

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHINA – US RELATIONS DURING XI JINPING'S PRESIDENCY

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The bilateral relationship between the United States and China is one of the most crucial and complex in the world. In the 21st century, the geopolitical landscape has changed as a result of China's rise to economic dominance and the United States diminishing role in global production and commerce. There have been numerous ups and downs in the ties between China and the United States ever since Xi Jinping became the President of the People's Republic of China. The evolution of these ties is reviewed, and the characteristics of each stage are examined.

Keywords: China – US relations; Xi Jinping's presidency; dispute; cooperation; diplomatic relations; Covid-19; international order; dialogue; technological and cultural exchanges; US Government; protectionism; US President; unilateralism.

ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ КИТАЙСКО-АМЕРИКАНСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ В ПЕРИОД ПРЕДСЕДАТЕЛЬСТВА СИ ЦЗИНЬПИНА

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Отношения между США и Китаем имеют важное значение в современном мире и характеризуются чрезвычайной сложностью и противоречивостью. В XXI в. в результате экономического подъема Китая и одновременной потери прежних позиций США в мировой экономике геополитическая обстановка в мире существенно изменилась. С момента избрания Си Цзиньпина председателем КНР периоды относительного укрепления китайско-американских отношений чередовались с периодами их ослабления. Рассматривается ход развития этих отношений, описываются их этапы и характерные признаки.

Ключевые слова: китайско-американские отношения; период председательства Си Цзиньпина; дипломатические отношения; Covid-19; мировой порядок; диалог; технический и культурный обмен; американское руководство; протекционизм; президент США; односторонние действия.

Introduction

When the Empress of China anchored at Guangzhou in 1784, China and the US had their first encounter. However, until the start of the First Opium War, the two nations made no official contacts or established diplomatic ties. For many years, the China – US relationship had a far lower relative importance than in contem-

porary world politics. The world did not start paying attention to China – US relations until the big countries battled each other in the Far East. Due to their mutual enthusiasm and high aspirations, the two nations allied quickly when the Pacific War began in 1941. But a series of events – the start of the Cold War, the founding of the

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People's Republic of China (PRC), the start of the Korean War, and the US assistance to Jiang Jieshi's administration in defending Taiwan – led to a lasting hostility and isolation between the two nations.

The 1970s saw several historical turning points. PRC became a member of the UN in 1971. A few months later, R. M. Nixon travelled to China and signed the Shanghai communiqué, which lay the ground for fully normalising ties between the US and China. The two countries' diplomatic relations were formally established on 1 January 1979. In the meantime, China started its reforms to open up to the world and integrate into the global system dominated by the United States. Since then, China and the US have maintained steady progress in their relationship, with expanding economic and trade ties, regular scientific, technical, and cultural exchanges, and collaboration on important international problems. Most of the conflicts were resolved by negotiation up until 2010 when China overtook the United States as the second largest economy in the world.

This paper is divided into two parts. First, we look at how the two nations perspectives hardened during Xi Jinping's first term as president. Nevertheless, throughout Obama administration, the two sides remained in contact and worked together on several significant international problems. China was now "both an enemy and a potential partner", according to B. Obama [1, p. 68]. In the second part, we trace how the package of new US policies towards China took shape under Trump's administration, when Xi began his second term as president, leading to a sharp decline in bilateral ties across the board.

Many American authors examine the strategic rivalry between the US and China as an attribute of US – China relations. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), rare earth metals, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are just a few examples of the issues that have caused long-standing mistrust between the United States and China, according

to the American expert Edward I-hsin Chen [2, p. 57]. The phrase "Thucydides trap"¹ was coined by the American political scientist G. T. Allison to refer to a visible propensity towards a war between the United States and the People's Republic of China. There is "no doubt" that the United States and China will fight a war over the islands in the South China Sea within the next ten years, as S. Bannon, D. Trump's senior strategist, remarked while the US – China opposition grew². Few aspects of the bilateral ties over the past few years have been left unaffected by rivalry and conflict. Many analysts affirmed that the escalating tension between China and the US signalled the start of a "new Cold War" [3, p. 331].

However, Chinese scholars and policymakers still hope for a smooth and peaceful development of US – China ties. Most experts on Sino-US relations claim that both sides should avoid falling into Thucydides trap [4, p. 78], and China had no intention of waging a new Cold War [5, p. 99]. Wang Yi, Minister of foreign affairs of China, contended that an outbreak of a new Cold War will be a disaster for China and the US, as well as other parts of the world³. China always views cooperation with the US as an effective way to develop a sound international system.

Since Xi Jinping took office, the US administration has roundly criticised China's foreign policy, particularly concerning Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea. The impending Taiwan crisis is the most emotional of the many issues and disagreements that the Chinese leadership is now confronting. During the Covid-19 pandemic and the military operation in Ukraine, public attitudes in both countries soured. It is uncertain how the Biden administration will address the complicated legacy of the Trump administration's policies.

This article explores the key characteristics of the China – US relationship under Xi Jinping to provide a complete analysis and forecast by drawing on data, reports from mainstream media, and government publications.

Materials and methods

The relationship between China, the world's largest developing nation, and the United States, the biggest industrial nation, has a significant and direct bearing on the state of the world. However, there has been a constant lack of trust in their relationships and their long-standing strategic rivalry. Substantial misunderstanding and rising mistrust are evident in reporting from both countries' mainstream media. The predominant attitudes of both nations may be gleaned from the distinctive language of news stories due to the sig-

nificant influence of official discourse on forming public opinion.

In this study, the "New York Times" and "China Daily", two major US and Chinese news outlets, are compared for their viewpoints. To define the features of the bilateral ties during Xi Jinping's presidency, the study analyses the diverse narratives about the same events conveyed by these outlets. A thorough scientific analysis of the news items was performed to uncover the underlying ideologies from many viewpoints

¹The Thucydides trap: are the US and China headed for war? [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/#main-content> (date of access: 17.11.2022)

²Next stop for the Steve Bannon insurgency: China [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/us/politics/steve-bannon-china-trump.html> (date of access: 17.11.2022).

³Wang Yi meets with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger of the United States [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202209/t20220920_10768474.html (date of access: 17.11.2022)

using the tools of critical discourse analysis⁴ and systemic functional grammar⁵. The Chinese state newspaper “China Daily”, statements from US official spokespeople, stories from the “New York Times” and the texts of the US annual report to Congress were reviewed to examine perspectives from the Chinese and US governments.

China’s official English-language newspaper, “China Daily”, has the largest print run of any English-language publications in China. It is regarded as the “voice of China” or “window on China” due to its global circulation in more than 150 countries and regions [6, p. 8]. The online edition (www.chinadaily.com.cn) is China’s most popular English-language web portal and

a complete multimedia platform, making it qualified to represent Chinese news media.

As one of the world’s most significant newspapers, the “New York Times” has been referred to as a national newspaper of record⁶ in the American newspaper industry. This prestigious newspaper, headquartered in New York City, is available daily online (www.nytimes.com) and has readers all around the world. The top ten issues covered in the US annual report to Congress include the global rivalry between the US and China and their competition in international markets.

In this study, trade data were collected from Chinese official media and authoritative US sources to analyse the China – US trade relations.

Relations between China and the US during Xi Jinping’s first term

President B. Obama began his second term in office in 2013. The People’s Congress of the PRC also affirmed Xi Jinping as president of the nation, concluding China’s 10-year transition from the 4th to the 5th generation of political leaders. The two nations’ relations underwent

a period of strategic mistrust from 2013 to 2018 but retained an amazing level of bilateral contact in the domains of business, politics, culture, and humanitarian aid. However, China – US ties quickly deteriorated once D. Trump assumed office.

Strategic mistrust under the Obama administration

China has emphasised the importance of fostering global collaboration and sustainable development ever since Xi Jinping’s inauguration on 14 March 2013. The Chinese President advocated for a new regional cooperation model when visiting Kazakhstan in September 2013. He offered to work together to construct the Silk Road economic belt. On his visit to Indonesia a month later, Xi Jinping renewed his appeal for the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank and the 21st century maritime Silk Road. These two initiatives are formally known as the Belt and Road initiative (BRI)⁷. To date, more than 100 countries, mostly poor nations, have signed the memorandum of understanding on BRI cooperation.

The BRI was created with the intention of bringing more nations into the economic globalisation process and achieving shared prosperity via win-win collaboration. The initiative’s connectedness is its cornerstone. Improved connectivity in both hard and soft infrastructure, including transportation, energy, and digital technology, is creating new platforms for international cooperation, boosting regional and global

socioeconomic development, and facilitating the flow of people, money, knowledge, technology, and ideas [7, p. 104].

Despite the impressive accomplishments of recent years, the BRI encountered significant mistrust and misunderstanding both domestically and internationally. The US administration immediately labelled it as the normalisation by China of its coercive treatment of weaker nations and an aggressive geopolitical move that violated the liberal international order by forcing collaboration on weaker nations. The BRI has been referred to as China’s Marshall plan by both mainstream media and expert commentators from its inception. However, the two fundamentally differ in structure and motivation. In contrast to the Marshall plan, which was strongly driven by politics and directed against the socialist camp, the BRI is open to the entire globe and does not specifically target any third party [8, p. 315].

Furthermore, BRI sceptics have long accused China of employing debt-trap diplomacy, which refers to providing money to a borrowing nation to strengthen the lender’s political clout⁸. Poor countries are cur-

⁴Critical discourse analysis emerged from critical linguistics developed at the University of East Anglia by R. Fowler and fellow scholars in the 1970s. Critical discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice.

⁵Systemic functional grammar is a form of grammatical description originated by M. Halliday. It is part of a social semiotic approach to language called systemic functional linguistics.

⁶Average paid and verified weekday circulation of “The New York Times” from 2000 to 2021 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273503/average-paid-weekday-circulation-of-the-new-york-times/> (date of access: 29.09.2022).

⁷What is the Belt and Road initiative? [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/info/iList.jsp?tm_id=540 (date of access: 29.09.2022) (in Chin.).

⁸The complete story of debt-trap diplomacy [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://thegeopolitics.com/the-complete-story-of-debt-trap-diplomacy/> (date of access: 29.09.2022).

rently paying a heavy price for loans from China, as the "New York Times" lamented, and they are going through an economic and political crisis. The "China Daily" rebutted, saying that the US administration was pushing the idea of so-called Chinese debt traps to manipulate and restructure the supply chains and undermine China's international cooperation.

The argument intensified quite rapidly. The launch of Beijing's project "Made in China – 2025" exacerbated the Obama administration's concerns over China's alleged economic threat to the US-led international order, even though it aimed to develop Chinese industry in ways that would benefit both parties. The "New York Times" persisted in presenting the project as "a threat to traditional business"⁹ and a weapon to "dislodge established industry leaders and replace them with Chinese brands"¹⁰.

Through high-level negotiations from 2013 to 2016, China and the United States were still able to reach an agreement on crucial topics, such as nuclear non-proliferation and the South China Sea, and prevent severe disputes. Both sides understood the other's significance and their interdependence in many fields, so their collaboration remained robust and all-encompassing. During this time, China's overall exports to the United States increased steadily, reaching a record high of 385.1 bln US dollars in 2016¹¹.

The US administration, however, claimed that its unprecedented 347 bln US dollars trade deficit with China was proof of China's unfair trade practises¹². President D. Trump made the deficit a major campaign issue in the 2016 US presidential election. This action had repercussions on other nations since it defied the normative framework of the WTO [9, p. 406].

D. Trump's first two years in office: a historically low point

On 20 January 2017 D. Trump was inaugurated as president of the United States. He overturned a long-standing, bipartisan agreement on US policy towards China, which he believed made the US too cautious and kept it from reacting forcefully enough to China's alleged abuses. The Trump administration's approach to China appeared to be motivated by the notion that, in the long run, the historical trajectory of the two nations' ties benefitted China in its bid for global leadership and harmed the US. To stop this trend, the Trump administration took a more America first, unilateralist, protectionist, zero-sum, and nativist stance¹³. Although D. Trump had declared that it does not want to be protectionist, it still reserved the right to be protectionist when trade is not free and fair.

Trump launched a trade war on 23 March 2018, by slapping tariffs on steel and aluminium and issuing the Presidential Memorandum against China's economic aggression [10, p. 38]. The US administration soon announced sanctions against China based on Section 301 of the US Trade act, escalating the US – China trade conflict. The world's two largest economies imposed rounds of import tariffs on each other.

There is general agreement among American decision-makers that China's activities threaten the multilateral trade system and that the country's state-led,

market-distorting economic model endangers American economic and national security interests. According to the US – China economic and security review commission's 2018 report to Congress¹⁴, Chinese industrial policies unfairly support the international expansion of Chinese firms while erecting market barriers, discriminating against foreign firms, and endorsing technology transfer as a prerequisite for market access. Additionally, they offer minimal protection and redress for foreign owners of intellectual property in strategic industries.

Political leaders in China believed that they had no choice but to respond to US unilateralism and trade protectionism. Solutions included modernising and transforming Chinese industries, upgrading the investment structure, looking at new business prospects in domestic and international markets, and encouraging enterprises and firms to adopt technical training programmes. "China Daily" described the ongoing trade war between China and the US as a "lose-lose" situation harmful to the world economy¹⁵. Beijing has always maintained that the thriving and steady growth of commercial ties between China and the US is in the interests of the two countries and the world at large. Instead of engaging in greater conflict, China and the United States should work to find solutions that benefit everyone.

⁹China's goals threaten traditional business [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/video/multimedia/100000003760465/chinas-goals-threaten-traditional-business.html?searchResultPosition=3> (date of access: 05.10.2022).

¹⁰2015 Report to Congress of the US – China economic and security review commission [Electronic resource]. P. 9. URL: https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/annual_reports/2015%20Annual%20Report%20to%20Congress.pdf (date of access: 05.10.2022).

¹¹2010–2016 China – US trade value added accounting report [Electronic resource]. P. 2. URL: <http://images.mofcom.gov.cn/zys/202101/20210127144306952.pdf> (date of access: 05.10.2022) (in Chin.).

¹²US trade deficit last year hit its highest level since 2012 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/02/07/us-trade-deficit-last-year-hit-highest-level-since-2012.html> (date of access: 06.10.2022).

¹³America first foreign policy [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/> (date of access: 07.10.2022).

¹⁴2018 Report to Congress of the US – China economic and security review commission [Electronic resource]. P. 3. URL: <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/2018%20Annual%20Report%20to%20Congress.pdf> (date of access: 08.10.2022).

¹⁵Trade row a "lose-lose" situation [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201810/16/WS5bc521bea310eff303282823.html> (date of access: 08.10.2022).

American-Chinese relations during Xi Jinping's second presidential term

Despite brief periods of truce in the China – US trade war – from December 2018 to May 2019 and again after the G20 Summit in June 2019 – it continued to dissuade investment and lower productivity in the two countries as

well as in other nations. Relations between China and the US became notably more adversarial as tensions over political and economic issues grew and surveys revealed a sharp deterioration in the American perception of China.

D. Trump's presidency final two years: continuing escalation

In 2019, the Chinese-American trade dispute entered its second year and was still mostly unresolved. 2019 saw China's weakest growth performance in more than 30 years due to the country's internal economic issues, exacerbated by rising trade tensions with the United States. China's technical innovation became one of the Trump administration's primary worries as China was creating and acquiring new technology important to its civilian and military industries.

The technology conflict centred on "Huawei" and 5G. Despite being a major global supplier of telecom equipment and a producer of smartphones, "Huawei" is still shunned in some nations as a result of the US Trump administration's inclusion of "Huawei" on its list of entities that pose a danger to the US telecommunications industry. Google and other Washington-based companies stopped part of their dealings with Huawei as a result of the blacklisting. Although D. Trump insisted that Washington did not wish to "artificially" restrict "Huawei" from the 5G market¹⁶, the administration was unable to come up with a cohesive plan. Trade negotiations between the US and China have been intermittent, and the parties have yet to reach a comprehensive settlement to this long-running trade dispute. Claiming "routine" violations by China of its WTO obligations, Trump decided to undercut the WTO by making its dispute-adjudication system ineffective and enacting trade policies that the organisation had ruled illegal.

In 2020, China's growth was expected to continue. Beijing and Washington came to a Phase one trade agreement in January, putting the trade conflict on hold. The high tariffs the US imposed on China before the agreement have not yet been reduced, leaving the fundamental differences between the two parties unsolved. The coronavirus pandemic devastated the world and plunged China into its worst crisis in decades. The US-Chinese ties hit their lowest point in the four decades of their diplomatic relations, and possibly, in the entire history [11, p. 16].

Some US politicians blamed the pandemic's worldwide spread on China, accusing it of negligent handling and deliberate cover-up of the Covid-19 outbreak. The use of the term "Chinese virus" was supported by President D. Trump months later, sparking a dispute over who was responsible for the pandemic's politicisation¹⁷. Numerous commentators and government representatives also accused China of using the coronavirus pandemic to promote itself as a responsible and benevolent world leader and its form of government as being superior to liberal democracies.

Beijing rejected claims that it had engineered the Covid-19 pandemic to harm the United States and that it was "the brains behind the global health crisis"¹⁸. The Trump administration, according to political elites in China, failed to provide and commit to a clear response to the coronavirus. Additionally, the US failed to show sufficient levels of collaboration and solidarity and lacked the capability or willingness to lead the global response to the epidemic.

J. Biden's presidency: back on track?

In 2021, China's economy continued to be impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic's immediate consequences and longer-term problems affecting growth and financial stability. The Chinese people are proud at how quickly their nation was able to contain the pandemic, especially in comparison with the West. Numerous Chinese observers anticipated that after J. Biden's inauguration on 20 January 2021, China will finally move past the toxic legacy of the Trump administration [12, p. 457]. They hoped that the new US President would give China – US

relations a new push and put them back on the right track¹⁹.

Top Biden administration and Chinese officials met for the first time in person on 19 March 2021 in Alaska. China viewed the two-day high-level strategic meeting as constructive and a sign of hope for a global recovery²⁰. The conversation, in contrast, ended without a joint statement, according to US sources, reflecting the two sides' profound divisions. Additionally, the Biden administration continued several of D. Trump's

¹⁶Trump: US not to "artificially" block Huawei from 5G market [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201902/23/WS5c70a132a3106c65c34eaf71.html> (date of access: 09.10.2022).

¹⁷Trump defends using "Chinese virus" label, ignoring growing criticism [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html> (date of access: 10.10.2022).

¹⁸China didn't create the Covid-19 pandemic to attack America, says US magazine [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202007/11/WS5f098732a310834817258c55.html> (date of access: 11.10.2022).

¹⁹Xinhua commentary: steer China – US ties back to the right track [Electronic resource]. URL: http://www.news.cn/english/2021-11/18/c_1310319043.htm (date of access: 13.10.2022).

²⁰High-level talks "constructive" [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202103/22/WS6057d0d0a31024ad-0bab0859.html> (date of access: 15.10.2022).

policies, including the Trump-era restriction on American investment in Chinese companies connected to the military and the preservation of tariffs on Chinese imports. President J. Biden also stressed the importance of investing in American infrastructure and technology to compete with China²¹.

Xi Jinping and J. Biden met online on 16 November 2021. Both presidents characterised their meeting as open, helpful, substantive, and fruitful. The majority of US commentators, however, claimed that it produced little more than polite words and brought no breakthroughs to a relationship that has spiralled dangerously downward. The "New York Times" reported that the two parties were

unable to even compose a joint statement of the kind that normally comes out of summits²². According to these analysts, the Biden administration continues to regard China as a major issue of immediate concern.

Despite maintaining their tough rhetoric, Washington and Beijing's bilateral commerce reached pre-tariff levels in 2021, and US capital flows to China rose. The Chinese policies of the Trump and Biden administrations will, however, have more similarities than differences given the legacies of the Obama and Trump administrations and the expectations – explicit or implicit – from Congress, the media, think tanks, and the American public [13].

Conclusions

For whoever is in charge in Beijing or Washington, managing US – China ties is a recurrent challenge. The long-held US prejudice that China represents authoritarian leadership and America represents democracy has contributed to the deterioration of US-Chinese ties. The world still has hope in this partnership, though, and to fulfil that optimism, both parties should work towards a win-win collaboration.

The US has historically objected to how China handled Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and also to its industrial policies, trade practices, and international relations. Taiwan has been the most touchy subject. Washington has often received advice from the Chinese leadership to avoid interfering in Taiwan. However, the Taiwan policy act of 2022 and US House Speaker N. Pelosi's provocative visit to Taiwan exacerbated the already tense situation between the US and China²³. The Biden administration has also been promoting its China – Russia binding theory and the democracy versus authoritarianism storyline since the outbreak and escalation of the situation in Ukraine. The result has been a widening of ideological gaps across the world²⁴.

In recent years, the US administration has embraced unilateralism, attacking institutions like NATO while threatening to withdraw from others, like the WHO

and the Paris agreement. Chinese officials argue that to address the growing number of global issues – like infectious diseases or climate change – that cannot be confined inside national borders, a multipolar world model is required. Beijing wants its relationship with the US to be distinguished by peaceful cohabitation, a shared set of principles, consensus, and a willingness to work together. However, Washington's great power rivalry has driven the evolution of the US-Chinese relationship, which is characterised more by competition and conflict than by collaboration.

Surely, competition will remain in the American-Chinese relationship in future. But it is also possible to make other predictions. The pattern of "punctuated equilibrium", a concept from evolutionary biology might give us a clue. Perhaps we may expect some rapid changes to occur during brief periods of very unpredictable, stressful conditions. The current rift between the US and China could be the point of equilibrium to which the country may return after an outburst of activity [14, p. 14]. If that prediction is true, we could expect a mostly stable relationship interrupted by extended periods of tension. For now, both parties might benefit by finding the appropriate tone for their conversation and choosing the maxim first do no harm as their overriding principle for action.

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