

## CHINA — U.S. RELATIONS IN A WORLD OF DISORDER

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The China-U.S. relations are the most complex bilateral relationship in the world. Since Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, a bipolar world order suddenly vanished. Although China and the United States both agreed the Cold War order is over, they are betting on different successors. U.S. policymakers have been trying to build a U.S.-led international order. Whereas China is readying itself for a peaceful coexistence world. In recent decade, the two nations raised rounds of confrontation, failing to manage their relations within a cooperative framework. The future of Sino-American relations may still be fraught with questions.

**Keywords:** China-U.S. relations; Competition; Cooperation; Cold War; Post-bipolar world; New world order; Disorder.

## ОТНОШЕНИЯ КИТАЯ И США В НЕСТАБИЛЬНОМ МИРЕ

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Отношения между Китаем и США являются самыми сложными двусторонними отношениями в мире. После распада Советского Союза в 1991 г. биполярный мировой порядок внезапно исчез. Хотя и Китай, и США согласились с тем, что холодная война закончилась, они делают ставку на разных преемников. Американские политики пытаются построить международный порядок под руководством США. В то время как Китай готовится к мирному сосуществованию. В последнее десятилетие между сторонами было несколько периодов конфронтации. Будущее китайско-американских отношений по-прежнему имеет нерешенные вопросы.

**Ключевые слова:** китайско-американские отношения; конкуренция; сотрудничество; холодная война; постбиполярный мир; новый мировой порядок; беспорядок.

After World War II, the Cold War began. From 1945 to 1989, the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its satellite states initiated a decades-long struggle for supremacy. The two superpowers avoided battling directly while through political maneuvering, military coalitions, espionage, propaganda, arms buildups, economic aid, and proxy wars to prevent the spread of each other's influence in the world. China, for a long time, was deemed by the U.S. as a great ally of the Soviet Union and a powerful enemy in the world.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the United States attempt to disrupt, destabilize, and weaken the Chinese government. Between 1949 and 1971, the U.S. refused to recognize the PRC and believed that the PRC was an aggressive, expansionist power that threaten its security. However, in 1971, the two nations opened a new chapter, since players from the U.S. Table Tennis team took a historic trip to China, known as "ping-pong diplomacy". After acknowledging one-China policy and breaking its formal ties with Taiwan, Washington and Beijing established official diplomatic relations in 1979. Thereafter, although they differed significantly over the handling of many critical issues, the two countries developed a mutually productive array of ties and interactions in many areas.

Under Trump administration, the China- U.S. relations hit a record low, culminating in a tit-for-tat trade war. Following Joe Biden's election in 2021, although both sides agreed to eliminate misunderstandings and coexist peacefully, the U.S. accelerated a substantial decoupling from China. Washington raised arms sale to Taiwan, frequently targeted Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, harassed China's attempts in South China Sea, brought further unfavorable factors to China—U.S. relations.

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of China-U.S. relations after the cold war. By comparing different visions of Washington and Beijing in building the global order, this article aims at predicting bilateral relations both in the near and far future.

During the Cold War, decolonization and the division between the Western powers and the Soviet bloc defined the world. In this period, the U.S. forged NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), a military alliance to create a counterweight to Soviet armies, whereas the Soviet bloc formed the Warsaw Pact. While the Soviet Union sent troops to preserve communist rule in East Germany, the West Germany was admitted into NATO. After the U.S. provided the Marshall Plan in 1948, the socialist economic system — the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance was established to protect Soviet influence. The Korean War, the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War brought the two superpowers to the brink of war.

The sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union astonished the world. The widely spread notion that major crisis may soon emerge in the post-Cold War era dominate the world. John Mearsheimer believed that the departure of the superpowers would transform the world to a multipolar system. The resulting system would bring the world instability [1, p. 7]. Likewise, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita pointed that "shifts toward either bipolarity or multipolarity, it appears, are dangerous" [2, p. 243]. However, the end of the Cold War has not resulted in major instability but brought about a renewed debate over the post-Cold War international order.

The liberal international order erected after the Cold War. Liberals argued that the Cold War ended with the dissolution of Soviet empire, signifying the

collapse of the communist world. The Western liberal democratic values and capitalist markets would soon dominate former communist states. In his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama claimed, liberal democracy is the final form of government for all nations [3]. At the same time, theorists and researchers attempted to define the post-Cold War order with “Democratic Peace Theory” — democracies do not go to war with other democracies [4, p. 177]. However, the most fast-emerging states after the Cold War, with a set of non-Western democracies, all become more prosperous. Therefore, today’s power transition represents the defeat of liberal order.

Behavioral, structural, and evolutionary approaches all attempted to explain the international relations theory, but none of these theories is enough to unravel the post-Cold-War international order. Now, the U.S.-Soviet antagonism is history. Instead, China’s economy grew impressively after the the Cold War, arousing much public attention and concern. Since China entered the World Trade Organization in December 2001, it has been deeply incorporated into global commodity chains. Soon China overtook Germany in 2007, and then Japan in 2010 as the world’s second largest economy. In 2013 it also displaced the U.S. as the world’s largest industrial producer [5]. For Washington, Beijing’s military capability also expanded widely, facilitating overseas bases and logistics facilities. With China’s continuous improvement over the last two decades, it has been remaking the landscape of global politics.

Now it seemed the world has entered a new era in which the U.S. and China are approximately equally powerful. Some strategists perceive the United States and China would constitute a “G2” as coleaders of the world [6]. However, for the U.S., the rise of China has raised the issue of its own declining position and how to maintain the U.S.-led world order. Policymakers from both countries have warned, a New Cold war might be inevitable [7]. How to establish a long-term favourable relationship has been moving up to both side’s agenda.

Benefited from geography and its unique trajectory of political development, the U.S. had emerged from the Second World War and the became one of the greatest nations in the world. The international order was largely constructed in the aftermath of the war, at the time when Washington led the foundation of new international institutions, centred on the United Nations and what became the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The system of international organizations, rules, and norms commonly referred to as the existing world order, or “rule-based international order” by U.S. government. For a long period, the system was in favor of the United States, thus it was enshrined in the U.S. foreign policies.

The U.S.-led world may be best described as “American Empire” — an empire dominated by U.S. power, wealth, institutions, ideas, alliances, and partnerships. After World War II, the United States exercised influence and exerted military force across the world. The “American Empire” can be best interpreted in its operation in the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and the Middle East, as well

as other countries where its armed forces have established a semi-permanent foothold and large numbers of troops deployed at bases keep a close watch on Iran, Syria, and other “potential enemies” [8, p. 45]. Beyond that, Washington has been increasing its economic capacity and ensuring dollar’s dominance in the world. Albeit widely criticized, Washington never gave up defending its established empire.

U.S. history has been characterized by a greater-than-average impact of moral values on foreign policy. The end of the Cold War was accompanied by talk of a “New World Order”. Speaking to a joint session of the U.S. Congress in 1990, former President George H. W. Bush defined the “New World Order” as “a new era, freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and securer in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony” [9, p. 17]. Obviously, most U.S. policymakers rejected these lofty goals. For the Western world, the Post-Cold War Order was certainly something of a euphoria. Because the former rivals of the United States, the Soviet Union, and other communist regimes in the world, have either collapsed or jettisoned the central features of their ideologies that were hostile to the United States, leaving a unipolar system under the leadership of the United States. They believed Washington has vast global political and economic aspirations to “apply its directing power to the inordinately complex and unpredictable realities” of the post-war world [10].

The conception that the U.S. is an empire is less contentious today. The U.S. continues to hold overseas territory. Besides Guam, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and a handful of minor outlying islands, the US maintains more than 700 overseas military bases around the world [11]. Albeit the U.S. reeled from the raging Coronavirus pandemic and mounting national debt, it still maintains a gigantic military presence all over the planet.

**Changes Unseen in a Century.** The Chinese history from the First Opium War in 1839, to the establishment of People’s Republic of China in 1949, were characterized by intervention and subjugation, therefore considered by Chinese government as “a century of humiliation”. Over time, although the humiliation was ended, China inherited from its past and kept moving away to Western hegemony. Today, despite China’s rise, in the eyes of Chinese strategies, the world is still defined by disorder, asymmetry and fragmentation, which countries have to take steps to survive.

This notion of survival in a dangerous world necessitates the development of what Xi describes as “a holistic approach to national security”. In 2014, President Xi Jinping introduced the National Security Commission the national security approach — political security, military security, homeland security, economic security [12]. Besides the internal security, it also encompasses some emerging fields like outer space security. This strategy would lead China to survive in the uncertainty and instability of an overall security environment.

At the opening ceremony of the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Chinese President Xi delivered a speech, and pointed out that “Our world is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century: the surging trend toward multi-polarity, economic globalization, IT application and cultural diversity, accelerated transformation of the global governance system and international order” [13]. Later, the notion “Changes unseen in a century” became the guiding principle, as well as China’s official ideology.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, President Xi noted in his speech, “the world is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century, but time and situation are in our favor” [14]. These encouraging words offered great confidence for China and other countries to resolve risks and live through a hard time. Xi has repeatedly guaranteed that “China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansionism” [15]. Moreover, Chinese officials denied that China was trying to become a center of the world or led to a Chinese world order. On the contrary, China has been trying to build a reciprocal world order, to make the world system more open, inclusive, balanced, and beneficial for all.

In contrast to Washington’s disintegration into the world, Beijing has been providing aid to other developing countries all over the world. China has facilitated the foundation and development of numerous organizations, such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Belt and Road initiative, Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative. Until now, from COVID-19 vaccines and railways to hybrid rice technology, China’s aid to the rest of the world and its evolving method of establishing cooperation to prompt local growth have gained more friendship and support from a vast number of developing nations.

**Gaining from Peaceful Coexistence.** Since the end of the Cold War, numerous leaders have openly anchored China to concepts like “multipolarity” and “the international balance of forces” that are essentially polite euphemisms for the relative balance between Chinese and American power. Meanwhile, scholars and academics now believe that the U.S. empire is giving way to new ones — a post-American, post-Western, post-liberal order marked by great-power competition and the economic and geopolitical ascendance of China. These remarks imply that the decline of the U.S.-promoted “rules based order” and a new Chinese-promoted world order is set to prevail.

After Donald Trump took office, China—U.S. relations took a nosedive. In December 2017, the Trump administration unveiled its National Security Strategy Report, described China “challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity” [16, p. 2]. Trump administration imposed rounds of punitive tariffs on China, forcing China to make changes to what the U.S. considered longstanding unfair trade

practices and intellectual property theft. However, China denied these forces and imposed sanctions back. Soon these tit-for-tat tariffs evolved into the so-called “Trade War”. The trade war caused economic pain on both sides and led to diversion of trade flows away from both China and the United States.

Despite pleas from the U.S. business community to ease tensions, there have been few signs to date that U.S. President Joe Biden is likely to change course. In its 2022 National Security Strategy, Washington defined China as “only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order” and drew an “out-competing China” outline [17, p. 23]. Even worse, Biden so far has amplified his predecessor’s policies by strengthening anti-China alliances and implementing additional sanctions.

Unlike the United States, China has been pursuing a coexistence route. The idea of “Peaceful Co-Existence” was first put forward by then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1953. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence are: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence [18]. These principles are great theoretical contributions made by China and other Eastern countries to international relations. Although the international situation has changed dramatically in recent decades, China has always been seeking peaceful coexistence and win-win outcomes with the U.S. In his reply to a letter from two U.S. Flying Tigers veterans who fought for China during World War II, President Xi told them, “China and the U.S. should and must achieve peaceful co-existence, offering further cues for both sides to lower persistent tensions” [19].

However, the prospect of China-U.S. relations may still be obscure. The Spy Ballon and Taiwan leader’s U.S. visit put Beijing and Washington at the brink of war. Some scholars warned, the two nations are inching toward World War III. Hopefully, while tensions between Washington and Beijing are mounting up, there is no evidence that any influential U.S. policymakers or Chinese leaders seriously contemplate an actual war towards each other.

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