

On the Brink of War?

-- Decoding the Irreconcilable Differences in China-U.S. Relations

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ABSTRACT

China and the United States have one of the most important and complicated bilateral relations in the world. Two distinct, yet similarly antagonistic, stances dominate Washington and Beijing. Over the last decade, China-U.S. relations are increasingly defined by mutual mistrust and suspicion. Currently, Beijing and Washington have been trapped into enduring rivalry. Unfortunately, their rivalry is more than a set of diplomatic disputes. Commerce, as well as other differences, is also driving the two nations further apart. Their differences are now irreconcilable for neither side could grant a concession on major issues. Up to now, nothing is sufficient to resolve their disputes nonviolently.

KEYWORDS

China-U.S. Relations; Irreconcilable Differences; World Order; World War III; New Cold War; Trade War; Technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The nuclear revolution grounded the geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Likewise, there are risks presenting in China-U.S. relations owing to their mutual possession of survivable nuclear arsenals. Over the past few decades, the advent of greater China's economy and military capabilities provided the United States with a threat to its preferred international order. U.S. leaders committed to shoring up its strategic stability in case China imperils its liberal world order, and also maintaining and strengthening its alliances in the world.

Now China-U.S. relations are worse than they have been in over 50 years. Worse still, their conflicts are irreconcilable and may last for several decades. Quite a few scholars studied China-U.S. differences, but they hold different visions. Chinese expert Yan Xuetong decoded the instability of China-U.S. relations and thought a détente in the near future may be unrealistic[1]. Michael Beckley, believed that China and the U.S. are enduring rivals rather than engaged partners[2]. However, Joseph S. Nye noted that, "enduring rivalry" is a misleading term and "cooperative rivalry" will be a sustainable goal[3]. But one thing is certain: their confrontations have impeded progress on international efforts to address critical global and transnational issues, including those in the economic and security spheres. This article analyses China-U.S. from multiple dimensions and decodes irreconcilable differences between the two countries. Drawing from the statistics and historical experiences, this article predicts the possible prospects of the China-U.S. relations.

2. THE STABILITY-INSTABILITY PARADOX

Shortly after the end of World War II, the the Cold War began, starting a period of geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as their respective blocs. During the Cold War years, both superpowers increased their military capabilities, expanded their global influence and undermined the other's predominance across the world. Initially, only the U.S. possessed atomic weapons, but in 1949, the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb - the two superpowers looked directly into the nuclear abyss and then began their arms race. In the backdrop of an escalating arms race, where both superpowers amassed vast arsenals of nuclear weapons, the two sides signed various arms control agreements as a means to manage their rivalry and lower the risk of nuclear war, including the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1968, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) in 1969, the Antiballistic Missile Treaty in 1972, the Second Round of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT II) agreement in 1979.

However, these agreements did little to restrain the behavior of the two rivalries. There were widespread fears that one superpower would first launch a surprise attack to the other, adding to the uncertainty and instability of the age. Hence, arms race were never dying. With more sophisticated and destructive weaponry introduced into the arsenals of the U.S. and the Soviet Union, both sides came – advertently or inadvertently – to the brink of hot war. Instead of direct confrontations between the two nations, much of the Cold War's deadliest combat occurred elsewhere, in distant areas, as proxy wars. Major crises in these decades, including the Korean War of 1950-1953, the Berlin Crisis of 1961, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the Vietnam War of 1964-1975, and the war in Afghan of 1979-1989, brought the two sides on the precipice of war.

The stability–instability paradox offered interpretations to U.S.-Soviet experience that both sides attempted to step back from brink of the nuclear war but could not avoid conventional military conflicts. In 1954, B. H. Liddell Hart reflected a widely held view that, “H-bomb (Hydrogen Bomb) reduces the likelihood of full-scale war, it increases the possibilities of limited war pursued by widespread local aggression[4]”. Western deterrence strategists have dwelled at length on this dilemma. Soon it evolved into an international relations theory, more precisely, a nuclear deterrence theory. It is commonly acknowledged that the concept of “stability–instability paradox” was first introduced by Glenn Snyder. In his book *The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror*, he identified this paradox from deterrence theory, “the greater the stability of the ‘strategic’ balance of terror, the lower the stability of the overall balance at lower levels of violence[5]”. Robert Jervis offered a more generalized and yet succinct formula, “to the extent that the military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of violence[6]”. Despite some scholars disputed that conceiving of nuclear weapons as a firebreak does not necessarily prevent escalation[7]. In practical terms, the existence of the stability–instability paradox could be verified in many international affairs, for instance, in the India–Pakistan relationship and to some degree in Russia–NATO relations.

The stability–instability paradox remains an inescapable problem for nuclear states. Since the first China's nuclear weapons tests took place in 1964, nuclear security has been pivotal to China-U.S. relations. In 1979, China established normal diplomatic relations with the United States. Prior to 1989, benefiting from close military and security cooperation against the Soviet Union, the two countries developed a mutually beneficial relationship. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China and the U.S. undertook a significant expansion and modernization in their nuclear forces. For Washington, Beijing's nuclear strength was perceived challenge to U.S. global leadership. The presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020) marked a corresponding shift toward a harder line on China. Under Biden administration, China-U.S. tensions move even further than the typical stability–instability paradox.

3. ENDURING RIVALRY

China and the United States competition differs dramatically from the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. Since the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC), the two nations have not always agreed, but sharply diverged for most of the time. Following a period of rapid globalization in the post-Cold War era, China and the U.S. are now deeply intertwined. However, under Trump administration, the U.S. saw China as a threat to the Washington's grip on global order and framed the two countries as "rivals" without boundaries[8]. Since Joe Biden took the presidential oath of office, political insecurities in both countries are running high. Until now, the United States and China are locked in hostility across all domains[9]: economy, technology, ideology, military... Many of these differences have existed for decades.

A major factor contributing to the overwhelming China-U.S. rivalry is China's very rapidly growing economy, which has passed certain key thresholds. Over the last 40 years, thanks to "the reform and opening up" policy, China transformed from a poor and underdeveloped centrally-planned economy into an economic powerhouse. In 2010, China surpassed Japanese economy to become the second largest economic power in the world[10]. A U.S. intelligence portrait of the world even predicted that China would surpass the U.S. as the world's largest economy by 2030, threatening fortunes of the U.S. and European countries in global economy[11]. Beginning in January 2018, former President Trump initiated a trade war with China by imposing a series of tariffs on everything from steel and aluminum to solar panels. Soon Washington leaders raised significant barriers for China's access to advanced chips and accelerated its steps in "decoupling" China-U.S. technology ties. China retaliated by banning the import of lower-grade U.S. chips. In fact, these punitive trade conflicts have had little effect in terms of altering economic outcomes. Rather, economic conflicts have inflicted considerable harms on manufacturing industries in both countries.

In the realm of ideology, Washington never gave up projecting a struggle between the forces of democracy and autocracy onto global politics. In the eyes of U.S. legislators, democratic institutions of the "free world" have been tested fiercely and found resilient because anti-Soviet states survived the cold war. Under the leadership of the United States, Washington, together with its fellow democracies, set up a whole alphabet of organizations like the UN, the EU, the WTO, and the IMF. Based on these international institutions, the free world captures the effort to build or maintain a global liberal order. Biden once characterized the China-U.S. conflict as "a battle between the utility of democracies in the twenty-first century and autocracies[12]" and urged its partners to choose sides. In the midst of American ideology aggression, Chinese leaders redefined "planing and market" and created "socialism with Chinese characteristics" in 1980s. After Chinese president Xi Jinping took office, he has injected new elements into this banner. The essence of Xi's vision are "Chinese Dream" and "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation[13]", strong reaffirmations to restore China's long lost glory. Meanwhile, to boost cross-regional economy, China initiated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and become the largest trade partner of 25 economies[14]. However, American analysts regarded new institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund as threats to established global institutions. U.S. leaders even defamed that China intended to remould and supplant existing global order.

Taiwan represents the greatest risk of instability in the China-U.S. rivalry. Taiwan has belonged to China from ancient times. Since 1949, although the mainland and Taiwan are yet to be reunified, Taiwan's status as part of China's territory has never changed. The one-China principle is the universal consensus of the international community. In 1979, the United States made a clear commitment in the China-U.S. Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations - "the United States of America recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China[15]." However, in disregard of China's strong opposition, U.S. administration is bent on selling weapons to Taipei. Meanwhile, Washington boosted diplomatic ties with Taiwan under Biden administration, sparking cross-strait crisis. Even more ominously, the

danger of such crises is most evident in Indo-Pacific, where U.S. transformed its military from a defense-oriented force focused mainly on the homeland to a more expansive, sophisticated force capable of harassing South China Sea and other regions.

Beyond these confrontations, China-U.S. relations are in a number of areas on the brink of red lines, such as human rights, different positions in Ukraine War and Israel-Hamas War...None of these conflicts reconcilable. Ray Dalio, founder of hedge fund Bridgewater Associates, once said, “these issues will remain and probably (be) intensified over the next five to ten years[16].”

4. DELUSIONS OF DÉTENTE

After an alarming downturn in China-U.S. relations, an easing of tensions could indeed provide a welcome breather for the two countries. Under the outgoing Trump administration, bilateral relations had hit a record low point. Since Biden’s election, stakeholders have been paying close attention to the direction of the new White House administration’s policy toward China, hoping the era of détente would arrive. However, in dealing with China, Biden signaled he was in no rush to depart from the Trump administration’s policies. On the contrary, Biden has largely maintained his predecessor’s approach to Beijing, albeit with a more equanimous tone and embrace of multilateralism. Even worse, Washington is now taking a multilateral approach by enlisting the support of Western allies to maximize Washington’s leverage on Beijing.

Beijing and Washington, as expected, has a very different view of bilateral dynamics. China believes Washington’s desire is to interfere and contain China’s rise. For decades, Chinese government emphasized that the United States should stop arming Taiwan and support China’s vision for peaceful reunification. Chinese officials see U.S. complaints about human rights violations in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet as disingenuous. Moreover, Chinese policymakers views Washington’s restrictions on sensitive technology exports to China as proof that the United States seeks to hamper its burgeoning tech sector. Beijing has also been heavily critical of NATO expansion and U.S. military actions in the Middle East, given to the fact that U.S. destroyed people in this region independently exploring their own development path.

Beijing’s pronounced warning has not led to self-reflection on the part of Washington, which blames the downturn in relations on China’s increasing assertiveness abroad and authoritarian at home. For a half-century, America has responded with rhetorical support for Taiwan, supplied it with weapons and strengthened American military presence in this region. For now, Americans are concerned that, Beijing’s military modernization and presence in Indo-Pacific will challenge Washington’s security primacy. Other factors, such as Beijing’s diplomacy, economic statecraft, and human rights issues have also alarmed and unsettled the United States and its partners. As the China-U.S. rivalry intensifies, the Chinese and U.S. public are increasingly distrustful of each other.

Complicating matters further, Beijing and Washington have locked themselves into war of words. Beijing condemned Washington have aspired to encircle China by geopolitical maneuvering[17]. Current U.S. policies are most at fault for driving the current downward spiral in China-U.S. relations. Whereas, U.S. elites regard China as a “rogue nation and creating trouble for every country[18]”. During the Covid-19 pandemic, former U.S. president Trump defended his increasingly frequent practice of calling the coronavirus the “Chinese Virus[19]”. Strategists in America also characterized the “China-Russia Axis” took shape in the Ukraine War. Unfortunately, little is being done in either capital to reconcile these different narratives. Achieving a major breakthrough in bilateral relations would require at least one side to make concessions in its red lines. Neither side can put a floor on the possibility of tit-for-tat cancellations in the future.

In November 16th, 2023, Chinese leader Xi Jinping and U.S. president Joe Biden spoke for several hours on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit. This meeting made progress on a number of key issues, including artificial intelligence governance,

counternarcotics and defense. According to Biden, the meeting was “among the most constructive and productive we’ve had[20]”. However, both side indicated that the main goal was to prevent the relationship from deteriorating further. The two powers leaved major issues to be addressed, such as confrontations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, human rights, nuclear security, and the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. Therefore, in the short term, areas of joint effort remain limited.

5. POSSIBLE ENDGAMES

China-U.S. relations has been complex, and at times, strenuous since they established diplomatic ties. Whereas, the two nations break the pattern between other rivalries because their economies are highly integrated. They have been major trading partners for years. China is one of the largest export markets for U.S. goods and services, and the United States is among the top export markets for China[21]. However, trade tie alone cannot reset the China-U.S. relationship. Once underway, rivalries are extremely difficult to end. According to data collected by the political scientists, since 1816, there have been 27 great-power rivalries. These rivalries lasted for more than 50 years on average and ended in one of three ways[22].

Hot war. The vast majority-19 of them culminated in war. Today, many commentators underlined that China-U.S. rivalry is more dangerous than U.S.-Soviet rivalry. The confrontation between China and the United States over Taiwan has been going on for years. If new rounds of conflicts emerged between the two countries, they would rapidly approach a hot war. At the same time, there are several serious conflicts in the world-Ukraine War, Israel-Hamas War and Sudan’s Civil War. In the absence of serious and sustained efforts to moderate crisis between the two nations, the chances of the World War III in the not-too-distant future are increasing.

A new cold war. During and after the World War II, The United States and the Soviet Union start of the Cold War. As the China-U.S. rivalry intensifies, ices have appeared warning that a new Cold War is in the offing. Some U.S. strategists warned that, the two superpowers are currently contesting in every domain, from semiconductors to submarines and from blockbuster films to lunar exploration. Today the winner takes it all -a collapse that permanently subordinates China to the American order; or a humbled America that retreats from the western Pacific[23].

G2. By counting of the statistics , 6 of 50 rivalries ended with the two sides allied against a common foe. For example, in 1900s, the United Kingdom set aside its hostilities with France, Russia, and the United States to fight Germany. Joseph S. Nye, Jr, a former US assistant secretary of defense, once pointed out, the U.S. and PRC are not destined for war. If U.S. administration avoids unnecessary provocations, it can reduce the probability of falling into either a cold war or a hot war with China[24]. Today’s Sino-American relationship is in a high level of economic, social, and ecological interdependence. The essence of G2 proposal is that, the two countries should work together to address the big challenges.

In fact, by the advent of the twenty-first century, it had become clear that, a range of new or greatly opportunities had emerged to reinforce both countries’ interest in preserving cooperative relations. In the trend of globalization and in unprecedented emergence of nontraditional threats, such as climate change, environmental degradation, global pandemics, terrorism, and transnational crime, the two nations, and many other states should cooperation on these global issues. For China and the United States, turning their back on each other is not an option. Because the world is big enough to accommodate both countries[25].

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