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## **The Current State of U.S.-Chinese Relations: An Assessment.**

**Abstract:** *The relationship between China and the United States has often been contentious, from the earliest efforts to establish a trade relationship between the Chinese Empire in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Today, that relationship remains tense as the two seek to advance their interests, while trying to avoid an escalation of tensions that could escalate into open conflict, especially in regard to Taiwan. Largely driven by the “Century of Humiliation” narrative, China seeks to restore what it perceives as its rightful place in world affairs, and to build a new world order. For the United States the emergence of China as a serious competitor for global influence, represents a threat to the current, post-Cold War world which has largely been the mainstay for the past three decades. Many Americans now view China as an enemy; a view reinforced by politically motivated “China hawks” who relentlessly argue that China is a threat to the current global order, and the role of the United States as the leading world power. These views reflect a lack of understanding about China, not just among the nation’s leaders, but the general public. The result has been a policy debate in the United States over how best to deal with China. What may not be getting enough consideration is a pragmatic approach to Sino-American relations which includes acceptance of that nation as a world power, and management of the relationship in order to minimize, if not eliminate the possibility of a confrontation that could lead to hostilities.*

### **1. Introduction**

For many Chinese today, the ruling class in particular, the period between the First Opium War and the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (1839 – 1949) has been labeled as the “Century of Humiliation.” This narrative provides the basis by which China’s leaders view their nation’s approach to international relations in the present. These views reflect the idea that

the current international system has not changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Made up of strong and weak nation-states, this system is one of competition for supremacy. There is disagreement over whether or not this is a permanent situation, or if it will change over time. Some Chinese argue that China's experiences during the "Century of Humiliation" should serve as a warning since the system is still focused on the humiliation and domination of weaker states by Western interests. Another interpretation holds that the current system is satisfactory because China can now compete with the other major powers. This view argues that China has emerged from the period of humiliation and can now work toward a stable international system and demonstrate its commitment to doing so. Finally, there is the argument that China's past experiences give it a unique point of view that can be used to remake the current international order. No matter which view is subscribed to, this version of China's national history has largely driven Chinese foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

The author of the book *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, Zheng Wang, in a 2014 interview, emphasized the importance of historical memory for the Chinese. Zheng notes that "...historical memory is the most useful key to unlocking the inner mystery of the Chinese, as it is the prime raw material for constructing China's national identity." Although he was referring to the tensions between China and Japan, this statement may be considered relevant to any nation conducting relations with China: "I think it is extremely important for the people of both countries to be aware of the other side's perceptions and understandings of history. As long as both sides remain ignorant of the

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<sup>1</sup> Allison A. Kaufman, "The Century of Humiliation," *Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order*, *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 25, No.1. See also, David Scott, *China and the International System, 1840-1949: Power, Presence and Perception in a Century of Humiliation*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); William A. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives*, March 2004, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 199-218; Matt Schiavenza, "How Humiliation Drove Modern Chinese History," *The Atlantic*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/10/how-humiliation-drove-modern-chinese-history/280878/> (Retrieved July 27, 2023); Harry W.S. Lee, "The Danger of China's 'Chosen Trauma,'" *ChinaFile*, July 27, 2023; <http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/danger-chinas-chosen-trauma> (Retrieved July 27, 2023); China Research Center, "The Clash of Historical Memory: The 'Century of Humiliation' vs. The 'Post WWII Liberal World Order,'" [http://www.chinacenter.net/2014/china\\_currents/12-2/the-clash-of-historical-memory-the-century-of-humiliation-vs-the-post-wwii-liberal-world-order/](http://www.chinacenter.net/2014/china_currents/12-2/the-clash-of-historical-memory-the-century-of-humiliation-vs-the-post-wwii-liberal-world-order/) (Retrieved July 27, 2023); Orville Schell and John Delury, "A Rising China Needs a New National Story," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324425204578599633633456090> (Retrieved July 27, 2023).

other country's perspective and the reasons behind it, finding a solution will remain impossible."<sup>15</sup>

The object of this paper is to briefly review the history of Sino-American relations, discuss the current state of affairs between the two nations, and consider the policy options facing the United States.

## **2. A Brief History of Sino-American Relations**

It should be remembered that the relationship between China and the United States has rarely been smooth or amicable. Contact between the United States and China dates back to the establishment of American independence. No longer subject to the British East India Company's monopoly on Asian trade, American merchants eagerly sought access to the legendary wealth of the Chinese empire. Over the next century, the United States struggled to compete with the other European nations for a piece of the China market as well as to formulate policies that would strengthen and protect American interests in that part of the world. These included the effort to secure a share of the Chinese market for American merchants and investors, support a burgeoning missionary movement along with other efforts to "save" China and westernize the empire, restrict Chinese immigration to the United States, prop up an increasingly weak Chinese government and prevent China's partition by the major European powers and Japan. These concerns led to the issuing of the "Open Door" notes in 1899 and 1900. While calling for equal opportunity for trade and the preservation of China's territorial integrity, the primary goal was to protect American commercial and investment opportunities in China. The other powers active in the competition for economic and other privileges in China gave the Open Door Policy little more than lip service.<sup>16</sup>

For the most part, China was of secondary concern for the United States in the first forty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Notable actions on the part of the United States included support for China in opposition to the Japanese Twenty-One Demands in 1915, support for the Peking Union Medical College, the return of Japanese-held territory in Shandong Province to China,

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<sup>15</sup> Zheng Wang, "In China, History is a Religion," *The Diplomat*, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/in-china-history-is-a-religion/> (Retrieved, June 30, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Moore, Gregory. *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy; Theodore Roosevelt and China, 1901-1909*, pp. 1-32. Lanham, MD. Lexington Books 2015, pp. 1-32.

recognition of the Nationalist Government in 1928, financial aid and additional support to Chiang Kai-shek's government after the Japanese invasion in 1937. The United States and China formally became allies when the United States entered World War II. However, the United States often chose to do little in regard to continued Japanese encroachment on China in the years leading up to World War II, other than criticize Japanese actions. Additionally, the United States enacted new legislation that increased limitations on Chinese immigration.<sup>17</sup> During the war, as recounted by Rana Mitter, in *Forgotten Ally*, American support for the Chinese in their desperate struggle against the Japanese invader, emphasized keeping China in the war but at a minimal cost, as the U.S. supported the allied strategy which focused on defeating Germany first.<sup>18</sup>

The end of the Second World War in 1945 and the subsequent civil war that followed in China brought about the victory of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party in late 1949. Although the United States supported Chiang Kai-shek's regime, efforts to find a compromise solution with Mao's Communist Party that would avoid civil war failed. From this point on, U.S.-Chinese relations have teetered between tension and some degree of cooperation. Tensions occurred over a number of issues ranging from the Taiwan Strait, Tibet, the Vietnam War, China's first atomic bomb test, concerns about the emergence of China as an economic competitor and the trade wars that followed, the status of Taiwan, Chinese espionage activities and accusations of disinformation spreading, the activities of China in the South China Sea, the origins of the COVID 19 pandemic and human rights issues. Positive aspects of the relationship included President Nixon's visit to China, the extension of full diplomatic recognition to China in the Carter Administration, normalization of trade relations under Clinton, efforts to improve trade relations and work toward the reduction of carbon emissions during the Obama Administration. However, friction arose over the administration's announcement of the "Pivot to Asia" policy, which many Chinese viewed as a containment policy directed at China. One

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<sup>17</sup> Sutter, Robert G. *US-China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Present*. (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Lanham, MD. 2022, pp.15-40; See also, Wang, Dong, *The United States and China: A History from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. (2nd edition) Lanham, MD, 2021. A timeline of U.S.- Chinese relations in this period can be found here: <https://history.state.gov/countries/issues/china-us-relations>. (Retrieved July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

<sup>18</sup> Mitter, Rana. *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945*. New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.

observer labeled the “Pivot to Asia” has termed the policy as President Obama’s “biggest mistake”.<sup>19</sup>

Relations during the Trump Administration bounced between acceptance of China’s “One China” policy and trade agreements to the placement of sweeping tariffs on China in response to accusations of Chinese theft of American intellectual property and technology. Ultimately, a trade agreement signed in January 2020 served as a step forward in mitigating the situation, although only a few tariffs were reduced, and China’s subsidization of favored domestic companies was left unaddressed. However, strains remained as the Trump Administration continued to pursue a policy of “toughness” on China throughout 2020. By July, Secretary of State Pompeo declared an end to engagement with the Chinese Communist Party, stating the policy had failed. Under the Biden administration, America’s China policy has continued to fluctuate between tension and efforts to cooperate.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The Current State of Sino-American Relations

As noted above, U.S.-Chinese relations have often been contentious since American traders began seeking to enter the China market in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. This is largely reflective of a conflict between American and Chinese views of the world and the conduct of foreign policy. For example, consider the values-based approach to foreign policy taken by the United States. This is manifested in the desire to promote change in China in ways preferred by the U.S. This approach has often ignored the realities in the U.S.-Chinese relationship and has created a view that China cannot be fully accepted into the global community until it accepts Western norms. Additionally, U.S. policymakers and the American public often reflect American

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<sup>6</sup> A useful timeline of U.S.-China relations since 1949, with links to supporting materials can be found here: <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations> (retrieved July 27, 2023); [https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/agreements/phase%20one%20agreement/Economic\\_And\\_Trade\\_Agreement\\_Between\\_The\\_United\\_States\\_And\\_China\\_Text.pdf](https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/agreements/phase%20one%20agreement/Economic_And_Trade_Agreement_Between_The_United_States_And_China_Text.pdf) (retrieved July 27, 2023); <https://www.voanews.com/a/report-china-spends-billions-of-dollars-to-subsidize-favored-companies-6587314.html> (retrieved, July 27, 2023); see, Sutter, *U.S. China Relations*, pp. 42-158; Wang, *The United States and China*, pp. 126-270; Cheng Li. “Assessing U.S.-China relations under the Obama Administration.” Brookings, August 30, 2016. (Retrieved July 27, 2023); Ford, John, “The Pivot to Asia was Obama’s biggest mistake.” *The Diplomat*, January 21, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-pivot-to-asia-was-obamas-biggest-mistake/>

<sup>7</sup> Sutter, *U.S. China Relations*, pp. 5-7; Inkster, Nigel. “Strained US-China Relations and the Threat to Taiwan.” International Institute for Strategic Studies, Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment, pp. 43-58.

exceptionalism, meaning they view American actions from a morally correct perspective. However, this practice tends to ignore the negative implications of these actions for China.<sup>21</sup>

Second, nongovernment actors tend to reinforce this approach, forcing the government to deal with these elements; thereby strengthening a values-based approach to China. Additionally, many of these people have little or no experience in the development of foreign policy. Leebaert argues that having amateurs involved in the foreign policy process – although they may come from academia, the law, or business - means most have little or no experience in the actual conduct of foreign relations, thereby increasing the potential for errors in judgment that can lead to an international crisis. Inexperienced amateurs in the foreign policy process compels a sense of urgency, increases risk and leads to an illusion that the ethnic, ideological and political concerns of other nations can somehow be managed, if not ignored. Political patronage leads to the appointment of a variety of undersecretaries and counselors who hold key positions in areas directly affecting critical foreign policy decisions, particularly regarding war and peace, yet have limited or no real-world experience in these roles.<sup>22</sup>

Third, despite a strategic interest in China, the U.S. essentially was reluctant to take a leadership role in China before World War II, due to the perceived risk, cost and commitment such a role would require. Forced to do so after Pearl Harbor, as Sutter notes, this period was a source of Chinese disappointment in the U.S., and its lack of help prior to the Japanese attack on the American naval base. Since then, American reactions to a variety of shifts in Chinese policies and leadership, which U.S. policymakers have found disconcerting, have contributed to a lack of trust in Sino-American relations, dating back decades, which remains strong today.<sup>23</sup> Today, the growing divisiveness in American politics has led to increasing attacks on China by American politicians on both sides of the political spectrum – further hindering U.S. relations with China. The second Republican presidential candidates’ debate further underscored the lack of a foreign policy consensus.<sup>24</sup> And former Secretary of Defense rightly notes that both political

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<sup>21</sup> Sutter, *U.S. China Relations.*, pp. 8-11.

<sup>22</sup> Leebaert, Derek. “How Foreign Policy Amateurs Endanger the World.” Politico, October 26, 2022. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/10/26/political-appointees-endanger-foreign-policy-00063259>  
Note also, Sutter, *U.S. China Relations*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Sutter, *U.S. China Relations*, pp. 8-11.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Leslie Vinjamuri. “The Republican debates expose fractures in US foreign policy consensus.” Chatham House, September 29, 2023. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/09/republican-debates-expose-fractures-us-foreign-policy->

parties have failed to convince Americans that developments in China (and Russia) matter. The result, Gates concludes, is that the United States cannot provide a coherent policy response.<sup>25</sup>

As a result, a spirited debate over how the Sino-American relationship should be managed has been underway for some time. Numerous books have been written about the rise of China and the threat that the nation poses to the current international system and American leadership.<sup>26</sup> Politicians have been raising the alarm about China's growing influence on the global stage, the potential threat to American security and as an economic competitor, and they argue for a hard-line approach in Sino-American relations. For example, Friedberg has called for policies that would, first, slow China's growing power and influence and reduce its threat to democracy and an open international system. Second, Friedberg argues the United States and its allies must show China the error of its ways, change the calculations of its rulers and force a reconsideration of its foreign and domestic policies.<sup>27</sup>

The Policy Planning Staff of the Office of the Secretary of State document, entitled "The Elements of the China Challenge", issued in November 2020 and revised in December 2020, highlights the hawkish focus on the Chinese Communist Party. The document bluntly states "...the Chinese Communist Party has triggered a new era of great power competition."<sup>28</sup>

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[consensus?utm\\_source=Chatham%20House&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=14139921\\_CH%20-%20CH%20Newsletter%20-%202029.09.2023&utm\\_content=Republican-CTA&dm\\_i=1S3M,8F2FL,PHH12,YQV0M,1](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/09/consensus?utm_source=Chatham%20House&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=14139921_CH%20-%20CH%20Newsletter%20-%202029.09.2023&utm_content=Republican-CTA&dm_i=1S3M,8F2FL,PHH12,YQV0M,1) (Retrieved September 29, 2023).

<sup>25</sup> Gates, Robert M. "The Dysfunctional Superpower: Can a Divided America Deter China and Russia." *Foreign Affairs*. [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/robert-gates-america-china-russia-dysfunctional-](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/robert-gates-america-china-russia-dysfunctional-superpower?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=special_send&utm_campaign=dysfunctional_superpower_actives&utm_content=20230929&utm_term=all-actives)

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<sup>26</sup> A sampling of the many volumes written on the subject includes: Jacques, Martin, *When China Rules the World, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, New York, Penguin Books, 2012; Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2016; Doshi, Rush. *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2021, Spalding, Robert. *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America Slept*. New York, Penguin Books, 2019 and *War Without Rules: China's Playbook for Global Domination*. New York, Penguin Books, 2022. A more balanced assessment can be found in Economy, Elizabeth C. *The World According to China*. Medford, Polity Press, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg. "An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back Against Beijing." *Foreign Affairs*. August 11, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-08-11/ccp-answer-aggression> (Retrieved August 7, 2023)

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of State, Policy Planning Staff. "The Elements of the China Challenge." November/December 2020, p.1. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf>. (Retrieved August 23, 2023).

The CCP aims not merely at preeminence within the established world order — an order that is grounded in free and sovereign nation-states, flows from the universal principles on which America was founded, and advances U.S. national interests — but to fundamentally revise world order, placing the People’s Republic of China (PRC) at the center and serving Beijing’s authoritarian goals and hegemonic ambitions.<sup>29</sup>

Congress has recently formed the House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has begun an assessment of the current relationship, although, interestingly, the focus is on the CCP rather than the Chinese nation as a whole. Testimony before the committee has featured a number of hardliners who have assailed the relationship and pressed for a decoupling. As Max Boot asserts, the testimony was generally misleading and one-sided. As such, Boot argues the committee “...is engaging in bipartisan alarmism.” The result is a growing concern that such alarmism can eventually lead to a new Cold War.<sup>30</sup> A recent study concludes that Congress is increasing the emphasis on ideological competition, and recent legislation related to China increasingly contains “...value judgments and institutional orientations that guide and constrain diplomatic practice.”<sup>31</sup>

Other “China hawks” focus on American economic ties with China. Congressman Mike Gallagher, a Republican from Wisconsin, who chairs the House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, is trying to end American trade and investment with China, arguing that American trade and investment enables China’s ambition to become a superpower. Although Gallagher admits he is not an expert on China, he views support for these economic ties as “naïve” and claims they have worsened the geopolitical position of the United States.<sup>32</sup> Another critic accuses China of

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Boot, Max. “Democrats and Republicans Agree on China. That’s a Problem.” *The Washington Post*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/06/republican-democrat-china-consensus-hysteria/> (retrieved August 7, 2023); “Capitol Hill finds rare bipartisan cause in China – but it could pose problems.” *The Guardian*, February 26, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/feb/26/chinese-balloon-bipartisan-capitol-hill-risk> (Retrieved August 7, 2023)

<sup>31</sup> Zhang, Y., Wang, F. Studying the narrative of US policy towards China: introducing China-related political texts in Congress. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 10, 431 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01894-6>

<sup>32</sup> James T. Areddy. “The China Hawk in Washington Rattling Corporate Boardrooms.” *The Wall Street Journal*. May 20, 2023. (Retrieved (August 7, 2023)



“weaponizing” the capitalist system against the U.S.<sup>33</sup> And some China hawks agonize over the possibility that American support for Ukraine in its war with Russia is undermining the nation’s ability to deter China.<sup>34</sup>

China hawks will also, undoubtedly, play a role in the 2024 election cycle as advisors to candidates running for office, thereby adding to the anti-China rhetoric.<sup>35</sup> One presidential candidate, North Dakota governor, Doug Burgum, has declared that the U.S. is already in a cold war with China, but “...we just don’t admit it.”<sup>36</sup> China has responded to these aggressive assertions by American China hawks and others in a lengthy rebuttal issued by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>37</sup>

As a result of this political narrative, Americans have come to view China unfavorably. The most recent Gallup Poll regarding American attitudes toward China reveals that only fifteen percent of Americans view China favorably, while 77 percent view Taiwan in a favorable light.<sup>38</sup> The anti-China political narrative has also raised concerns about hate-mongering, along with a lack of policy recommendations to enable the United States to compete with China more effectively.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Keith Krach. “How China weaponizes the capitalist system against us.” The Hill, August 6, 2023. (Retrieved August 7, 2023)

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, Raphael S. “What Washington Gets Wrong About Deterrence.” War on the Rocks, May 22, 2023, [https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/what-washington-gets-wrong-about-deterrence/?\\_s=xzf1vn31rrxht4qah9jo](https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/what-washington-gets-wrong-about-deterrence/?_s=xzf1vn31rrxht4qah9jo). (Retrieved (September 23, 2023).

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Ward and Ari Hawkins. “The China hawks briefing DeSantis. Politico. May 31, 2023. (Retrieved August 7, 2023)

<sup>36</sup> Kelly Garrity. “Doug Burgum: “We are in a Cold War with China, we just won’t admit it.” Politico, July 9, 2023. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/09/doug-burgum-cold-war-china-00105314> (Retrieved August 7, 2023)

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “Reality Check: Falsehoods in US Perceptions of China.” June 19, 2022. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619\\_10706059.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619_10706059.html) (Retrieved August 7, 2023)

<sup>38</sup> Brenan, Megan. “Record Low 15% of Americans View China Favorably.” Gallup, March 7, 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/471551/record-low-americans-view-china-favorably.aspx> (Retrieved August 7, 2023) See also Silver, Huang, Clancy and Fagan. “Americans Are Critical of China’s Global Role – as Well as It’s Relationship With Russia.” Pew Research Center, April 12, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/04/12/americans-are-critical-of-chinas-global-role-as-well-as-its-relationship-with-russia/> (Retrieved August 7, 2023).

<sup>39</sup> Akin, Stephanie. “Facing criticism, Tim Ryan defends anti-China ad in Ohio Senate race.” Roll Call, April 4, 2022. <https://rollcall.com/2022/04/04/facing-criticism-tim-ryan-defends-anti-china-ad-in-ohio-senate-race/> (Retrieved August 9, 2023)

Critics, of course, argue that the “China hawks” call for more aggressive policies to counter or contain China is the wrong approach. Coercion, they argue, will not deter China, nor will it lead to a China that will “do the United States’ bidding.” Instead, such a policy will lead to a greater chance of conflict, strengthen “chauvinistic nationalism” in China and minimize the chance of cooperation in dealing with common problems. A more nuanced approach focused on reducing the risk of nuclear war, an increased effort to coordinate with allies and partners in order to compete when necessary with China while incentivizing China to cooperate in dealing with shared concerns would be preferable. Ultimately the goal should be a stable balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region that would benefit the interests of all nations, revise international trade and investment pacts and adopt methods of international cooperation to address human rights issues and natural disasters around the world.<sup>40</sup> Other critics assail anti-China rhetoric and legislative measures as a catalyst for fueling domestic hatred toward Asian-Americans.<sup>41</sup> Weiss notes that the focus on countering China creates a danger of “losing sight of the affirmative issues, interests and values that should underpin U.S. strategy.” This threatens an “indefinite deterioration” of the relationship with China, the danger of “catastrophic conflict” and could undermine the ability of the United States to maintain its global leadership role as well as the domestic strength of American society and democracy.<sup>42</sup>

Another critic has concluded that the China policy debate in the U.S. “...is increasingly detached from reality.”<sup>43</sup> Larson notes that some China hawks are accusing the Biden Administration of pursuing a policy of détente, when, in actuality, no such policy exists. Biden’s alleged “reset” of U.S. relations with China, the writer states, is actually “wildly exaggerated.” Larson argues that Biden has, for the most part, dealt with China in a manner that is in line with

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<sup>40</sup> Michael D. Swaine, Ezra F. Vogel, Paul Heer, J. Stapleton Roy, Rachel Esplin Odell, Mike Mochizuki, Avery Goldstein and Alice Miller. “The Overreach of the China Hawks: Aggression Is the Wrong Response to Beijing.” *Foreign Affairs*, October 23, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-10-23/overreach-china-hawks> (Retrieved August 9, 2023)

<sup>41</sup> Gavin Bade. “Progressives warn Biden, Congress against fueling hatred with anti-China measures”. *Politico*, 5/19/2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/05/19/china-policies-racism-489688> (Retrieved August 8, 2023)

<sup>42</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss. “The China Trap: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Perilous Logic of Zero-Sum Competition.” *Foreign Affairs*, August 18, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-trap-us-foreign-policy-zero-sum-competition> (Retrieved August 8, 2023)

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Larson, “Hawks hallucinate a China policy that doesn’t exist.” *Responsible Statecraft*, June 6, 2023. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/06/06/hawks-hallucinate-a-us-china-detente-policy-that-doesnt-exist/> (Retrieved August 10, 2023)

the preference of the hawks, but the results have been “middling to poor at best.” Therefore, Larson argues, the China hawks need to pretend that failures of Biden’s China policy are the result of efforts at détente, although that is not the case.<sup>44</sup>

Beckley notes that “...grandstanding politicians, greedy defense contractors, sensationalizing pundits, overzealous human rights activists and belligerent bureaucrats fan the flames of rivalry for profit, creating an echo chamber that crowds out different perspectives.” He suggests that some “individuals are supposedly repeating hawkish narratives to protect their careers. Citing critics such as Fareed Zakaria and Max Boot, Beckley concludes that the increase in such views within the American public have led to irrational aggressiveness and submission to a national hysteria that could lead the United States into a pointless nuclear war.<sup>45</sup> General Mark Milley has called for a “lowering” of rhetoric on China.<sup>46</sup> And, regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine, Cohen argues that the robust response of the United States in its support for that country, “...has strengthened the perception of America and its deterrence capabilities.”<sup>47</sup>

Nair denounces the Western media in general for “China bashing”, asserting that it is “off the charts” and reflects media bias against China and the non-Western world in general.<sup>48</sup> Another negative aspect of the political rhetoric against China is that it is fueling a sense of Sinophobia, leading to a rise in anti-Asian violence in the United States.<sup>49</sup> Finally, an American scholar, writing in *China Daily*, explained that he had resigned from his faculty position at the University of North Carolina, citing an increasing rise of anti-Chinese paranoia on American campuses. Dr. Denis Simon, who has studied Chinese business and technology for forty years,

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Michael Beckley. “Delusions of Détente.” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2023, vol. 102, no. 5, p 10.

<sup>46</sup> Kevin Barron. “Lower the Rhetoric on China,’ Says Milley”. Defense One, March 31, 2023. <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2023/03/lower-rhetoric-china-says-milley/384693/> (Retrieved August 30, 2023)

<sup>47</sup> Cohen, “What Washington Gets Wrong About Deterrence,” [https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/what-washington-gets-wrong-about-deterrence/?\\_s=xzflvn3lrrxht4qah9jo](https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/what-washington-gets-wrong-about-deterrence/?_s=xzflvn3lrrxht4qah9jo). (Retrieved (September 23, 2023).

<sup>48</sup> Chandran Nair. “Anti-China Rhetoric Is Off the Charts in Western Media.” *The Diplomat*, February 21, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/anti-china-rhetoric-is-off-the-charts-in-western-media/> (Retrieved August 10, 2023)

<sup>49</sup> Viet Than Nguyen and Janelle Wong. “Bipartisan political rhetoric about Asia leads to anti-Asian violence here.” *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2021. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/atlanta-shooting-political-rhetoric-violence/2021/03/19/f882f8e8-88b9-11eb-8a8b-5cf82c3dffe4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/atlanta-shooting-political-rhetoric-violence/2021/03/19/f882f8e8-88b9-11eb-8a8b-5cf82c3dffe4_story.html) (Retrieved August 10, 2023); see also, Gavin Bade, “Progressives warn Biden, Congress against fueling hatred with anti-China measures.”, *Politico*. May 19, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/05/19/china-policies-racism-489688> (Retrieved, August 10, 2023)

believes that universities are starting to shy away from China out of a concern the federal government may remove funding opportunities out of national security concerns.<sup>50</sup>

Resolving these competing points of view as the United States struggles to develop a strategy that will enable the nation to find a coherent China policy will mean reconciling, at least to some extent, the divergent goals of each nation. These conflicting policy issues are complex and will require adroit strategic planning and implementation in order to achieve a suitable working relationship between China and the United States while minimizing or avoiding altogether an escalation of tensions that could result in global catastrophe.

#### 4. The Issues

From the Chinese perspective, the issues are essentially fourfold. Opposition to U.S. support for Taiwan is a primary concern, but China is also sensitive to other issues of sovereignty. These include Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang Province, along with territorial disputes with China's neighbors along China's maritime borders. China also contests the United States' role as the dominant strategic partner along the Chinese rim. Finally, there is general opposition to the leadership of the United States in world affairs.<sup>51</sup>

For the United States, the general areas of concern focus on several issues. Economically, these include, the trade deficit, China's currency policies/practices, China's role in financing U.S. budget deficits, poor enforcement of intellectual property rights laws, and extensive industrial espionage focused on U.S. technical firms, Security concerns include the buildup of Chinese armed forces and potential threats to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region and Taiwan in particular, and misinformation/disinformation campaigns.<sup>52</sup> The sovereignty issues mirror China's - status of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang Province, Tibet and other areas on China's maritime borders. China's support for states that don't reflect American standards - North Korea, Iran, Syria and Venezuela, for example - is another concern, as is China's record

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<sup>50</sup> Zhao Manfeng. "US professor: Anti-China paranoia rising on US campuses." *China Daily*, August 8, 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202308/09/WS64d32f0ca31035260b81b25f.html> (Retrieved August 10, 2023); Denis Simon biography, University of North Carolina, <https://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/faculty/directory/denis-simon/> (Retrieved August 10, 2023).

<sup>51</sup> Sutter, *U.S.-China Relations*, pp. 8-11; Economy, *The World According to China*, p. 223)

<sup>52</sup> "US says China's 'global information manipulation' threatens freedoms." *AL Jazeera*, September 29, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/29/us-says-chinas-global-information-manipulation-threatens-freedoms> (Retrieved September 29, 2023)

on human rights, religious freedom, democracy and family planning procedures. Finally, there is Chinese investment, trade and assistance in the resource-rich, but weak, poorly governed states in the developing world.<sup>53</sup>

The current *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* assesses that “...China has the capability to directly attempt to alter the rules-based global order in every realm and across multiple regions, as a near-peer competitor that is increasingly pushing to change global norms and potentially threatening its neighbors.”<sup>54</sup> Key assessments from the report state that Beijing views current U.S.-China relations as “...part of an epoch geopolitical shift and views Washington’s diplomatic, economic, military, and technological measures against Beijing as part of a broader U.S. effort to prevent China’s rise and undermine CCP rule.”<sup>55</sup> China’s response, according to the assessment, is to combine “...growing military power with its economic, technological, and diplomatic influence to strengthen CCP rule, secure what it views as its sovereign territory and regional preeminence, and pursue global influence. The Government of China is capable of leveraging its dominant positions in key global supply chains in an attempt to accomplish its goals, although probably not without significant cost to itself.” The ODNI assessment does note that China faces significant domestic and international challenges that are likely to hinder the aspirations of China’s leaders. “These include an aging population, high levels of corporate debt, economic inequality, and growing resistance to the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) heavy-handed tactics in Taiwan and other countries.”<sup>56</sup>

The ODNI assessment anticipates that China will continue to offer Taiwan inducements to move closer to unification while reacting to perceived increases in support for Taiwan and the conviction that the U.S. is using Taiwan as a pawn to undermine China’s rise and will push back against any increases in support for Taiwan. China is also expected to continue efforts to expand its influence abroad, its promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative and cooperate with Russia in its efforts to challenge the United States. Additionally, China is likely to maintain or expand its

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<sup>53</sup> Sutter, *U.S.-China Relations*, pp. 8-11

<sup>54</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, Unclassified Report*. p. 4. February 6, 2023.

<https://www.odni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf> (Retrieved August 11, 2023)

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

military and WMD buildup and become a world-class leader in space exploration. These efforts are the ODNI judges, another stage in the effort to undermine American influence in the military, technological, economic and diplomatic spheres. China is also viewed as the primary threat to the U.S. in technology and economics.<sup>57</sup> Finally, the assessment warns of the increased threat to the United States of Chinese cyber and malign influence operations.<sup>58</sup>

The ODNI assessment provides plenty of fuel to fire up American China hawks, but, of course, as an intelligence document, the assessment offers no policy recommendations. It is up to those who are the policymakers to consider the conclusions presented in the assessment and determine how to proceed from there.

And that is an important issue. To some extent, the current U.S.-China relationship has echoes of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. But, while the Cold War provided a rationale for American global leadership, the period that followed left the United States with no significant rival on the international stage. Laçiner asserts that this created a period of optimism and support for globalization, humanitarian intervention and regional integration. However, he adds, there were unanticipated consequences that may have gone unrecognized. American and other Western transnational companies, attracted by the lower cost of production, moved their factories to China and other third-world countries. However, these actions contributed to a loss of jobs at home, declining purchasing power, and other issues, resulting in economic changes that also affected American society and politics. An increasing income gap between the lower and upper classes contributed to an increase in polarization and radicalization in the United States and other Western nations, thereby undermining the optimism of the early post-Cold War period.<sup>59</sup>

Further upsetting that hopefulness was the failed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, which cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars, as well as prestige. This was further exacerbated by the financial crisis of 2008, and later by the failures of the Trump administration. At the same time, many of those countries that had been targeted for U.S. and Western investment were now emerging as economic and political power centers in other parts of the

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Sedat Laçiner. "China vs. US: Making of the Second Cold War?". *Modern Diplomacy*, April 23, 2023. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/04/23/china-vs-us-making-of-the-second-cold-war/> (Retrieved August 10, 2023)

world. China in particular had made the world increasingly dependent on it for numerous products throughout the 2010s. Those companies that had invested overseas made tremendous profits but at a cost of lost incomes and rising unemployment at home. Unlike the U.S., China, benefitting from the transfer of wealth and technology, quickly recovered from the financial crisis to become a significant investor in the American debt, to enjoy generally consistent double-digit economic growth and emerge as the world's second-largest economy. Laçiner believes U.S. policymakers have had difficulties in understanding this process and have been slow to respond. He credits the COVID 19 crisis with helping raise awareness of American dependence on Chinese manufactured products, many of strategic value. The response, he says, is a two-pronged "New Strategy" designed to, first, put the United States "back on its feet" by encouraging the return of strategic industries that have "fled to the third world and China", becoming self-sufficient "in the production, processing and distribution of strategic natural resources, and "the priority measure" – the removal of China and other adversary states from the logistical and supply chain in the manufacture of semiconductors and similar products. The second stage of the "New Strategy" is an increase in military preparations. This entails expanding alliance networks in the Asia-Pacific region and in Europe, encouraging allies to increase their defense budgets to five percent of GDP, and establishing permanent military bases around enemy countries. Laçiner also advocates for the rearmament of Germany and Japan.<sup>60</sup>

The latter may not be as far-fetched as some might think, as both countries have had internal debates about this very issue. Japanese concerns about a possible invasion of Taiwan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have heightened debates in each country about strengthening their respective militaries.<sup>61</sup> The Chinese view the possibility of Japanese rearmament negatively,

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, See also Mark Leonard, "China Is Ready For A World Of Disorder: America Is Not." *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2023, Vol. 102, No. 4, pp. 126-127.

<sup>61</sup> Ian Buruma, "Japan and Germany Are Again Preparing for War." *The Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/japan-and-germany-are-again-preparing-for-war-8dc75cc1> (Retrieved August 12, 2023); Phillipe Pons and Thomas Wieder, "Germany and Japan confront the twilight of their pacifist ideals". *Le Monde*, August 12, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/05/25/germany-and-japan-confront-the-twilight-of-their-pacifist-ideals\\_6028017\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/05/25/germany-and-japan-confront-the-twilight-of-their-pacifist-ideals_6028017_4.html) (Retrieved August 12, 2023) James Snell, "Japan's rearmament could be a force for good.: *The Spectator*, December 19, 2022. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/japans-rearmament-could-be-a-force-for-good-if-it-works/> (Retrieved August 12, 2023); Mina Mitsui, "Europe Sees Japan with Strong Military as Key to Asia's Stability." *Japan Forward*, June 27, 2022. <https://japan-forward.com/europe-sees-japan-with-strong-military-as-key-to-asias-stability/> (Retrieved August 12, 2023). Tim Kelly, Nobuhiro Kubo and Yukiko Toyoda, "Analysis: Japan rushes to rearm with eye on 2027 – and China's Taiwan Ambitions." Reuters, October 18, 2022.

while other critics raise the specter of an Asian arms race and even fear that Japan could move beyond the self-defense restrictions in its constitution and a policy of rearmament could accelerate military tensions in East Asia.<sup>62</sup>

As a counterpoint, Chen Jian notes that the integration of China into the global economy during this period enabled Beijing to play “positive and constructive roles at many critical junctures.” He references Sino-American cooperation in dealing with the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, working together against global terrorism after 9/11 and China’s part in “helping control the impact of the 2008 worldwide crisis”. This, Chen asserts “has demonstrated China’s strong desire and deep capacity to be a responsible stakeholder – indeed, a genuine “insider” – in the increasingly integrated global community.”<sup>63</sup>

Whether or not Professor Chen is correct in his assessment, no matter how China is viewed, it is imperative to avoid an escalation of tensions that could lead to increased discord, whether it be an escalated trade war or military confrontation. The challenge for both sides is how to do so. However, in order to help achieve this goal, American policymakers must take a realistic approach to improving relations with China and temper expectations. For one thing, this means working to develop a deeper understanding of China’s worldview and how that nation’s history has shaped it.

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/japan-rushes-rearm-with-eye-2027-chinas-taiwan-ambitions-2022-10-18/>; Brahma Chellaney, “Unpacking the limits to Japan’s military awakening.” *The Japan Times*, January 13, 2023 <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2023/01/13/commentary/japan-commentary/japan-rearmament> (Retrieved August 12, 2023); Kaori Kaneko, Yukiko Toyoda, Tim Kelly and Sakura Murakami, “Japan elevates Taiwan security ties in move likely to rile China.” Reuters, September 12, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-elevates-taiwan-security-ties-move-likely-rile-china-2023-09-12/> (Retrieved September 12, 2023)

<sup>62</sup> “China warns that Japanese rearmament poses a risk to peace in Asia.” Time News. <https://time.news/china-warns-that-japanese-rearmament-poses-a-risk-to-peace-in-asia/> (Retrieved August 12, 2023) Ding Gang, “Japan shouldn’t bring Cold War rearmament to Asia.” *Global Times*, July 13, 2022. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1270432.shtml> (Retrieved August 12, 2023); Shi Jiangtao, “China berates Japan over massive military expansion plans.” March 7, 2023. *The South China Morning Post*, March 7, 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3212686/china-berates-japan-over-massive-military-expansion-plans> ; “Japan’s rearmament a dramatic policy change.” Asia News Network, December 20, 2022. <https://asianews.network/japans-rearmament-a-dramatic-policy-change/> (Retrieved August 12, 2023); Tokuhito Sato. “China condemns Japan’s ‘resolve to fight’ remarks over Taiwan.” *Asahi Shimbun*, August 10, 2023. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14978555> (Retrieved August 13, 2023).

<sup>63</sup> Chen Jian. “From Mao to Deng: China’s Changing Relations with the United States” Working Paper 92. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, November 2019. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/mao-to-deng-chinas-changing-relations-the-united-states> (Retrieved July 25, 2023).



## 5. Interpreting China's Worldview

Swaine suggests, for example, that the Chinese, despite the achievements of their country in the recent past, remain fearful of domestic and political chaos, such as China experienced in numerous forms in the modern era, especially through the exploitation of China by imperialist powers during the “Century of Humiliation.” Added to this is a history of unstable borders, invasions, attacks and even conquest by outsiders. These events have led to a sense that American or Western hegemony is just a continuation of a process of stronger powers interfering in the affairs of weaker ones. Swaine notes contradictions in this view as well, particularly in the belief that the international system is a hierarchy and strong powers have a duty to assist weaker ones. However, there is a sense that hegemonic powers don't play by those rules. However, Swaine concludes, “...most Chinese apparently believe that China's rightful place in the world as

a major (but not singularly dominant) power whose views must be respected but who exists in general harmony with other nations.”<sup>64</sup> Menon adds that their history “...has left China with a fear of barbarian encirclement and a strong drive to ‘maintain face’ after what the Chinese regard as ‘a century of humiliation’ and colonial degradation.”<sup>65</sup>

The fear of hegemonic powers interfering with the affairs of other countries may help explain Xi Jinping's renewed emphasis on China's internal and external security. Greitens notes a number of times when Xi has stressed the dangers of outside threats to Chinese security. Document No. 9, issued soon after Xi assumed power, noted the danger that Western influence and values could destabilize China. The CCP Central Committee has highlighted the risks posed by “encirclement, disruption, and subversion.” Xi's tenure has emphasized constant vigilance against foreign infiltration and a vigorous anti-espionage campaign. Greitens explains that these exhortations reflect Xi's view that “...many of the threats to China's internal stability come from beyond the country's borders.” This is one factor, Greitens adds, that has led to the repression of

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<sup>64</sup> Michael D. Swaine. “China: The Influence of History.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 14, 2015. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/01/14/china-influence-of-history-pub-57715> (Retrieved August 14, 2023).

<sup>65</sup> Shivshankar Menon. “How China bucked Western expectations and what it means for world order.” Brookings. March 10, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-china-bucked-western-expectations-and-what-it-means-for-world-order/> (Retrieved August 14, 2023).

the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang Province and to enhanced control over any foreign organization that could transmit foreign influence.<sup>66</sup>

Another point of view argues that rather than try to revise or replace the current world order, China is preparing for a different future – preparation for a world of disorder. Leonard believes Washington’s efforts to revamp the alliances and institutions of the post-World War II era in a new era of international competition is, in the view of Xi and other Chinese leaders, doomed to failure. An emphasis on other countries’ search for identity and sovereignty is outdated in a new post-Cold War era and doomed to fail. China is preparing for a “...more fragmented, multipolar world in which China can take its place as a world power.”<sup>67</sup> In Xi’s view, it is the United States that is on the wrong side of history and, as a result, China is now poised to become a strong, stable power.<sup>68</sup>

Additionally, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century idea that has become influential in China is Social Darwinism. This idea, Leonard notes, that the state is like a biological organism that must evolve or die, is taking hold and becoming an ideological framework that argues that modern geopolitics is becoming a struggle for survival between inward-looking, fragile superpowers. The result is a greater focus on the part of Xi toward a more holistic view of national security. This point of view focuses on creating a security capability able to counter all challenges, as the state must do all it can to safeguard its people. China has identified the United States as the principal threat to China. This is, in the view of Beijing, because the U.S. has become deeply polarized and Washington’s response is to respond to this polarization through a policy of “total competition” in an effort to pit China against the “entire democratic world.”<sup>69</sup> This, Leonard concludes, has led to the alienation of many countries. “In this moment of change, it may be that China’s stated willingness to allow other countries to flex their muscles may make Beijing a more attractive

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<sup>66</sup> Sheena Chestnut Greitens. “Xi’s Security Obsession: Why China Is Digging In At Home And Asserting Itself Abroad. *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/xis-security-obsession> (Retrieved August 14, 2023).

<sup>67</sup> Leonard. “China Is Ready For A World Of Disorder: America Is Not,” pp.116-117.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 119-120.

partner than Washington, with its demands for ever-closer alignment. If the world truly is entering a phase of disorder, China could be best placed to prosper.”<sup>70</sup>

Another analysis, focused on the Taiwan issue, argues that China’s leaders have determined that China no longer has to tolerate “the actions it was forced to when it was weak.” Instead, China is using coercive methods “...such as military threats, diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and disinformation campaigns to erode public confidence in U.S. support, undermine Taiwan’s elected government, and convince Taiwanese people that unification with—and submission to—China is inevitable and therefore resistance is dangerous and ultimately futile.”<sup>71</sup> Yun Sun, in an interview with National Public Radio, in April 2023, noted that the competition between China and the United States is not so much about ideology than it is about two competing views regarding the nature of the international system, with Beijing concluding that great power competition is competition for the rest of the world.<sup>72</sup> Adding to the conversation, Ryan Hass stated that there seems to be a lack of consensus in the U.S. concerning the competition between the U.S. and China, suggesting that there is a wide range of views on the subject. This has led to the lack of any consensus on how to effectively deal with China’s rise in terms of overall national power.<sup>73</sup>

## 6. A New Cold War – A Revival of Containment?

A controversial document issued by the Scowcroft Center of the Atlantic Council entitled “The Longer Telegram: Toward a New American China Strategy,” in January 2021, attempts to emulate George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” of 1946. Written by someone whom the Scowcroft Center described as “a former senior government official with deep expertise and experience dealing with China,” the paper outlined a geopolitical strategy that is largely holistic in nature. What is particularly interesting is the focus on Xi Jinping. The undisclosed author declares that

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p. 127.

<sup>71</sup> Susan M. Gordon, Michael G. Mullen, *et.al.* “U.S.-Taiwan Relations in a New Era: Responding to a More Assertive China.” Council on Foreign Relations, Independent Task Force Report No. 81, p. 36. <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/us-taiwan-Relations-in-a-new-era> (Retrieved August 16, 2023)

<sup>72</sup> Ryan Hass and Yun Sun. “What China’s growing role on the world stage means for the U.S. National Public Radio, Ideastream, April 30, 2023. [https://www.npr.org/2023/04/30/1172957370/what-chinas-growing-role-on-the-world-stage-means-for-the-us?utm\\_campaign=Foreign%20Policy&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=257179458&utm\\_source=hs\\_email](https://www.npr.org/2023/04/30/1172957370/what-chinas-growing-role-on-the-world-stage-means-for-the-us?utm_campaign=Foreign%20Policy&utm_medium=email&utm_content=257179458&utm_source=hs_email) (Retrieved August 16, 2023)

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

“The single most significant challenge facing the United States in the twenty-first century is the rise of an increasingly authoritarian China under President and General Secretary Xi Jinping.”<sup>74</sup> The writer goes on to assert that Xi has “returned China to classical Marxism-Leninism and fostered a quasi-Maoist personality cult...Xi is no longer just a problem for US primacy. He now presents a serious problem for the whole of the democratic world.”<sup>75</sup> The paper argues for a return to post-Xi China when that nation, in the writer’s view, was more cooperative with the U.S. and the global community. He then goes on to state that “Washington’s difficulty in developing an effective China strategy has been accentuated by the absence of a clearly understood strategic objective.”<sup>76</sup> While the paper naturally attracted criticism, particularly in its focus on Xi Jinping, one point of agreement on the part of some was the call for a more holistic China policy on the part of the U.S.<sup>77</sup>

It would seem both logical and necessary for the United States to develop a holistic policy consensus and implement it moving forward. Any progress in this regard, however, is going to be difficult to come by given the divergent viewpoints regarding U.S.-China relations. A small sample of possible policy approaches, other than what is essentially a containment policy as favored by China hawks are offered below.

## 7. Policy Options

Haenle and Bresnick, for example, advocate seeking to improve bilateral ties between Beijing and Washington as well as working toward the establishment of an effective problem-solving approach for the bilateral relationship, although they offer little in the way of a detailed

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<sup>74</sup> Anonymous. “The Longer Telegram: Toward a new American China Strategy.” The Atlantic Center Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, January 27, 2021., p. 6. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/the-longer-telegram/> (Retrieved August 16, 2023).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p.7.

<sup>77</sup> Dov S. Zakheim. “The Longer Telegram: What it means for U.S.-China relations.” The Hill, February 5, 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/537291-the-longer-telegram-what-it-means-for-us-china-relations/> (Retrieved August 16, 2023); Daniel Larson. “‘The Longer Telegram’ Is a Recipe for Costly Failure”. *The American Conservative*, January 29, 2021. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/the-longer-telegram-is-a-recipe-for-costly-failure/> (Retrieved August 16, 2023); Evelyn Cheng. “A U.S. strategy paper on China draws a tepid response in Beijing.” February 24, 2021. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/24/us-china-strategy-paper-longer-telegram-stirs-little-debate-in-beijing.html> (Retrieved August 16, 2023); Talli Ni. CvT: What Is ‘The Longer Telegram’ and Why Should We Care?” TCG The China Guys, March 17, 2021, <https://thechinaguys.com/what-is-the-longer-telegram-and-why-should-we-care/> (Retrieved August, 16, 2021).

proposal.<sup>78</sup> In *China Goes Global*, published in 2013, Sinologist David Shambaugh advocated an integrationist policy, arguing that there is literally no choice other than “...to continue to engage China and integrate it into the institutions, rules, laws and norms of the international community.” He notes former President Nixon’s observation that it is better to have China in the international system than outside of it. Shambaugh argued for a constructivist approach on the part of the global community that would focus on “...the key areas of civil society, media, rule of law, government transparency, human rights, and global governance.” Shambaugh also chastises advocates of a containment policy toward China, calling containment an “absurd alternative”, adding that such proposals are “both folly and dangerous.”<sup>79</sup>

Another approach has been suggested by Goldstein, who proposes that the United States approach should be an innovative one. In *Meeting China Halfway*, he calls for the creation of “cooperation spirals”. Goldstein states that these would “provide bilateral policy ‘moves’ for achieving substantive progress across a range of difficult issues.” He explains that through these cooperation spirals “trust and confidence are built over time through incremental and reciprocal steps that gradually lead to larger and more significant compromises.” Noting that these steps will be difficult, Goldstein asserts that “their gradual, evolutionary, and reciprocal nature make them a feasible guide for practitioners.”<sup>80</sup>

Doshi contends that the United States must rise to the China challenge, noting that “...in most respects, this is not a choice.” The policy response he advocates is one that avoids competing dollar for dollar with China, but, instead, adopts “...an asymmetric approach that blunts Chinese advances at a lower cost than China expends in generating them, all while reinvesting in the sources of American order and power.” Doshi points out the urgency of doing so, adding that meeting the challenge China poses “...will require the kind of reinvestments in American competitiveness and innovation that are also critical to domestic renewal and working-class prosperity.” Policymakers, he adds, can link these two agendas and defend them by making

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<sup>78</sup> Paul Haenle and Sam Bresnick. “Why U.S.- China Relations Are Locked in a Stalemate.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. February 21, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/02/21/why-u.s.-china-relations-are-locked-in-stalemate-pub-86478> (Retrieved August 16, 2023).

<sup>79</sup> Shambaugh, David. *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*. 2013. New York, Oxford University Press, pp.314-315.

<sup>80</sup> Goldstein, Lyle J. *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging US-China Rivalry*. 2015. Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press. p. 24.

clear that they will make it clear that undertaking them will benefit the nation domestically while producing benefits internationally.<sup>81</sup> Doshi adds that "...policymakers must resist the common declinist tendency to see US competitors as ten feet tall and instead calibrate a response that spurs innovation without stoking fear and prejudice. The arrival of an external competitor has often pushed the United States to become its best self; handled judiciously, it can once again."<sup>82</sup>

Beckley, on the other hand, offers a defense for a policy of containment. He anticipates that the most likely scenario "...is a new Cold War in which the United States and China continue to decouple their strategic economic centers, maintain a military standoff in East Asia, promote their rival visions of world order and compete to provide solutions to international problems."<sup>83</sup> While a cold war doesn't necessarily mean an end to "all forms of cooperation", it would mean a policy of containment. This, Beckley points out, means (1) prioritizing deterrence and denial over reassurance, (2) building up capabilities in order to negotiate from a position of strength and (3) measuring success by successfully defending American interests and values, rather than whether or not Sino-American relations are amicable. However, a containment policy, Beckley concludes, would not automatically lead to violent conflict. Such a rivalry might result in "... a technology race that pushes the frontiers of human knowledge to new heights" that could result in groundbreaking solutions to international problems. Peaceful organization of compatible powers using peaceful means could enable both sides to expand their influence. This type of rivalry, Beckley reckons "...might not be so bad for the world and certainly would be better than the great-power wars that have characterized most of modern history."<sup>84</sup>

Given these divergent views on China, formulating a cohesive policy that would both create an effective response to China as a competitor for global influence, and that would avoid an escalation of tensions, as noted before, will be difficult at best and, in the current political atmosphere, nearly impossible. In the ten policy recommendations put forth in the State Department's "Elements of the China Challenge", three points stand out as a start for developing a long term blueprint for the construction of a policy that might serve the United States well. These recommendations call for educating American citizens about the extent of the China

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<sup>81</sup> Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 333.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>83</sup> Beckley. "Delusions of Détente." p.21.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

challenge, training a new generation of public servants who are fluent in Chinese, as well as China's history and culture and, finally, educational reform. The last recommendation emphasizes the need to prepare the next generation "...to meet the special demands of a complex, information-age, globalized economy for expertise in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics."<sup>85</sup> While these recommendations may not resolve the question of differing views on China, they would certainly go a long way toward preparing the upcoming generation to assess and debate the Sino-American relationship from a more informed perspective.

Competition in the international arena is a fact of life. American policymakers must walk a fine line between developing a cooperative relationship with China, while seeking to dissuade China from pursuing a policy of regional aggression. The United States must accept the fact that China "...is no longer a rising power, but a world power." And, having risen from the ashes of the Century of Humiliation, China's constitutional commitment to a project of a 'community of destiny for humanity' indicates that Beijing is committed to a policy of world transformation.<sup>86</sup> The United States must accept this fact and craft its responses to China's ambitions thoughtfully, and carefully and prepare to adapt to changing circumstances. Moreover, despite China's place as a world power, China is not an invincible bogeyman, but a nation that must also confront and overcome numerous internal challenges if it is to remain a major player on the world stage. Among these challenges are: (1) an increasing loss of confidence in the private business sector, foreign investment concerns, linked to China's slow recovery from the Covid 19 pandemic, (3) a potential collapse of the housing market, (4) unemployment, and (5) a declining population.<sup>87</sup> Recent statistics indicate that a decline in exports are contributing to China's current economic malaise.<sup>88</sup> How Xi Jinping and the CCP deal with these issues will undoubtedly impact Beijing's ability to influence and transform the world.

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<sup>85</sup> Department of State, "Elements of the China Challenge," p.3.

<sup>86</sup> Guiheux, Gilles. *Contemporary China: 1949 to the Present*. Hoboken, NJ. Polity Press, (2023), p. 137.

<sup>87</sup> Frank Tang. "China Economy: 5 issues from housing to population, that are likely to feature in Xi Jinping's fact-finding campaign." *South China Morning Post*, March 23, 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3214455/china-economy-5-issues-housing-population-are-likely-feature-xi-jinpings-fact-finding-campaign> (Retrieved August 30, 2023).

<sup>88</sup> Stella Yifan Xie. "Chinas Exports Fall for a Fourth Month as Once-Reliable Growth Engine Sputters." *The Wall Street Journal*, September 7, 2023. [https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-exports-fall-for-fourth-month-as-once-reliable-growth-engine-sputters-1ab9d689?mod=hp\\_lead\\_pos4](https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-exports-fall-for-fourth-month-as-once-reliable-growth-engine-sputters-1ab9d689?mod=hp_lead_pos4). (Retrieved September 7,2023)

As for the possibility of conflict over Taiwan, it can be expected that Beijing will continue to try and influence political developments there in order to build a consensus favoring reunification with China. As long as Taiwan represents a credible alternative to the current system on the mainland, Beijing's efforts to incorporate Taiwan into the PRC will continue. Whether or not a decision will be made to achieve reunification by force remains to be seen. At present, it appears that Xi Jinping is pressing the United States to adhere to the "one China" policy and not interfere in the Taiwan issue. If the U.S. does so, and Taiwan makes no move toward independence, then a crisis may be avoided, at least for the present.<sup>89</sup>

### **8. A Pragmatic Approach to China**

What is needed now is a pragmatic, realistic approach to U.S.-China relations. The United States must act in a responsible and disciplined manner toward China, and doing so requires crossing political party lines. This will be especially difficult given the relatively short election cycles in the United States, the tendency to engage in anti-China rhetoric to gain votes and to make political points, and an overall lack of Chinese expertise in government, business and the public as a whole. If China is led to believe that relations with the United States are based on favors that can be revoked at any time will lead Beijing to view America as untrustworthy and intrusive.<sup>90</sup>

It might be best if American policymakers approached the nation's foreign policy with a greater sense of pragmatism, and an understanding that there is only so much the United States can do in terms of the exercise of power. Perhaps, in terms of its conduct of foreign policy, the United States should reconsider the traditional view of the nation as a singular incarnation of virtue. This viewpoint can act as an inhibiting factor when conducting foreign policy. More focus on geopolitics, international rivalries and ambitions through the balance of power politics might better suit the policymaking process. Americans, of course, will not abandon the view of their nation as exceptional and destined to spread democracy and freedom to the rest of the world, but this should not be the only basis on which foreign relations and diplomacy should be

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<sup>89</sup> Asia Society. "Avoiding War Over Taiwan." October 23, 2022. <https://asiasociety.org/center-us-china-relations/avoiding-war-over-taiwan> (Retrieved August 29, 2023)

<sup>90</sup> Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995, p. 830.



conducted.<sup>91</sup> Brzezinski commented, “At the onset of the global era, a dominant power...has no choice but to pursue a foreign policy that is truly globalist in spirit, content and scope. Nothing could be worse for America, and eventually the world, than if American policy were universally viewed as arrogantly imperial in a postimperial age, mired in a colonial relapse in a postcolonial time, selfishly indifferent in the face of unprecedented global interdependence, and culturally self-righteous in a religiously diverse world.”<sup>92</sup>

Additionally, the increasing number of competing ideologies and worldviews at present makes the understanding of cultural influences, prejudices and stereotypes essential for dealing effectively with the challenges that have arisen and have yet to appear on the international stage in this century. Oversimplifying or generalizing about cultural differences can lead to false assumptions that can negatively impact policymaking. In order to overcome this challenge, and to bring about a balanced foreign policy, the American public must take a greater responsibility for shaping America’s place in today’s world. Sean Kay argues that for America, successful “citizen engagement requires a deep sense of history, understanding international relations, and effective means of communicating perspectives derived from facts.” He notes several methods of engagement, from attending lectures, community programs and involvement in local councils on world affairs, to careers in foreign and defense policy and honoring those who have served on behalf of America.<sup>93</sup> He concludes by writing:

The kinds of issues that are pertinent to the future of America’s role in the world also requires citizens to challenge assumptions, question politically driven narratives, and insist that their leaders use facts to inform policy. It also suggests that the truest idealist vision is the cause of peace. Americans have a special role to play in balancing between idealist and realist

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<sup>91</sup> Moore, *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy*, p.210.

<sup>92</sup> Brzezinski, Zbigniew. *Second Chance: Three American Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower*, (New York. Basic Books, 2008), pp. 215-216.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy*, p.211.

policy approaches toward this basic goal.<sup>94</sup>

While American idealism should not be cast aside, more realism and a pragmatic foreign policy approach would best serve both the United States and China in the coming years. Granted, the opportunities for Sino-American cooperation are limited, but there are areas where progress can be made. As Economy notes: “Engagement is likely to occur not at the level of the grand bargain but at the level of technical cooperation around the big issues of global governance, such as climate change, public health, drug trafficking, and crisis management.”<sup>95</sup>

## 9. Conclusion

It is likely that the Chinese understand the United States better than the U.S. understands China. Therefore, it is imperative for Americans at every level to have a better understanding of China – its history and culture in particular – to fully appreciate China’s worldview in order to develop, conduct and support effective diplomacy with Beijing, not only at present, but in the future. The time has come, therefore, for a greater focus on a realistic foreign policy to balance the Wilsonian idealism that has been a critical component of American diplomacy for the past century. That realism should be built around the recognition and acceptance that the United States cannot dictate solutions to the problems of the world, and that it may not be possible to achieve all of its foreign policy goals. Compromise, partnerships, careful diplomacy, strategic planning and a balancing of interests, combined with a greater emphasis on understanding cultural differences, may be the keys to a successful foreign policy in this century.<sup>96</sup> It should be recognized that, even with its flaws, China takes pride in its successes and growth in the post-Mao years, and it intends to continue to assert itself in world affairs. That is the reality of the situation at present. Whether or not Beijing can overcome its domestic challenges and remain a major player on the world stage over the long run remains to be seen. Therefore, the China policy of the United States should focus on the goal of avoiding conflict, if possible, while responding to Chinese initiatives responsibly, avoiding inflammatory rhetoric and seeking

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<sup>94</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>95</sup> Economy, *The World According to China*, p. 223.

<sup>96</sup> Moore, *Defining and Defending the Open Door Policy*, p. 212.

solutions that each can live with even if imperfect. Granted, a new Cold War may come to pass. But there is no reason that it cannot be managed, with thought and care, and that an escalation of tensions that could lead to an outbreak of hostilities can be avoided if the United States deals with China from a perspective of pragmatism, rather than idealism.

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