

THE CHINA QUESTIONS • 2

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QUESTIONS
2

CRITICAL INSIGHTS INTO
US — CHINA RELATIONS

Edited by

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In memory of Ezra Vogel,
devoted advocate for better US-China relations

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THE CHINA QUESTIONS • 2

INTRODUCTION

*Maria Adele Carrai, Jennifer Rudolph,
and Michael Szonyi*

OPEN ANY major newspaper or news site or listen to any news broadcast on almost any day and you will likely encounter a story about US-China rivalry. Skepticism and suspicion between the two countries are rising, and the relationship has entered tense new territory. Economic and military modernization has transformed China into a major world power, and its behavior affects a broad spectrum of US interests both directly and indirectly. China now challenges American leadership in many dimensions of world affairs. At the same time, China's participation has also become essential to addressing many global concerns such as climate change, cybersecurity, and public health. In the face of myriad critical issues, some preexisting and others newly emerging, the two sides are fundamentally rethinking their relationship.

WHY THIS BOOK?

These changes in US-China relations are already affecting American lives and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. It is critically important that Americans have a clear understanding of developments inside China and the US-China relationship. In our age of 24/7 news cycles and pervasive social media, it is easy to get information. But much of the information about China that is available to the general reader is one-dimensional or partisan. Despite the obstacles that Beijing imposes on its own and foreign journalists, there

is still much high-quality reporting. But even in balanced coverage, the broader significance of the latest news event is not always easy to grasp. There are few sources for the general reader seeking well-informed, nonpartisan insights into the many critical issues in the US-China relationship.

The China Questions 2: Critical Insights into US-China Relations can be one place to start. More than fifty leading scholars, analysts, and journalists with expertise spanning politics, national security, economics, science, technology, public health, history, culture, and society have contributed to the book. We asked each to identify a pressing question that readers outside China, especially Americans, should know more about, and then provide an answer in a short, accessible essay. Naturally, such difficult questions cannot be comprehensively answered in a few pages. But our authors explain them clearly and provide information that readers should have when thinking about these issues for themselves. The authors offer insights based on years and sometimes decades of thinking, researching, and writing about these issues. For readers who wish to delve deeper, additional resources for each topic are provided on the book's web page at <https://fairbank.fas.harvard.edu/china-questions2>.

Most of our authors are US-based. This is deliberate. No single volume can describe all the issues or perspectives in US-China relations. Therefore, we offer a cross-section of key areas, presenting analyses from the US perspective or aimed at lessons for the United States. (After discussions with Chinese colleagues, we also worried that participation in this project might be difficult for academics in People's Republic of China [PRC] universities.) We recognize that counterparts from China might have very different views, and thus we present the book not as a balanced representation of views from both sides of the Pacific but instead as a reflection of the critical environment of today and as a response to some important questions. Of course, we hope that readers from China and elsewhere will find

this book interesting and that it will contribute to greater understanding in China of US perspectives and thereby facilitate better relations.

Because our contributors come from different fields and present different viewpoints, readers will encounter both overlaps and disagreement among them. This reflects the open debates in the field. Some essays include policy proposals; others do not. Regardless, each chapter provides, explicitly or implicitly, an informed perspective on the bilateral relationship. That the more than fifty authors hold such an array of different opinions is itself noteworthy. We are quite confident that they would not argue that their particular characterization of a specific issue should be extrapolated to describe the entire relationship. Americans need to consider the possibility that all of them are right in their own terms and ask what this means for the United States.

Trying to understand these diverse and complex perspectives is crucial for America's future. Failure to do so will lead to policy mistakes that will harm US interests. Perhaps the best-known recent example of misunderstanding is the Trump administration's launch of a trade war that rested partly on the mistaken belief that China is primarily an export-oriented manufacturing economy and thus vulnerable to American tariffs. But underestimating and misconstruing China's Belt and Road Initiative, which has led to years of missed American opportunities, may prove even more significant in the long run. Americans need accurate and sophisticated knowledge of China to better understand the issues at stake.

THE US-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

The recent downturn in the bilateral relationship may have come as a surprise to many, but its roots can be traced back decades. After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the PRC in 1949,

the United States and most of its allies did not grant the PRC diplomatic recognition, choosing instead to continue to recognize the Republic of China, which had by then moved to Taiwan, as the legitimate government of China. This arrangement only began to change in the 1970s. Though initially motivated by Cold War goals of countering the Soviet Union, the normalization of relations between the United States and China proved to be one of the most important events of the twentieth century.

The remarkable developments in the bilateral relationship since US president Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to Beijing were enabled by a policy framework known as "constructive engagement" that has shaped China policy for both Republican and Democratic administrations for the past half century. The policy maintains that US domestic and international interests are best served if China is stable and meets the needs of its own people, is increasingly integrated into the world economy and adopts international rules and norms, and perceives the United States as neither hostile nor seeking to undermine the CCP regime. Constructive engagement has also meant the maintenance of the One China policy (which acknowledges but does not accept PRC claims to Taiwan) and the assumption that a continued US presence in Asia is required to ensure a peaceful and prosperous region. Engagement was intended to promote stability and prosperity in China and the region while gradually integrating China into the existing liberal world order, thereby protecting US priorities and leadership. Whether eventual political liberalization and democratization in China was also a core goal of US constructive engagement policy—as some of its critics charge today, therefore implying that the policy has been a failure—remains a highly contentious debate.

On the China side, when Deng Xiaoping and the post-Mao Zedong leadership launched the PRC on its current path of "opening up and reform," they recognized that the stability of the US-led world

order and China's integration into it supported their goals as well. In this regard, no nation has done more in the last half century than the United States to assist China's rise and global integration. China has benefited tremendously from Pax Americana and the system it created. In return, China has contributed to American prosperity through investments, workers and students, and exports of products for American consumers. And China's participation in the system implicitly acknowledged US leadership in it. But Chinese leaders recognized that the benefits of engagement also came with peril. Distrust persisted alongside cooperation due at least partly to the clash between China's authoritarian rule and US support for democratic liberal norms at home and abroad.

During the 2000s, China and the United States became top trading partners. Chinese factories became integral to global supply chains, and products with a "Made in China" label became ubiquitous in American households. US investments in Chinese industry helped expand China's domestic market. Overall, engagement created strong interdependence and successfully kept the relationship free from threats to US fundamental interests. Yet as early as the first years of the twenty-first century, Americans were increasingly thinking about the need to adjust imbalances built into the relationship that had become more pronounced over time, such as continued barriers to Chinese markets and state support of industry. However, major efforts to address these and other areas were delayed as the US-driven global war on terrorism and the Great Recession of 2007–2009 diverted US attention and resources.

With the recovery well under way, in the 2010s the Obama administration tried to reassert US leadership in Asia in the face of China's growing influence, launching a broad "pivot" to East Asia that involved economic, diplomatic, and security dimensions. For instance, on the economic front, the United States led the negotiations for the

Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which until it was abandoned by the Trump administration would have let the United States remain the main rule setter of the international economic legal order, pointedly excluding China from the agreement.

Donald Trump leveraged a bipartisan consensus to get tougher on China that was driven in part by growing pessimism about whether it was possible to fully integrate China into the existing international liberal order. He took popular anxiety about China's rise to a new level, using unprecedented vocabulary and seeking to enflame ethno-nationalism. The rhetoric helped hasten a worsening view of China on multiple levels. The 2017 *National Security Strategy of the United States* for the first time labeled China a revisionist power and a peer competitor. Trump had centered his campaign around the accusation that China was stealing American manufacturing jobs, and he promised to bring them back. Yukon Huang and Ryan Hass explain in their chapters how wrong he was. Trump's campaign themes blossomed into racist rhetoric that reached new heights as the United States grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic. The rhetoric fueled an alarming increase in anger and violence toward Asian American fellow citizens as well as millions more visitors to the United States.

On the Chinese side, Xi Jinping, secretary-general of the CCP and president of the PRC since 2012, has presided over the emergence of a China that is not only stronger but also bolder. Today China asserts its interests through a national industrial strategy, power projection abroad, and a willingness to exert economic coercion on trade partners. Beyond its borders, China more aggressively pushes its claims in territorial disputes with India and Bhutan; to the east it has expanded into the South China Sea. From the perspective of Beijing, these are legitimate actions to protect and assert its sovereignty. The repression of Uyghur and other minorities, including reeducation and internment, and the suppression of political freedoms in

Hong Kong and the crackdown on human rights activism have generated outrage and alarm in the United States and elsewhere. Domestically China has successfully used populist and nationalist arguments to respond to these concerns, build support and legitimacy for the CCP, and counter any challenges to Xi's personal authority. Propaganda efforts are matched by new forms of surveillance that use advanced technologies, such as facial recognition and artificial intelligence, and stricter controls over the internet. Many of these tactics illustrate fundamental differences between the United States and China about the proper relationship between a government and its citizens. In the economic realm, under Xi the CCP has been bringing many sectors of the economy under direct control, even as it continues its established tradition of long-term strategic planning that differs significantly from a free market approach. In the background of these developments appears to be a strongly held view by China's leadership that the United States is in decline and therefore that the time is ripe for China to advance.

China has declared its goal of becoming a global technology, military, and economic leader by 2050, putting an end to US supremacy though not necessarily replacing it. This is not entirely a surprise. For years China has complained that it was tired of hearing Washington tell it what to do. Even prior to the United States raising tariff barriers, China was taking steps to limit and better control interactions between its citizens and Americans, decouple the two economies in a controlled way, and transition its military from a primarily defensive force to one capable of projecting power beyond China's borders. In 2015 the Chinese legislature passed the National Security Law of the People's Republic of China, designed in part to create a parallel digital world sealed off from US influence. The following year China put all nongovernmental organizations under police administration, negatively impacting those organizations operating in China and the

Americans and other foreigners employed by them. And China is increasingly emphasizing the importance of indigenous innovation and reduced reliance on the United States, especially for critical components necessary for technological modernization that are increasingly tied to military advancements.

China has also started promoting its own visions for the future global order through new organizations for economic integration and legal standards such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Built on a strikingly similar model as the US-led financial institutions with which it aims to compete, the bank serves at least in part as a vehicle to enable China to participate in international infrastructure financing with due recognition and with input into the terms. Most significantly, China also launched the Belt and Road Initiative, a global development strategy to make it a dominant actor in the international economic and political systems.

On the military front, as Andrew Erickson's chapter notes, the United States still enjoys an absolute military advantage, but China's rapidly growing military capabilities have narrowed the gap considerably, particularly in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and other regions of particular concern to China. This inevitably increases the risk of armed conflict.

The rising tension between China and the United States in the diplomatic and security realms is mirrored in the media and in popular perceptions. In 2022, roughly two-thirds of Americans across the political spectrum view China negatively. While the explanation for this lies partly with US domestic politics, the deterioration in US perceptions of China is not simply a matter of the election cycle. It is also a product of China's international conduct as well as broadly held concerns about human rights in China. Today there is also broad agreement among US corporations and government officials that Beijing's industrial and economic policies provide unfair advantages

that undermine US (and other foreign) performance in China, with state subsidies and intellectual property theft challenging capitalist norms and rules.

As China has become more assertive at home and nearby, its narratives about the United States have also changed. Some Chinese diplomats, popularly known as “wolf warriors,” now state openly the view that the United States meddles in China’s internal affairs in ways that threaten its domestic unity and stability, something unprecedented in the history of engagement. The official line contends, for instance, that the United States instigated the 2008 riots in Tibet and the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. And China’s narrative about the United States goes beyond painting it as a meddler. For instance, China questions the validity of the United States as a model in areas such as public health, noting the sustained chaos caused by COVID-19 in the United States as opposed to the disciplined approach taken by Beijing. China now presents itself to the world as an alternative model for economic development and political and social organization vis-à-vis the previously dominant American-led order.

Relations were made even more difficult by heated nationalist rhetoric from both Donald Trump and Xi Jinping. Their use of nationalist populism makes it even more important that the two sides understand each other. The costs of this approach make the need for a course correction that is more measured and clear-eyed even more pressing. Demonizing China as not just a rival but also as an enemy and using racist tropes can carry a heavy cost. It can lead to bad national policy, misunderstandings, and also bigotry and racism. Likewise, Chinese patriotic education and nationalist social media campaigns jeopardize the manifold people-to-people exchanges that have in past years broadened cooperation and exchanges between the two countries. These campaigns may also pose a danger to ethnic or other groups in China who are not seen as sufficiently nationalistic

or Chinese and thus forced to conform to the dictums of the Chinese nation.

The deteriorating relations of recent years now extend into virtually all domains, including the ideological one. Some pundits argue that a new cold war is beginning. Many blame the Trump presidency for this. But as we have seen, the deterioration of relations actually reflects trends that have been under way for years, with both sides sharing some responsibility. An altered distribution of power and global changes in politics and economics are shifting the world away from a US-led order and toward a bipolar or perhaps multipolar one. Other broad trends, such as technological advances and the rise of populist and antiglobalization movements, also contribute to these tensions.

This is certainly not the first time in history that an established power has had to consider the question of how best to accommodate a rising power. The United States navigated its own rise through a combination of economic might and a breakdown of European power networks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Japanese leaders in the early twentieth century believed that the Western powers actively excluded them from achieving first-power status, and this view ultimately led to a disastrous war in Asia. Can the existing world order make room for China? Will China try to create an alternate system, or will it try to make the existing system adjust so that norms are not based primarily on what Xi Jinping terms “Western values”? It’s obvious that China is no longer satisfied with the status quo and that the United States is necessarily worried about what China’s rise might mean.

Despite the growing friction, the two countries are deeply intertwined. Bilateral trade in goods and services reached nearly \$660 billion by 2020, and the two countries have become major sources of foreign direct investment in each other, with supply chains entwined for good and bad as the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demon-

strated. In short, interdependence defines the relationship. But interdependence does not determine the relationship.

There is much to gain if the two powers can tame their animus and engage productively. The economic stakes clearly are high, as is the potential and need for collaboration on such critical issues as climate change and global health. The United States could learn from the Chinese experience in areas such as infrastructure and poverty reduction, while China could continue to benefit from the dynamic US educational system, innovative business practices, and more. The reality is that China and the United States cannot simply walk away from each other. They share too much history and too much of the global stage. But engaging productively must include grappling with divergent views and managing competition. It will take time to develop a new postengagement policy, but finding ways to connect and tackle shared problems while still pursuing national interests is a necessary goal.

CHARACTERIZING THE US-CHINA RELATIONSHIP TODAY

Secretary of State Antony Blinken laid out the key aspects of President Joe Biden's China policy in one of his first public speeches in March 2021. "Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be," said Blinken, adding, that "the common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength." Some observers were surprised that there was no formal break with the Trump administration's policy, but in reality there was almost no possibility of a reset in US-China relations. There is a broad bipartisan consensus that the old policy of constructive engagement has failed. While Trump's departure from existing norms of the relationship were startling in terms of their rhetoric and the lack of strategic coherence

behind individual decisions, the relationship had already entered a new phase. There's no going back to pre-Trump engagement not because of Trump's rhetoric but instead because the relationship was already compromised. The Biden administration's task is to assess and prioritize US interests in a complicated post-engagement landscape where China is pushing its interests assertively and at times at cross-purposes with those of the United States.

What are the lessons of *The China Questions 2* for US policy in this new era? Endless streams of rhetoric in the last decade have argued about how best to characterize the relationship: partnership, competition, and, increasingly, threat or enemy. Finding the existing vocabulary inadequate, some analysts have even coined new terms, such as "Chimerica," "G2," and "co-opetitor." Reading this book should make clear that no single label adequately describes the entirety of this crucial relationship because it is much too complex and contradictory. While the bilateral relationship is too complicated to be reduced to a single characterization, it is still important for academics and practitioners to try, for in the absence of a simple description, politics will fill the empty space, and in the current political dynamic, the term that will most likely be adopted is "enemy."

Old ways of defining policy options are similarly outdated. It no longer makes much sense to speak of China "doves" and "hawks." Recognizing the limitations of these categories and current policies, Rush Doshi, director for China on the US National Security Council, argues that the United States needs to reframe its policies in terms of a distinction between strategies intended to accommodate or reassure China and strategies intended to change China's behavior through deterrence or subversion. The essays here present a different way of thinking about the complexity. Most of the authors focus on one or more of the following aspects: US-China interdependence, the implications of a changing China, and US-China competition. Plausible

policy choices could be drawn from each of them, though not necessarily exactly as the individual authors would favor.

The authors who focus on interdependence implicitly or explicitly ask the question of whether close links to China are good, bad, or neutral for the United States. What opportunities and risks does interdependence create? China has many things the United States desires, including markets and skills. Interdependence can be positive if it gives the United States access to such things, and thus an appropriate policy might be to maximize American access to China. But interdependence also creates risks, so some authors explore how to minimize these risks without damaging the opportunities. China and the United States share interests in addressing common challenges, including global public health, counterterrorism, and combating climate change. In these areas, policy makers must find ways to work constructively with China in support of shared interests while minimizing costs or new risks.

Some of our authors frame their analyses largely in terms of changes inside China rather than on the relationship between the two countries. For some, China's rise in and of itself does not pose a direct challenge to US interests or it is not clear what that challenge may be. Either way, these authors argue, it makes no sense to adopt a policy of constraining China just for the sake of doing so. Carla Freeman's chapter on space exploration is a good example of this approach. For others, internal developments in China—such as the human rights crisis in Xinjiang—do demand a strong US response.

Most of our contributors think primarily of the two countries as competitors. That this view predominates among more than fifty leading China experts is a strong indicator of a truly fundamental shift in the academic world in recent years. Only five years ago this view was not the dominant one. Within that shift we can find some patterns. For some of the authors who see the two countries as competitors, the

game is essentially a fair one and therefore should be allowed to continue. Some within this group argue that the United States has real advantages and is therefore likely to prevail in the competition. A small group, exemplified by Selina Ho's essay on infrastructure, argue that China has certain advantages and therefore that the correct policy is for the United States to learn from China in these areas. This is another largely unprecedented development in the study of US-China relations. A variant of this approach, also quite novel, sets aside the issue of competition. As China becomes wealthier and more technologically advanced, it faces challenges similar to those in the United States. In response, as Winston Ma writes about technological governance, the two should learn from one another.

It can also be argued that the two countries compete in a game in which China does not play by the rules or changes the rules in its favor. In such cases, the appropriate policy may be to strengthen the rules or sanction China to produce compliance. A third approach, exemplified by Margaret Lewis on intellectual property, acknowledges that China is not playing by the rules—by incentivizing and even at times directing violations of US law—but seeks ways to mitigate the threat this poses.

Some authors focus on the core competition and worry that it is dangerous in and of itself. Alex Wang's essay on climate change takes the view that US-China competition could actually benefit both countries and the world.

Finally, though it is not argued here by any of our contributors, one position contends that China is both a competitor and a threat and that the threat cannot be mitigated. So, the only right policy is to weaken or constrain China or force it to change—an increasingly widespread public view. One might read the chapters in this volume as rebutting this position as both wrong and dangerous.

One common factor to policy implications across all these approaches is the need to think about how to maximize benefits while minimizing costs; deciding what is best depends on whether one focuses on China itself, on interdependence, or on competition. But for an overall China policy, the United States needs to combine and balance these perspectives without letting any of them dominate. If one thinks that a specific issue really does override all others, then a simple policy might work. But once the complexity involved is acknowledged, that approach is simply untenable. If the United States has a compelling interest in working with China on any issue, its policy simply can't focus exclusively on mitigating perceived threats.

The downturn in the relationship is further complicated by the way options open to the United States are sometimes presented as mutually exclusive alternatives: either China changes and profoundly reforms its policies or the countries should decouple. Neither of these is viable or realistic, and for that matter, neither serves the interests of either country.

Although the book's focus is to inform rather than argue for specific policies, there is one obvious conclusion to draw. Failure to recognize the complexity of China and the US-China relationship can harm US interests. No one-size-fits-all policy makes sense. An appropriate policy needs to recognize that the relationship is different in different spheres. Reciprocity may be the right policy in the commercial realm, as John Pomfret argues—if China doesn't allow foreign firms to operate in certain sectors, then Chinese firms should be excluded from those sectors in the United States—but this doesn't make reciprocity the right principle everywhere. In education, as Mary Gallagher argues, banning Chinese student organizations on US campuses because American students can't organize in China would begin a race to the bottom that would erode, not strengthen, America's advantages.

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