



THE GROWING US-CHINA TENSIONS: DO WE SEE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

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Observers of US-China relations have become increasingly concerned about the current status and future development of this most consequential bilateral relationship. Why has the relationship deteriorated? How can the two powers step out of the dilemma?

In the escalating trade war, Washington seems bent on forcing China to give in with high tariffs and a technological blockade while Beijing is contemplating stronger retaliation. Shortly after President Donald Trump's declaration of a [national emergency](#) shutting out Huawei from the US market, President Xi Jinping visited a [rare earths](#) processing facility – a move widely considered to be a reminder to Trump of major Chinese leverage over high-tech industries critical to the US economy. Meanwhile, the US has upgraded relations with Taiwan by passing several Taiwan-friendly laws, dispatching warships to the Taiwan Strait more frequently, and hosting the first direct meeting between US and Taiwan [national security advisors](#) since 1979.

After President Richard Nixon's historic trip to China in 1972, there was a consensus among Americans that an open and prosperous China was in the US interest. This provided the foundation for engagement with China since then. Major setbacks in the

relationship such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the 2001 EP-3 mid-air collision near Hainan did not derail the relationship. There was a genuine American wish that China would become “more like us” as it became more integrated into the US-led liberal international system. As China quickly emerged to become the second largest economy while maintaining its one-party authoritarian government, Americans began to feel disillusioned and disappointed. The new consensus in Washington is that China has become a grave challenge, even a [threat](#) to the United States and the liberal order it has been leading.

During President Barack Obama's second term, Washington began to seriously address the China challenge. The “pivot” or “rebalance to Asia” was Obama's hallmark approach to China and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was a key architect. For this, as well as her loud criticism of China's human rights record, the Chinese government and many Chinese people preferred Trump to Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election.

The Trump administration is determined to “fix” the problems between China and the United States, but has narrowly focused on economic and technological competition without addressing the root causes of the problems. The relationship has become more competitive due to structural conflicts as both sides are struggling to adjust to power changes in the international system.

The US discourse on China has turned very hostile while China has become more assertive. Beginning with Vice President Mike Pence's strident anti-China [speech](#) at the Hudson Institute in October 2018, several administration officials have taken a hawkish line toward China recently, such as FBI director Christopher Wray's “[China spying](#)” warning and State Department Policy Planning Director Kiron Skinner's “[civilizational clash](#)” remark. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton are both harsh critics of China. Their frustration with China is palpable, but they add more heat than light.

In the current deadlocked trade negotiations, the US has demanded that China change its laws. This sounds more like an ultimatum than trade talks. Some of the US accusations against China seem dubious. For example, regarding forced technology transfers reported by the [Special 301 Report](#) of the US Trade Representative's Office, China has [denied](#) that this is its official policy and has urged the US government to present evidence of specific US companies that were forced to transfer technology. The reality probably lies somewhere in between. Apparently, it has been a mutually agreed-upon practice for some foreign companies to share certain technologies and management skills with Chinese collaborators in exchange for access to the China market. But these businesses have the option to say no and leave China.

The Trump administration's high-handed approach reflects its lack of understanding of Chinese culture, in which face is highly valued. A trade deal that is forced upon China will not be accepted by any contemporary Chinese leaders. With little knowledge of China's humiliating history since the Opium War, it may be hard for Trump to understand why Xi will stand firm and not yield to US pressures.

Even if a trade agreement is reached, competition between liberalism and authoritarianism will continue. As the two powers put their own national interests first, one wonders whether they can co-exist peacefully, like the proverbial two tigers sharing the same mountain.

The most difficult challenge for Washington and Beijing is to manage the global power transition as a result of China's rise. Right now, the US strategy seems to focus on slowing down China's development and prolonging US dominance. Trump may think he is winning the trade war, but when US businesses and consumers gradually realize that they have to bear the brunt of the [tariffs](#), domestic support will fizzle.

The United States will continue to dominate the international system, but China is quickly closing the gap. Is the US willing to accommodate China's rise? Will China elbow the US out of the top spot in the global pecking order?

Deep distrust and suspicion plague the bilateral relationship. Despite its pledge not to seek hegemony, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) spans much of the world. Washington sees the BRI as a direct challenge to its global supremacy, especially in its traditional spheres of influence. Washington's knee-jerk reaction has been to resist the BRI by smearing it and threatening others who want to join it, much like the US treatment of Huawei. Might an alternative approach work better? How about joining the BRI and working with China to enhance the BRI's implementation with transparency and equality?

Bystanders often see things more clearly than players. Hugh White, a former Australian defense official and currently a professor at Australian National University, suggested almost a decade ago in his provocative book *The China Choice* that as China continues to rise, the US has three choices: it can compete, share power, or concede leadership in Asia. White controversially argued that the best option for the US is to share power with China and relinquish its supremacy in the Asia-Pacific. Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan also remarked in Washington recently that the United States should [accept](#) China's rise and allow China to have a greater say in shaping global rules to avoid a prolonged clash.

China's rise is a challenge for the US-led system, but it has provided unprecedented opportunities for global development. Working together, the United States and China can create a better world for all. When defending free trade, President Obama once said, the United States, not China, should write trade [rules](#). It is time for the US and China to write trade and other rules together to safeguard a more just, inclusive, and sustainable international system, in which both powers play a constructive leadership role.

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