



WHAT US NATIONAL (DIS)UNITY MEANS FOR CHINA POLICY

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Warnings about domestic political infighting undermining US foreign and security policy in relation to China are growing in American political discourse. The prosecutions of former President Donald Trump and investigations into incumbent President Joe Biden's son have the potential to [destabilize US resilience](#); [the upcoming presidential campaign](#) risks further deteriorating China-US relations. With more than 80% of the public holding unfavorable views of China, both parties are expected to toughen their anti-China rhetoric to win over public support.

As the showdown over the debt ceiling in May revealed, tensions in US political life have the potential to [spill over](#) into the economy and foreign affairs. A default would have heavily impaired Washington's [ability to compete with China](#). There were direct consequences as well: In mid-May Biden was forced to pull out of a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("[Quad](#)") [summit](#) and a [historic trip to Papua New Guinea](#) because of political negotiations in Washington. These cancellations demonstrated the powerful impact domestic crises can have on China-US competition and foreign policy more broadly.

Domestic cohesion and US foreign policy

In 2019, Cold War historian Arne Westad [warned](#) that the foremost challenge for the United States in competing effectively with China was in the "American mind." Similarly, George Kennan, in his "[X](#)" [article](#) in 1947 urged the US to "create among the peoples of the world the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time."

Today this objective still seems dangerously unmet.

Low domestic cohesion is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Robert D. Putnam's [recently published book](#) examined how the United States "came together" after a previous period of social divisions. Putnam argued that it was the emergence of the Progressive movement that healed the excesses of the Gilded Age, namely inequality, political polarization, social dislocation, and cultural narcissism. Progressives such as Theodore Roosevelt pushed for greater economic equality, social cooperation, and solidarity, with their ideas inspiring policy and shaping American life until the early 1960s.

However, Putnam's focus is on domestic society, and his analysis thus omits the foreign policy dimension and approach that developed during that crucial time. US foreign policy during the Progressive era was characterized by [imperialism, economic nationalism, and war](#). The [nationalism and exceptionalism](#) informing the Progressives' thinking, at home and abroad, ironically provided the ideological underpinning for the Bush doctrine, the neoconservative movement, and the rationale for democracy promotion abroad.

Such forces ensnared the United States in Afghanistan for more than 20 years—the longest war in American history. US involvement in the Middle East and Africa [directly cost](#) almost \$5.4 trillion and around 15,000 American lives, and indirectly [intensified the militarization](#) of the police, undermining American society's domestic fabric.

In other words, the same dynamics resulting in increased social cohesion in the early 20th century ultimately had a destabilizing effect on US foreign—and ultimately domestic—policy in the 21st.

The US preoccupation with China

[National security fears about China](#) represent the foremost concern for today's policymakers. The scope of this challenge makes it essential to think about domestic cohesion in relation to the mentalities historically informing and reflecting Americans' public perceptions about China.

As Stanford historian Gordon H. Chang [argued](#) in his 2015 book *Fateful Ties: A History of America's Preoccupation with China*, China has been a “central ingredient in America's self-identity from its very beginning and in the American preoccupation with national fate.” The US preoccupation with China competition must be put in perspective alongside the ebb and flow of national cohesion to understand patterns of engagement in the history of China-US relations and discern which historical analogies are most appropriate.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, a time of rising national cohesion, US policymakers [were sure that](#), as former Secretary of State Dean Acheson put it, “the democratic individualism of China will reassert themselves and she will throw off the foreign yoke.” He then warned China's people that they “should understand that, whatever happens within their own country, they can only bring grave trouble on themselves and their friends if they are led by their new rulers into aggressive or subversive adventures beyond their borders.”

Following the Communist takeover and the outbreak of the Korean War, [these beliefs](#) fueled McCarthyism, while the emergence of the [Red Scare](#) set in motion a downhill trajectory in US national cohesion.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when national cohesion further declined as the United States tried to disentangle itself from Vietnam, President Richard Nixon came up with the idea to “open” to China and to use rapprochement against the Soviets. Prior to the secret talks between then-National Security Advisor

Henry Kissinger and Premier Zhou Enlai, Nixon instructed the former that the negotiations “[should build on three fears](#): (1) fears of what the President might do in the event of continued stalemate in the South Vietnam war; (2) the fear of a resurgent and militaristic Japan; and (3) the fear of the Soviet threat on their flank.”

Instead of communicating a reassuring yet patronizing message, as Acheson had, US policymakers and Nixon in particular felt the need to manipulate China's fears over these issues to obtain strategic advantages from the Chinese Communist Party leadership. It is highly plausible that the strategy of fear Nixon suggested might have stemmed from the president's own fears about [deep division at home](#) combined with the crumbling military and political situation in Vietnam.

What do these two episodes tell us about contemporary challenges? In an era of domestic cohesion US policymakers were overconfident in dealing with China, but when domestic cohesion was on the decline their approach revealed a sense of uneasiness, concern, and overall under-confidence. This latter dynamic can be observed today, too: It's impossible to deny how, in the past few years, lowering levels of domestic cohesion in US society have been accompanied by rising anxiety about the “[China reckoning](#)” and alarm at Beijing's plans [to displace](#) the US-led international order.

On the other hand, it should be noted that contemporary China is not the same country it was in the 1960s and '70s. Then, China was internationally isolated, involved in a [conflict with the Soviet Union](#), its economy and society impoverished by the Cultural Revolution. Today, China is a completely different actor. This is why strategies motivated by fear or aimed at [exploiting situations](#) of perceived weakness will never be as effective as they were in the past.

Policymakers should acknowledge that tensions and divisions in American society [have a powerful impact on US foreign policy](#), compounding the inability of the United States to contain and compete with China. At the same time, the way the United States has dealt with China in the past has also affected such cohesion.

Being fully aware of how this mutually reinforcing mechanism works is just the first step toward the adoption of a more balanced approach to US China policy.

A sustainable approach to China should eschew both overconfidence and anxiety, elements contributing to making relations dysfunctional and filled with mistrust. In the context of an emerging [anti-China consensus](#) in Washington, diplomats must build domestic support around a mode of engagement that takes as its core a deeper understanding of how domestic constraints and cognitive biases have influenced past relations between the two countries.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.