the norm. For anarchy, the material power and in particular the military strength of the various states in the international system that has typically been decisive in shaping the patterns of relations among states.

8. China's Power Rising

For realists, the single most important feature of China today is its rising power. The character of the US-China relationship follows from this fact. Monteiro (2014) has argued that China's rising power eminence is contingent on whether the unipolar (Keohane & Robert, 1984), the US, is willing to accommodate economic development. Taking aggregate economic capability as a rough surrogate for overall national power, it is apparent that China's growth has been extraordinarily rapid. As was true of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China's rapidly growing economy brought expanding military capabilities to its train. The GNP has made it comparatively easy for China to sustain a large and expanding military effort in recent years, China's spending on arms and military equipment has grown at an impressive pace.

The high levels of productivity per capita incomes and technological competence that encompasses economic growth should also translate to increasing ability to absorb sophisticated weapons. There are good reasons to expect that China will be able to build and develop more increasingly capable military systems in the years ahead.

Realist pessimists note that, throughout history rising powers have tended to be troublemakers. At least insofar as their more established counterparts in the international system are concerned. The realists thought of regime type, was true of the rising, democratic United States, and autocratic Germany. The external expansion of the UK and France, Germany and Japan, the Soviet Union and the US coincided with the intense growth. As China seeks to assert itself, rising powers are often drawn to challenge territorial boundaries, international institutional arrangements and hierarchies of prestige that were put in place when they were relatively weak. Their leaders and people feel that they were unfairly left out.

9. US-China Security Dilemma

Underlying the growing strategic distrust is an emerging security dilemma—a situation in which one state's efforts to enhance its security will lead others to feel less secure—between Beijing and Washington (Yan, 2019).

Chinese public and elite believe that the Obama administration's pivot or re-balancing to Asia is a thinly veiled attempt to restrain and counterbalance, if not encircle or contain, a rising China (Krasner, 1978). Many U.S. officials and analysts perceive an increasingly assertive China that does not shy away from flexing its muscles, "bullying" its neighbours, and relentlessly pursuing its "narrow" interests.

Numerous moves by the Obama administration have all been perceived in China as evidence of U.S. hostility toward Beijing. These moves have included deploying U.S. Marines to Darwin, Australia; asserting U.S. interests in freedom of navigation in the South China Sea; bolstering military alliances with the Philippines, Japan, and Australia; enhancing security cooperation with Vietnam and India; improving bilateral relations with Myanmar; and beefing up the United States ballistic missile defence systems in East Asia.

The United States will continue to hedge against the rise of China and perceived Chinese assertiveness. It will strengthen its deterrence posture, build its forward deployment, and reinforce military alliances and security partnerships in Asia. Yet, because of the almost inevitable shrinking of the U.S. defence budget, it remains to be seen whether Washington can match its rhetoric with action.

10. US-China Power Transition Theory

The United States and China have experienced many changes in their relations in the past 40 years. Some international security experts posit that the most profound one has begun the apparent power transition between the two nations (Mearsheimer, n.d.). This potentially titanic change was set in motion by China's genuine and phenomenal economic development over the past decade. China's impact on the United States and the US-led international system has been stable.

Historically, most great power transitions were consummated by war. Can China and the United States avoid a deadly contest and spare the world another catastrophe? The good news is that the two nations expressed goodwill in the mid-

2000s, with China's promise of peaceful development and the US's call for China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system.

The bad news is that China and the US still have unsettled issues, some of the two nations' core interests and others indirectly entangled with China's neighbours. Those issues can lead to the two nations stumbling into unintended clashes triggering a repeat of the great power tragedies of the (Kuhn, 1970) past. Some scholars predict that over the next 30 years and beyond, the apparent power transition process will continue to be a defining factor of the US-China relationship. What can we expect from China concerning future international relations? As China's economic, political, cultural and military influence globally, what kind of global power will China become and what relationship will develop with the US? How does the US maintain its relationship in world affairs and a working relationship with China that encourages it to join hands with the US to shape the world?

11. Constructivist Optimists

Constructivists believe that international relationships like political relations are socially constructed. The nature of interactions between two states is not simply the product of objective, material factors, such as the balance of trade balance of power or the structure of domestic institutions. Interstate relations are also shaped to a considerable degree by subjective factors, by the beliefs and ideas that people carry around in their heads and cause them to interpret events in particular ways.

As regards the US-China relationship, constructivists view the possibility that China's increasing participation in international institutions of various kinds will lead to shifts in its strategic culture, in the norms of international behaviour accepted by its leaders and ultimately in their conceptions of national identity.

12. US-China Relations Uncertainty under Donald Trump and Joe Biden Administrations

Neither China nor the United States should rationally wish to see a confrontation develop with a crucial economic partner. For the first time since the rapprochement that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger orchestrated in the early (1970s), an incoming U.S. president seems to be considering translating the China-bashing rhetoric of a presidential campaign into actual policy.

U.S. President Donald Trump complicated bilateral relations between the US and China. Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping should strive to keep US-China relations stable. But this will prove difficult, given not only Trump's Sino-phobic rhetoric but also ongoing disagreements about Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea and North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Moreover, US-China relations could fall victim to US domestic disputes about global trade, the value of the dollar, and protectionism.

Trump's negative image of China argues that China took US jobs and

committed to bringing American manufacturing jobs home but has no policies for doing so. Accuses of China's currency manipulation and push to increase military power in Asia could lead to a clash with China. Shifting relations with Taiwan region by calling on the phone, Tsai Ling-wen, the leader of Taiwan region and the uncertainty about the US role in Asia in general.

Now that the United States has introduced a new set of import tariffs on Chinese goods, the world's two largest economies appear to be on the brink of open economic war developing countries are in danger of getting caught in the crossfire (Sheng, 2024). If one superpower perceives them to be helping the other, Sino-American trade tensions are eroding the value of many of these economics' comparative advantages, such as cheap labour and land (Geng, 2024). Coping with these challenges will require skilful economics statecraft.

The United States does not have a coherent trade policy. It has a political strategy masquerading as a trade policy that has taken dead aim at China (Roach, 2024, Yale University). Unsurprisingly, China has responded in kind. The two superpowers drew on their allies for support, the U.S. leading the G7 and China turning to the Global South.

The Biden administration's new tariffs on Chinese goods are primarily symbolic and political, with negligible economic impact they aim to protect and foster the U.S. clean energy supply chain, particularly in the EV sector. The U.S. tariffs are politically motivated and could undermine industrial policy goals by focusing on geopolitical competition rather than applying uniformly to all countries. High officials in the Biden administration and President Biden have repeatedly proclaimed that America does not seek to decouple from China (He, 2024). The latest move to impose extreme tariffs on certain Chinese goods goes exactly that direction.

13. The Issues in Trump's Foreign Policy

Trump's foreign policy is guided by America first, to achieve that goal of making America great again. The U.S. foreign policy has undergone a series of drastic adjustments, causing shocks in the U.S. relations with the world. Trump launched a global trade war, exited from various multilateral cooperation mechanisms, reshaped the U.S. alliance system, and intensified strategic competition with China (Mead, n.d.: p. 58). These diplomatic actions not only represent the personal style of Donald Trump but also symbolise the transformation of the U.S. foreign policy strategy.

Donald Trump's foreign policy adjustment is most concerned about Sino-US relations. The Sino-US relations fell to the lowest point in more than four decades since the establishment of the diplomatic relations. The issues of Trump's foreign policy towards China are the securitization of economic issues, the COVID-19 pandemic, trade war, withdraw from global multilateral trading system, and the use of national security as an excuse to contain and suppress trade, investment and technology.

14. U.S. Foreign Policy towards China Influence on Global Development

The United States' policy toward China underwent a major shift during the Trump administration, transitioning from a policy of engagement to one of comprehensive competitive relationships. The Biden administration differs from its predecessor in emphasizing dialogues and cooperation with China to resolve common challenges like climate change. Nonetheless, it has de facto succeeded Trump's hardline stance against China (Gao, 1995). That is, Biden has given up on changing China's behaviour through engagement and assumes Beijing, with its increasing military and economic power, to be a competitor that threatens U.S. superiority.

Washington is not expected to break away from its hardline posture toward China at least in the near future. As the relative power gap between the two countries narrows, it has become increasingly difficult for the United States to influence China's behaviour to its liking. November 2022, the Department of Defense (DOD) released its annual report to Congress, 2022 Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (2022 CMPR).

Against this backdrop, there is a widely and deeply shared perception in the United States that China's future actions could threaten U.S. national security. Indeed, ensuring U.S. national security has become the primary factor shaping America's policy toward China. From the U.S. perspective, China's foreign policy seeks to change the Indo-Pacific order to its favour, weakens the alliances that the United States has forged, and leverages China's military and economic power to coerce neighbouring countries. The United States views Beijing's objective as not only altering the regional order but also changing the global international order to suit its interest and deems China has "the economic diplomatic, military, and technological power" to achieve this objective.

As the Biden administration revealed the fact that U.S. security policy assumes geopolitical competition with China means that the era of being able to change its actions has come to a close. For the United States, China is now a "peer competitor" with more power, both economically as well as militarily and politically, and the policy goal of transforming China from within has become unrealistic. Going forward, the United States is anticipated to accept the Chinese political system as a given and aim for "a steady state of clear-eyed coexistence with Beijing on terms favourable to U.S. interests and values," regardless of China's policies.

15. Conclusion

Amidst a flurry of pessimistic analyses and predictions of U.S.-China relations, one prominent Chinese international relations scholar, Professor Niu Jun at Peking University, said a new Chinese approach to the United States. Specifically, on the whole, China should maintain a cooperative relationship with the United States, which should be part of its national strategy—not a policy of convenience.

Indeed, Niu's new essay sheds some light on U.S.-China relations from a

Chinese perspective. It is particularly timely given that both countries are increasingly suspicious of each other's intentions in East Asia and beyond. The United States is suspicious of a rising China that tries to push U.S. influence out of Asia and, in the process, becomes a regional hegemony. China suspects that the United States wants to block its rise for fear of losing its hegemonic status in world politics. Such a deep level of distrust was already evident as early as (2012) when China's Wang Jisi and Kenneth Lieberth in the United States co-wrote a report on strategic distrust between the two powers. China and the ASEAN countries are adjacent neighbours (Hall & Ames, 1995). China has always pursued a good neighbourly and friendly foreign policy and has been willing to be good neighbours, friends, and partners with ASEAN. Furthermore, the foundation of China's foreign policy lies in developing countries. No matter how developed and strong China becomes in the future, it will always safeguard the rights and interests of developing countries, including those within ASEAN.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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