



**AMERICA AND CHINA: SEEKING AN
UPDATED FOUNDATION FOR
ENDURING ENGAGEMENT**

BY RON HUISKEN

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The US and China bookend the core bilateral axis in the contemporary world. This relationship became increasingly distant over the last 20 years and went into [free-fall](#) in 2017-18 when the Trump administration openly stepped away from the broad posture of engagement that had underpinned US policy toward China since 1972. The incoming Biden administration therefore [inherited](#) a badly fractured US-China relationship.

Somewhat ironically, as concerns about US-China relations mounted, a widespread propensity to re-assess alignments and policy settings emerged as a helpful source of restraint on the behavior of key states. The proximate trigger for this propensity was, of course, Biden's election win over Trump. There was some speculation that Beijing also faced new and difficult judgements. This stemmed from international polling suggesting that its policy settings and style of implementation were [alienating](#) many global audiences.

From the outset, the Biden administration made clear it agreed that the US posture of engagement toward China had [run its course](#). The new administration believed that China was presenting itself as an ideological alternative to the prevailing liberal order

and suggested that US-China rivalry could be characterized as centered on alternative systems of governance. As always, the cumulative stresses and strains of the past rolled over into 2021 and continued to develop as well as to interact with new events and developments. Above all, the COVID-19 pandemic continued its relentless erosion of stability, prosperity, and optimism around the world. Other, more specific concerns included, in particular, [Taiwan](#) but also the South China Sea, Myanmar, the Korean Peninsula, and [Afghanistan](#).

The Biden administration could not easily suppress the major qualms about America that political leaderships around the world were grappling with. Although there was unmistakably hesitation in some quarters, Washington encountered a strong residual interest in re-engagement among its allies.

The so-called rules-based order has established itself as something of a lightning rod in the dispute between the US and China. At an initial meeting of senior officials in [Alaska](#) in March 2021, the Biden administration sought to have the relationship viewed as a package of selected, broadly agreed, areas of cooperation alongside areas of regulated or bounded competition centered on economic performance. China had for a number of years flagged its reservations about the rules-based order simply by pointing out that it had not been present when the order was framed. In Alaska, however, it expressed a broader and sharper view, characterizing the order—which even Xi Jinping acknowledged had been a decisive factor in China's spectacular economic success—as a hegemonic construct that precluded fair competition and looked to the building of a new order devoid of these hegemonic characteristics.

This prospective insight into at least one aspect of China's difficulties with the rules-based order seemed to be confirmed in July 2021 when China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi [formally presented](#) US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman with a package of two lists and three “bottom lines.” The first of these “bottom lines” reportedly reads: The United States must not challenge, slander, or attempt to subvert the path and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This statement confirms that China

seeks formal acknowledgement of and acceptance that systems of governance other than liberal democracy/market economies can be fully effective across all criteria and should be assessed without prejudice.

What we have, therefore, is both the US and China saying that the rules-based order has been subverted, with the US highlighting, inter alia, the unqualified concentration of power in the Chinese Communist Party constitutes as an unacceptable threat to fair competition with private enterprise in the West while China insists, also inter alia, that Western notions of democracy and human rights are now so entrenched that they cast a pejorative cloud over its own system of governance even though it performs effectively against “collective” variants of these essential qualities.

All things considered, China and the United States spent the greater part of 2021 posturing and probing for the high ground rather than engaging substantively on practical solutions to the problems bedeviling their relationship. The outlook, therefore, remained somewhat fraught, with the scope for further serious deterioration looking rather stronger than the prospects for constructive engagement.

We cannot delude ourselves. The differences in values and priorities, the associated differences in what is expected of the state and in the sources of the state’s authority are real and deep. The judgement of political, economic, and security commentators is all but unanimous: the events and trends of the recent past appear to have placed the tools, processes, and mindsets that sustain order and stability in the Indo Pacific under alarming cumulative stress. The Cold War resulted in the Indo-Pacific hosting formidable nuclear and conventional military capabilities. Then China emerged and engineered the fastest sustained expansion of its military power to major power proportions in recorded history. And all sides are deploying these capabilities to prevent or provoke change. Both sharp surprises like [AUKUS](#) and the persistent calculated brinkmanship in the East and South China Seas can be seen as warning signs that the potential rate of change to the status quo is exceeding the region’s absorptive capacity.

It is imperative that the policy community in the Indo-Pacific region demands, encourages, and facilitates efforts to probe, dissect, and unravel the policy settings of the major powers and to develop the space for a coexistence that is stable, peaceful, and competitive—in that order. Above all, this is a task that the ASEAN-managed multilateral security processes—especially the ARF and EAS—should and must be a prominent part of, not least because their inclusive membership is an inherent antidote to the forces of divergence that are currently so strong.

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