

MANAGE US-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION BY OVERCOME THE PERCEPTION GAP

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In recent years, the U.S.-China relationship has been undermined by their increasing bilateral economic disputes, the strategic and economic tensions between U.S. and China are escalating, which has caused much concerns across the world. In the United States, many political elites share a narrative of disillusionment with China, which believes that the U.S.'s longstanding policy of "engagement" has failed. Meanwhile in China, interpreting bilateral tensions as containment from the United States is a considerable tendency. From 2017, Trump administration has published National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review, collectively articulated China as a strategic competitor, claims the great power competition is return. Since then, the world has witnessed more confrontational interacts between China and the United States. To many observers, whether the United States and China are in competition is no longer a topic to discuss, and the concern that current competition between the two major powers could escalate into a comprehensive confrontation seems not impossible.

Under such circumstance, it is crucial to develop preventive measures to make sure that U.S.-China relationship will not fall into a comprehensive confrontation. How can both sides cooperate to manage this competition and prevent it from escalating into a more adversarial relationship or conflict? Closing the perception

gap between China and the United States could be a fruitful approach.

Establish a meaningful intergovernmental dialogue between China and the United States to address strategic issues should be a priority. Although the United States has long sought such dialogue, Chinese officials are always express it is not the right time ("the conditions are not ripe"), refuse to conduct any official strategic dialogue regardless it is bilateral or multilateral. As many Chinese participants pointed out, the refusal is largely because China processes a much smaller nuclear arsenal than the United States and Russia, and given China's no-first-use policy and it's thinking that nuclear weapon is only for prevent nuclear coercion, opaqueness on nuclear policy has special value in China's deterrence. There also many different perceptions between China and the United States: while China claims it's already possesses credible and secure second-strike capability, calls for mutual no first use or mutual no targeting commitment between China and the United States, the United States asks for better understanding on Chinese nuclear thinking and developments, calls for transparency. Consider the lack of mutual trust and understanding between China and the United States, official strategic dialogue could be possible only if compromise made from both sides: Chinese official would need to consider engage to more meaningful, transparent strategic dialogue, while Washington would need to acknowledge that the United States and China are in mutually vulnerable strategic relationship, recognize this premise of strategic stability.

Despite of whether China and the United States could conduct official strategic dialogue, both parties should immediately seek to establish crisis management mechanisms. As a matter of fact, some military to military mechanisms have been established between China and the United States, and achievements have been made: in 2014, China and the United States have signed memorandums of understanding of notice on major military operations as well as codes on unplanned encounters at sea. These documents provide channel for communication during

conflicts or crisis, also indicated that despite the tension and dispute, China and the United States could conduct pragmatic cooperation in certain areas. Such mechanisms should be well maintained and fully utilized. But existing mechanisms are far from enough, more such mechanism are needed. Consider China has maritime dispute with many countries in the Indo-Pacific region, and the United States has security commitment with its allies in this region, mechanisms on preventing conflict triggered by third party are in special need.

In recent years, deep distrust and suspicion increasingly plague the bilateral relationship, the worrisome trend of “prepare for the worst scenario” is emerging in both China and the United States. Such distrust has been amplified by information asymmetry, and the two major power is falling into a dangerous action-misinterpret

-reaction loop. As an outcome of China’s rise, China is increasingly aggressive on preserve its rights, while the United States views any revise of current international system as challenge to its supremacy, and its current policies seems focus on slowing down China’s development and trying to decoupling China from international market. But is this the only way? Find common interest and work together could be an alternative approach. Since China says it’s not interested in pursue supremacy, claims its seek for peaceful development is not a trick, but a matter of strategy, it may need to adopt a more transparent, fair approach to implement its geo-economic initiatives, and the United States may need to resist its instinctual respond, try to shape China’s behavior by cooperate in certain areas such as climate change and global trade reform. Indeed, China’s rise poses challenge to the current U.S led system, but it should be viewed as an opportunity for global governance rather than nightmare.

I’m truly grateful to Pacific Forum for offer me this opportunity to engage this strategic dialogue. From the dialogue, my personal takeaway is both satisfactory and frustrating. The satisfaction is because I noticed participants from both sides are genuinely willing to address the issue on bilateral

strategic relationship, the frustration is from a glimpse of how huge the perception gap between China and U.S, and this truly worries me. I do believe that by working together China and the United States could build a just, harmonic, sustainable international system, but the path to it is bound to fitful.

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