**The US-China Relations in the Biden-Xi Era**

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Thank you very much. Today I'll share with you some of my observations on the complexity of the "sweet and sour" relationship between the U.S. and China.

One of my favorite American movies is "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly". To use the metaphor, President Biden explains its China policy as a clash of systems, casting the rivalry between "The Good" and "The Bad" as a battle between democracy and autocracy. He calls for rebuilding the U.S. as a role model for democracy and vows to defeat China and win the battle. In reality, "The Ugly" is the fact that the whole world is not divided into black and white, thus, President Biden's China policy is more like a cocktail with three layers of pragmatic elements: "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.”

I'll begin with a brief discussion on the debate of democracy first, and then move on to three specific issues: 1) a brief description of the current US-China relations, e.g., what is the status quo of the relationship; 2) an explanation of the fundamental changes in the relationship, focusing on Chinese narratives and debates on dealing with the U.S.; and 3) predictions and some proposals to manage the relationship.

**I. The Debate on Democracy**

In my humble opinion, the debate on democracy and autocracy have positive implications in both philosophical and practical ways for reconsidering current US-China relations.

The concept of democracy was introduced to China in the early 20th Century, before the May 4th Movement. It was originally presented "as an ornament of modernity and asset for rulers.” Dr. Dewey, a Columbia professor, visited China in 1919 and stayed for two years. He gave nearly 200 lectures to Chinese audiences and was hailed as a "Second Confucius". One of Dr. Dewey's legacies in China is that his theories and elaborations on democracy were broadly introduced and he himself at that time represented "Mr. Democracy" and "Mr. Science," two personifications of modern western values.

Democracy was defined by Dr. Dewey as the "ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity". He argued that "complete democracy" was to be obtained not just by extending voting rights but also by ensuring that there exists a fully formed public opinion, accomplished by communication among citizens, experts and politicians, with the latter being accountable for the policies they adopt.

The concept of democracy is very much relevant today. As a matter of fact, struggles on democracy and human rights has been a long controversial topic in US-China relations. Today, democracy in many Chinese people’s minds refers to various things ranging from “a more effective means to resolving problems facing our country” to “certain adjustments” in the political system. It is interesting to note, that in response to President Biden's remarks, Chinese president Xi Jinping stresses that "democracy is not a special right reserved to an individual country, but a right for the people of all countries to enjoy". He even put forward a new concept, "whole-process democracy", which sounds a bit like Dewey's explanation: people are masters of the country, as it gives full play to the principal role of the people.

My general argument is that, democracy can be conceptualized either as the way one thinks of a skyscraper or as one thinks of a cloud. A skyscraper is easily recognizable, but a cloud changes its shapes all the time. The concept is more complex because one can consider “as if”; or “as is” or “as might be”. When Covid-19 is still raging in the world, democracy and science, the twin concepts that Chinese are so familiar with, should be regarded as goals for good governance for both countries. They should be seen as measurements for global development as well. Why so?

As for the U.S., even though most Americans are proud of their democratic values, in practice, they worry about "political decay" or institutional failure, in Fukuyama's term. To make American democracy work more efficiently, the two parties must find ways to work together and avoid "riot on Capitol Hill" like tragedies in the future. Most importantly, domestic displays of racial tensions, political polarization, socioeconomic inequality and xenophobia must be fixed. The U.S. must put its own house in order before it can successfully wage a principled campaign against China.

The mixed results of the U.S. using force to spread democracy should also be reconsidered. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have undermined support for democracy and generated anti-Americanism. Many people in the world believe that America seems like a country that relies on military might. Sometimes it shoots first and asks questions later.

As for China, no one believes that foreign pressure can change Chinese policy in Xinjiang or Hong Kong or with respect to lawyers, feminists, or religious believers, because the regime authentically sees these forces as threats to its own survival. To maintain political stability at home, China has constructed an information firewall and tightened domestic ideological control. Perhaps "Beijing is more afraid of Washington’s advocacy of expanding democracy into China than the U.S. is afraid of China’s authoritarianism". As the U.S. is trying to forge an [alliance](https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/04/07/realistic-ambitions-for-us-alliance-system-in-asia/) of democracies to confront China, China has attempted to enhance its strategic partnerships with Russia, Pakistan, Iran and other countries to build a global "anti-hegemonic" coalition.

The competition between democracy and authoritarianism will continue. The so-called "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics" should be further improved and recognized by the international community.

**II. The Current Relations: Fundamental Change**

A fundamental change in US-China relations in the Biden-Xi Trump era can be seen in four perspectives: a sharp shrink in people-to-people exchange; lacking of substantial cooperation even in a symbolic sense; intensified competition in every field; extended confrontation ranging from sovereignty, human rights, to cyber-security issues.

To be more specific, China and the U.S. have had several rounds of wrangling this year. Some people argue that at least bilateral ties haven’t continued deteriorating, but are showing signs of a gradual thaw. Indeed, since the US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited China and held the “Tianjin talks” with the Chinese side, we have witnessed the US COVID-19 virus tracing report ended up abortive in August, John Kerry’s second China visit for talks on climate cooperation in September, and, most recently, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai’s speech on US policy on trade with China, which released some reconciliatory messages in October.

Yet it is very difficult to get the relationship back to its normal track. For example, the Asia-Pacific region has, as a whole, been relatively peaceful and stable, compared with what happened in the Middle East, Central Asia or Europe. However, the cross strait tensions have been intensified lately. The U.S. relations with Taiwan, as State Secretary Antony Blinken said, are “rock solid”. President Biden has also repeatedly pledged to support Taiwan to enhance its “defensive capabilities”. His recent response — a quick [“yes,” then “yes”](https://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=001I-CLa40vb2t_Z7A-L-xfSI4NhJQhNt6UTDbpfUYiFVwIiso8xm1m12bV0X89SU1ApEWFBCPfllroCidgxB39d1ABiMG2XaDniVAtL2PvWJcPA6tyPRHBwX7Ki3Udgu5ekXyRH8TG5f1AxSbPrKDPtEkUox_tUWTyKN-4sRIZdLiu1NQK3CsDFzT3suj5ZMKtq4Dl3Y6j80VoDDpTa-jYjA==&c=MfBmVnjw0mZZ0gq4oSUk0Thk8AHG-eMLUhsv7d09Rd8iAEGkpQxxhQ==&ch=o98JSEZKQQ0ul0QfTaxnxb3DqDNt9x5Ne8CggA4TVVT993l7JhfFeg==) again when pressed by a CNN anchor — to protect Taiwan from mainland was an instant breaking news globally. A shift to strategic clarity from strategic ambiguity of American Taiwan policy would likely be interpreted by China as a sign that Washington intends to support a formal declaration of Taiwan independence. Thus, from mainland China's perspective, President Biden's pro-DPP policy has emboldened the DPP authorities to refuse to recognize the “1992 consensus” until now.

The Taiwan crisis is just one example to show that it is difficult to fix the relationship. There are several explanations on the change of the nature in the relationship. The most popular one is that China has become more "conservative" internally and more "aggressive" in its diplomacy. Chinese President Xi Jinping, in Washington's eyes, has approached the U.S. from a perceived position of strength, no longer bending to pressure and accommodating its demands without conditions.

Indeed, I argue that the new Chinese leadership possesses both domestic aspirations and global consciousness. Whether the rise of China is a fantasy or fallacy, China has become a stronger economic force that has further contributed as well as destabilized the status quo of the current international order. Expansion of China's diplomatic frontiers, for example, includes economic and commercial diplomacy, cyber security, polar exploration, space competition, and so on. A "great leap forward" modernization of defense and military forces (qiang jun gu fang 强军固防, yi wu zhi ge 以武止戈) has also caused international concerns.

Another reason, which is more popular in China, is that the U.S. cannot compete effectively with China due to American decline in economic vitality, technological innovation, political unity, and diplomatic credibility. This argument suggests, to some extent, that the U.S. has lost much of its institutional attractiveness to China over the last two decades.

To elaborate a bit on this point, China has seen the U.S. as either a paper tiger or a real leviathan. America, in most Chinese people’s views, is both a beautiful country and an imperialist empire (美丽的帝国主义). During the late 1970s and 1980s, China viewed the U.S. as a role model for economic modernization. Even in 1989, some demonstrators at Tiananmen Square put up Statues of Liberty to symbolize the Chinese pursuit of democracy. However, after the Iraq War and the 2008 financial crisis, China gradually changed its attitude towards the U.S. Through my observations, I strongly felt that Chinese public opinions today have one dominant theme: China has defeated the U.S. in three battle areas: in controlling the Covid-19 crisis, in the recent trade war, and in defending national sovereignty related to Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan (三大战役：中国完败美国).

There are strategic debates occurring in China, with some advocating a much firmer line towards the U.S., but mostly, calling for the continuing policy of “Pi er bu fan, dou er bu po” (批而不反、斗而不破), i.e., “criticize but don’t alienate, fight over core interests but don’t break the relationship.”

I summarized and classified four perspective of views on how Chinese people see the US-China relations today. The key words reflecting these four views are decoupling, futility, decisive battle and cooperation (四种观点：脱钩说、无用论、决战派、合作观).

The decoupling school is quite pessimistic on the relationship, arguing that due to domestic constraints, the two countries will inevitably grow apart, at least in areas of science and technology.

The futility school believes that the U.S. is determined to contain China or, at least, try to diminish China's influence and power. Thus, as long as China grows fast, the U.S. will find ways to suppress China. No politicians in Washington DC would like to admit that one day, the US may be replaced by China and become the second most powerful country in the world.

The decisive battle view emphasizes the confrontational nature between the two countries, which might lead to the "fight of the century" . Therefore, China must prepare itself well for the coming duel.

The cooperation school still sees hope in the bilateral relationship. As Chinese Ambassador Qin Gang repeated, as two countries are entering "a new round of mutual exploration, understanding and adaptation", we must find a way to get along with each other in the new era. He believes that "the door of China-U.S. relations, which is already open, cannot be closed" and cooperation of the two countries is "the call of the times, and the will of the people".

Despite all these debates, I feel that the current leadership is still adopting a pragmatic approach in handling its relations with the U.S.

Let me share a story: an accidental air transport in Aug. 1945 symbolized a token of friendship between the US and China and that airlift had changed China's destiny and future. What happened exactly?

The Japanese army in China surrendered on Aug. 15th, 1945. Both the KMT and CCP wanted to send their troops as soon as possible to take over those Japanese occupied regions. The nationalist government had an advantage since the U.S. recognized it as the only legitimate government in China, and thus, rejected any warlords or armed parties including the CCP. Chairman Mao Zedong and the CCP central committee didn't expect the Japanese would surrender in August, so a large number of CCP's experienced senior leaders had stayed in Yan'an for meetings and studies. How to send them back to the "front lines" was a challenge. An amazing thing happened: the CCP representative dared to ask the US Observation Group to "borrow" an airplane to send some "cadres" to the front line to participate in the "final fight" against the Japanese. The CCP didn't tell Americans any names and titles, and the American Observation Group didn't bother to ask. On Aug. 25th, 20 "cadres" boarded an American military plane and several hours later, landed successfully. If not being sent out by that airlift, it would take them over two months to get out of Yan An area. 40 years later, their names were exposed: Deng Xiaoping, Lin Biao, Liu Bocheng, Chen Yi, Bo Yibo, Teng Daiyuan, and so on. Six of them were high level generals who fought in the Korean War against the US 5 years later.

What an amazing story. Why did Mao and the CCP dare to ask a "favor" from Americans? Mao had a pragmatic approach to work with those Americans who visited Yan An at that time. He asked to not only "differentiate" American people with the American government, but also differentiate American decision makers and low level working people. All in all, he knew how to work with American friends to influence government decisions. It was proven by the fact that in 1970, he invited Edgar Snow to board on Tian Anmen and passed a positive message that China intended to improve its relations with the U.S.; he also conducted "ping pong diplomacy" and invited Nixon to visit China in the following years.

China's pragmatic approach in handling its relations with the US is by no means due to expediency, but a long-term and strategic choice. After Mao, Deng Xiaoping was also a pragmatic leader. His remarks on "black cat or white cat" had proved it. Deng was determined to establish diplomatic relations with the U.S. since he firmly believed that "those countries that followed the U.S. all got rich".

Pragmatism is also Xi Jinping's principle to deal with the U.S. What he once said, "we have a thousand reasons to make the China-US relationship work, and no reason to break it" reflected his genuine intention to maintain good relations with the U.S.

**III. Future Perspective and Proposals to Manage the Relationship**

China is searching its soul. In a more fluid and volatile international context, China is shaping the world by changing itself. Same thing can be said for the U.S. A bipolar world is emerging as the US–China rivalry dominates virtually every aspect of international politics. The US-China relations should be characterized by decency, mutual understanding and pragmatic problem-solving.

In September, President Biden called President Xi to discuss implementing and promoting the consensus. Xi made three points clear: First, China-US relations are not a multiple-choice question, but one that must be answered well. Second, China and the US should proceed from the big picture, be responsible powers that are forward-looking, and show strategic insight and political will. Third, the two countries should continue contact and dialogue and promote cooperation on the basis of respecting each other’s core concerns, properly managing differences.

In practice, China’s policy towards the U.S. today can be summarized as “strategically suspicious, economically hopeful, and practically uncertain.” That is, China has a strategic suspicion of the U.S., but seeks a productive working relationship with it.

There are powerful imperatives for cooperation between the U.S. and China. But there are equally powerful obstacles to developing a truly cooperative relationship. What then should be done? Many scholars have argued that the two sides must build up mutual trust, but I argue that the two countries must learn how to live with each other and how to cooperate more without trust. While mutual trust is not possible, we should strive for greater transparency, predictability and reliability.

One proposal I made was to re-establish an intellectual community in both the U.S. and China to reset the tone of the bilateral relationship. Columbia University has a tradition and good reputation in doing this. Columbia University alumni Gu Weijun, Hu Shih, Jiang Tingfu, and Song Ziwen served as high level government officials and diplomats for the KMT government in the past. Collectively, they worked as a group to influence American policy toward China during the WWII era.

Today I feel that Chinese foreign policy needs to be advised, reviewed and critiqued by scholars in the relevant fields. Serious questions must be raised: whether "wolf warrior diplomacy" has made China more attractive or isolated? What should China and the U.S. do to begin cooperation in less controversial areas, such as dealing with the climate change issue?

"Intellectual community" has been a useful tool in advising and critiquing government policy in the U.S. as well. For example, from the "Fulbright hearing" in the 1960s to the lobbying granting China into the WTO in late 1990s, many American scholars such as Kissinger, Brzezinski, Madeleine Albright, had either joined the government, or worked closely in serving as policy consultant. Washington was at its best when it was cautious, deliberate, and focused on incremental progress.

The second proposal would be a multi-layer dialogue mechanism. This include: 1) continued expansion of the U.S.-China Security Dialogue which allow the two militaries improve communication about future uncertainties on Taiwan, South China Sea and the Korean peninsula, sharing assessments of developments and working to ensure that the interests of the two countries do not come into conflict; 2) a trilateral consultative defense conference among three superpowers in the region—the U.S., China, and Japan—should be established. The biggest dangers are accidents or miscalculations. There need to be rules of the road, especially regarding potential incidents at sea and in the air. Thus, a binding code of conduct on the East China Sea and South China Sea must be worked out. China has to calm neighboring claimants and prepare to work together with other countries on these issues.

The third proposal, knitting the two societies together through people-to-people contacts and educational and cultural exchanges in the post pandemic era. Washington has never faced a rival like Beijing. China cannot expect the U.S. to accept its authoritarian system, and Washington cannot alter Beijing’s intrinsic values or stop its rise. So at Columbia University, I truly feel that each of us should become "pragmatic idealists" who can make individual contributions to mutual understandings, as no matter how small or technical in nature, it will have strategic implications in bringing back the relationship to the normal track in the future.

To conclude, I believe that strategic opportunities still exist since “govern ourselves better” should be top priority for both countries. In this sense, the longest journey is the journey inward.

Thank you very much.