



# It's not a cold war: competition and cooperation in US–China relations

Robert S. Ross<sup>1,2</sup>

Received: 23 April 2020 / Accepted: 10 June 2020 / Published online: 19 June 2020  
© The Institute of International and Strategic Studies (IISS), Peking University 2020

## Abstract

For nearly 4 years now, the United States and China have experienced increased conflict and tension and diminished cooperation. This has been a costly trend for both countries, as it has led to heightened costs and forsaken potential gain. Heightened US–China security conflict and tension may well be inescapable. The United States and China are engaged in transformative power transition with implications for the balance of power in East Asia and for their respective national security interests. As the power transition continues to develop, it will necessarily contribute to increased great power competition. But the power transition neither precludes moderation in security and economic competition nor cooperation on common interests in bilateral and global affairs. Leadership and policy choices matter in international politics. The current trend toward unmitigated conflict in US–China relations is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Pragmatic leaders that focus on their respective country's national interests can contribute to constrained conflict and greater cooperation in US–China relations.

**Keywords** China–US relations · Chinese foreign policy · US foreign policy · Rise of china · China–US power transition

## 1 Introduction

For nearly 4 years now, the United States and China have experienced increased conflict and tension and diminished cooperation. This has been a costly trend for both countries, as it has led to higher costs and forsaken potential gain. Nonetheless, in both countries, think-tank analysts, nationalists, and ideological extremists advocate

---

✉ Robert S. Ross  
rossrb@bc.edu

<sup>1</sup> Boston College, Boston, USA

<sup>2</sup> John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA

for aggressive cold-war policies that will accelerate this trend toward a relationship characterized by greater hostility and belligerence.

Heightened US–China security conflict and tension may well be inescapable. The United States and China are engaged in transformative power transition with implications for the balance of power in East Asia and for their respective national security interests. As the power transition continues to develop, it will necessarily contribute to increased great power competition over the East Asian security order, including over the alliance and alignments of the East Asia’s secondary powers. The power transition also contributes to trade tension, as the changing balance of power compels Chinese and American reconsideration of the bilateral terms of trade and investment. But the power transition neither precludes moderation in security and economic competition nor cooperation on common interests in bilateral and global affairs.

Leadership and policy choices matter in international politics. The current trend toward unmitigated conflict in US–China relations is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Pragmatic leaders that focus on their respective country’s national interests can contribute to constrained conflict and greater cooperation in US–China relations.

## 2 The enduring sources of US–China competition

The two most powerful countries in international politics are never friends or allies. On the contrary, they are always competitors and rivals for international influence. Neither Chinese nor Americans should expect that US–China competition will be easy to manage or will diminish.

In a political environment in which proclaimed intentions can deceive and sincere intentions can change with the changing whims of leaders and domestic circumstances, great powers will assess the capabilities of other great powers with suspicion and fear and they will increase their own capabilities for added security. Great power competition is the inevitable outcome. But this trend is especially acute during a power transition. The prospect of relative decline and reduced security impels the declining power to resist the changing balance of power. At the same time, the rising power, confident in its improved capabilities and seeking greater security, adopts policies that push for a revised regional security order, including a changing balance of power, regional alignments, and basing arrangements, exacerbating the declining power’s suspicions and insecurity.

These power transition dynamics are apparent in US–China relations. Forty years of post-Mao economic development have enabled the Chinese economy to reach near parity with the US economy. China has developed world class, innovative universities and corporations that challenge US dominance of twenty-first century advanced technologies. Together, a large and developed economy and advanced technologies have enabled China to challenge US dominance of important regional and global bilateral economic relationships and of the global trade order. They have also contributed to decades of a growing Chinese defense budget and to China’s large and modern navy and air force (Heginbotham et al. 2015). China’s economic and military rise is transforming the East Asian balance of power and challenging

America's hegemony in maritime East Asia and its post-World War II regional security partnerships.

America's response to the rise of China has been predictable. It has resisted relative decline and a changing regional order. The Trump administration has increased military spending to contend with the rise of the Chinese Navy and the US Navy has undertaken a wide-ranging review of its future requirements, including reconsideration of its ship-building priorities and its missile and aircraft requirements, and it is designing new weapons systems and communications technologies that take advantage of US advances in high technology (Larter 2020; Mcleary 2020). The US Navy is developing new strategies and developing greater access to port facilities on the perimeter of East Asia in the western Pacific Ocean and in the Indian Ocean to constrain and contain Chinese naval activities within East Asia's seas (USINDOPACOM, 3). As China's Navy has contested US maritime hegemony and the stability of US strategic partnerships, the US Navy has increased the frequency of its challenges to Chinese maritime claims to signal its resolve to contend with the rise of China and to defend its security commitments.

But China's response to its own rise has been just as predictable. Whereas the United States has been the status-quo power, content with the post-World War II regional order that maximized its security, China has never accepted the legitimacy of US maritime hegemony in its coastal waters and over the trade routes through the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea, and of American air and naval power projection capabilities deployed on China's perimeter throughout the region, including in South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines (Liff 2018). Possessing greater economic and technological resources, China has challenged US maritime superiority and its regional alliance system. Over the last decade it has funded the expansion and modernization of the Chinese navy, so that the Navy now operates a fleet that is both modern and larger than the US fleet. It has developed advanced missiles that target US naval and air facilities throughout East Asia. It has built artificial islands in the South China Sea that enable its naval and coast guard ships to maintain a constant presence in the waters of American security partners. China has also carried out unwavering maritime actions to persuade the region's secondary powers to accommodate Chinese demands and to constrain their cooperation with US policy toward China.

### 3 Toward constrained competition

The trend in US–China security relations is toward greater tension and greater risk of costly maritime confrontations. This trend reflects a hardening of US and Chinese policies, as the United States is determined to resist a changing regional security order, despite China's continued rise, and China is determined to reorder East Asia to reflect the changing balance of power, even as US resistance increases. Nonetheless, interminable conflict escalation and cold-war hostility are not determined by structure or the power transition conflict. The course of US–China competition will be determined by policy choices. Pragmatic US and Chinese policies can contribute to constrained competition.

Constrained competition requires US adjustment to the power transition and acknowledgement of Chinese interest in greater influence in regional security affairs. Determined US insistence on maintaining the post-World War II status quo in regional alliances and alignments will necessarily lead to greater Chinese belligerence, as China will demand a revised regional order commensurate with its greater capabilities and the changing great power distribution of power. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong expressed it well:

it is well worth the US forging a new understanding that will integrate China's aspirations within the current system... China will expect a say in this process, because it sees the present rules as having been created in the past without its participation. This is an entirely reasonable expectation... The world...has to adjust to a larger role for China (Lee 2019).

US hegemony and the unipolar maritime order have given the United States near absolute security in East Asian seas, so that the emerging bipolar order is not optimal for the United States. Nonetheless, bipolarity can prevent the development of unchecked Chinese power and it can constrain Chinese strategic ambitions both in East Asia and the globe. US adjustment to the rise of China does not require that the United States cede East Asia to Chinese hegemony. Rather, the United States can adjust to the rise of China while competing in a bipolar regional balance of power. Moreover, the United States will retain worldwide leadership in military affairs, in critical elements of technological innovation and research and development, and in international leadership capabilities.

Adjustment and constrained competition will require the United States to moderate its naval and diplomatic posturing that signals China and the region that it seeks to contain the rise of China. The United States will continue to expand and modernize its military capabilities, maintain extensive cooperation with its regional security partners, and promote its international economic and global interests. But the US Navy's high-profile challenges to China's maritime claims, including its frequent freedom of navigation operations, do not reassure US security partners in East Asia, but they do elicit Chinese responses that exacerbate US–China maritime tension. The United States will maintain close defense cooperation with Taiwan, but the recent up-tempo US Navy transits of the Taiwan Strait do not contribute to deterrence or to Taiwan's security, but they do elicit Chinese countermeasures and exacerbate US–China and cross-strait tension. US charges of China's ideological incompatibility with international cooperation and global norms are not only unpersuasive, but they also suggest to Chinese leaders US resistance to any acknowledgement of Chinese interests or of a legitimate Chinese role in global affairs, encouraging Chinese hostility against apparent US containment of the rise of China (Pompeo 2019).

The US must adjust to China's economic rise; it will exercise global leadership, but it cannot expect to maintain dominance of the global trade regime or global technological innovation. It is foolhardy to think that the United States and China can decouple economic relations—there is mutual trade and supply chain interdependence requiring continued private sector cooperation. US pursuit of a comprehensive trade and technology war against China has signaled its intent to derail China's economic growth and to restore US regional and global military

and economic preeminence. Adjustment requires recognition that negotiated agreements and selective, targeted, and independent US strategic adjustments of the terms of trade can protect American economic interests, while contributing to less hostile and costly economic competition.

Constrained US–China competition also requires Chinese acknowledgement of US security concerns, requiring Chinese restraint in the use of its greater maritime capabilities and patience in realizing a revised regional security order. China will not relinquish its sovereignty claims. However, its frequent Chinese naval and coast guard patrols and resource exploration in disputed waters and on the coastal perimeter of US security partners, and its recurring naval and economic diplomacy to compel US security partners to accommodate Chinese interests, exacerbate US–China conflict. These activities have persuaded the United States that China seeks to exclude US strategic presence from East Asia and to establish regional hegemony. In response, the United States has increased its resistance to Chinese regional influence and its challenge to growing Chinese maritime presence in East Asia with shows of force that similarly exacerbate US–China tension and risk heightened maritime conflict.

Additionally, Chinese economic policies must adjust to rising China’s global economic weight. Chinese domestic economic regulations that privilege state-owned industries with government subsidies and with non-competitive international access to the Chinese domestic market are not compatible with bilateral or global economic cooperation. Moreover, China’s ongoing restrictions on direct foreign investment signal China’s intent to maintain trade rules premised on China’s outdated status as a developing economy (Meltzer and Shenai 2019), thus reinforcing US resolve to wage a trade war against the rise of China.

Chinese restraint and adjustment does not mean that China cannot compete with the United States or that it must forsake its ambition to reshape the regional order and realize greater security. China will continue to develop its military capabilities and seek a leadership role in the international economy and global affairs. Rather, restrained US–China competition requires Chinese strategic patience and economic adjustment. Even in the absence of frequent and high-profile Chinese naval and economic diplomacy, and unremitting insistence that the region acknowledge Chinese territorial and economic claims, the US–China power transition will generate increased pressure on East Asia’s secondary powers to carry out strategic adjustment and to avoid taking sides in US–China competition. This trend is already underway in the foreign policies of such long-term US security partners as South Korea, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore (Ross 2020). Chinese liberalization of its antiquated protectionist domestic economic regulations will ease pressures for US and global protectionism that will otherwise constrain Chinese access to international markets and slow Chinese growth. Economic adjustment will enable robust Chinese competition in an open international economic system.

Constrained US–China competition requires neither US acquiescence to Chinese regional hegemony nor Chinese acquiescence to the post-World War II strategic status quo. Rather, it requires restrained diplomacy and mutual adjustment, even as the great power competition persists and even intensifies. The required policies are well

within the range of choice of pragmatic US and Chinese leaders engaged in highly competitive balance of power politics.

#### 4 Cooperation despite competition

Great powers can compete without engaging in cold-war dynamics in which every issue is considered a critical, zero-sum conflict that could determine the outcome of strategic competition. The US–Soviet Cold War was an anomaly in the diplomatic history, in which even the limited cooperation in the 1970s on nuclear arms control proved fleeting and ineffectual. The norm through the millennia is that political dialogue and negotiations, trade, and shared international leadership persist amid heightened strategic competition and power transition. In recent years, however, the security competition amid the power transition has infused the entire agenda of US–China relations with a zero-sum perspective. This has been detrimental to cooperation on shared Chinese and American interests on a wide range of non-security issues. Despite the US–China power transition and heightened strategic competition, the United States and China share an extensive agenda of common bilateral and global interests that call for negotiation and cooperation for mutual gain.

It is clear that there was inadequate US–China cooperation on containing the spread of COVID-19, contributing to the global pandemic and to highly costly and unnecessary human, economic, and societal costs for both countries. The status quo in US–China global health cooperation is unacceptable. There are significant opportunities for improved policy in both countries to enable greater and effective cooperation.<sup>1</sup> First of all, governments must not operate under the illusion that global health emergencies are zero-sum developments that can benefit one side or the other in trade competition. Vilification of China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic does not contribute to containing the virus, but it does undermine cooperation to minimize illness and death. There are no winners in a pandemic. Second, there needs to be greater government transparency following medical discoveries of new diseases to allow early national and global responses and to encourage scientists from the US, China, and other countries to cooperate on containing the spread of an illness, as well as prevention and treatment. Third, the United States and China need to reestablish a strong presence of public health professionals in each other's countries to maximize regular cooperation and timely responses to potential global health crises. Public health cooperation should be a permanent item on the agenda of high-level US–China dialogues. Fourth, the United States and China must work together to strengthen the World Health Organization's global role in combatting global diseases and they must

---

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the importance of US–China cooperation on past global crises, see the Carnegie Endowment's series, "SixCrises: How the US and China Have Coordinated Despite Strategic Rivalry," curated by Evan Feigenbaum, 2013. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/carnegieendowment/video/six-crises-john-podesta-on-controlling-pollutant-emissions-2013/249255339810677/>, accessed May 27, 2020.

increase their cooperation with the WHO to jointly manage and prevent disease within their own countries.

If the United States and China can constrain their strategic competition in East Asia and moderate their trade conflict, they can develop greater cooperation on counterterrorism. US–China intelligence cooperation on terrorism should be routine. Each country has information that can weaken terrorist organizations and save lives. As the United States withdraws its military forces from Afghanistan, the United States and China can together promote Afghan political stability and economic development (Rank 2018). Although the United States and China compete for strategic influence in the Indian Ocean, counterterrorism cooperation and promotion of political and economic stability in Pakistan is a common interest. The United States and China have multiple conflicts of interest in the Middle East, but neither has an interest in Middle East instability that fosters unchecked terrorist recruitment and violence. On the contrary, the stability and development of Middle Eastern countries is in their common interest. Neither country should assess the other's aid programs to any of these countries as detrimental to its respective security interests.

China and the United States share vital interests in non-proliferation of nuclear weapon technologies in Iran and North Korea. Nonetheless, in the context of heightened strategic competition in East Asia, the ongoing trade war, and the absence of sustained, functional US–China dialogues, Chinese cooperation with US non-proliferation efforts has all but ceased. The Trump administration has independently developed policies to restrain North Korean and Iranian proliferation activities, but without Chinese cooperation these policies cannot succeed (Lynch 2020a, b). A thaw in the US–China diplomatic chill and US engagement with China in a substantive high-level non-proliferation dialogue will promote greater Chinese cooperation with US non-proliferation diplomacy.

The US–China agenda for cooperation also includes stopping trade in illicit drugs. Smuggling of opiates and of other controlled substances costs lives in the United States and China. During the Trump administration, the United States has been especially concerned about the smuggling of fentanyl into the United States from China and has sought Chinese cooperation to stop production and smuggling (Serletis 2019). Over a 12-month period in 2018–2019, nearly 35,000 Americans died from fentanyl overdose (CDC 2019). Nonetheless, Chinese cooperation has been intermittent and selective. In the context of the US trade war against China and US ideological attacks on the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese leadership has little incentive to help the United States manage its domestic problems.

The United States and China also have a common interest in managing global climate change. As the two largest global emitters of CO<sub>2</sub> gasses, no multilateral effort to control climate change can succeed without US–China cooperation. But, as in other aspects of US–China relations, in the context of the power transition and the spread of strategic competition to all corners of the relationship, there is no longer a bilateral dialogue on climate change. The United States, China and the rest of the world are poorer for this outcome. Management of global problems requires shared US–China leadership, not competitive efforts to promote unilateral approaches to global problems in the pursuit of unilateral gain.

Realizing shared US and Chinese interests in these bilateral and global issues requires robust staffing at each country's embassy in the other's country. In the decades after normalization of relations in 1979, US and Chinese embassy staffing expanded as management of their common interests required extensive and regular consultations and cooperation. But because intensified strategic competition has fostered a competitive dynamic across the entire relationship, embassy staffing has declined and embassy officials are increasingly idle, as dialogue and cooperation are deemed harmful to national security. This is a false and costly assessment. American and Chinese diplomats and experts must cooperate to maximize their common interests and to manage global problems.

## 5 Conclusion

The United States and China are destined to compete. But they are not destined for violent conflict or a cold war. The power transition will drive US–China competition for many decades, but it does not require an across-the-board freeze of cooperation and dialogue. Unlike the US–Soviet relationship, the United States and China are not engaged in ideological struggle in which each side believes that resistance to an insidious threat to the other's political system requires total diplomatic warfare. China is not the Soviet Union. Rather than isolate itself from the global economy, since the end of the Maoist era, all Chinese leaders have believed that China benefits from participation in and support for the US-led post-World War II economic order. China's participation in the global trade order has contributed to its rise and to US–China competition, but it has also created opportunities for cooperation. China has supported and participated in multilateral approaches to global problems. China's leaders have promoted the Chinese people's participation in non-governmental global cultural and societal exchanges.

Moderation of the US–China competition and greater cooperation on common interests is a challenge, but leadership matters, and greater pragmatism in policy-making can reverse the current downward slide in relations. In the United States, there is considerable opposition among experts and former policymakers to current US policy. The presidential election presents an opportunity for the United States to reconsider the direction of its China policy. Many Americans support economic growth and job creation through exports and international cooperation on climate change and nuclear proliferation, so that US leaders have a political interest in greater cooperation with China. For China, its peaceful rise and *taoguang yanghui* strategies have contributed to international stability and US–China cooperation, major factors that have enabled Chinese economic growth and the rise of China (Goldstein 2001). Pragmatic Chinese leadership understands the benefits of cooperation with the United States in achieving international economic stability, especially in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, and in strategic stability in East Asia.

China will approach US–China negotiations from its own interests. But so too will the United States. Negotiated solutions to bilateral and global issues will reflect mutual compromise, in which both sides will be better off than in the absence of cooperation and agreement.



China's rise challenges US security interests in the post-World War II East Asian order, including the stability of its regional alliance system, and American resistance challenges China's interest in a revised regional order that offers China greater security. But the US–China power transition does not preclude US–China engagement and cooperation on common interests. Unilateralism might have worked in an era of unipolarity, but today and in the future, sweeping US and Chinese unilateralism will undermine realization of their common interests, with no winner on either side. The United States and China will compete where they must, but there are opportunities to restrain strategic competition to minimize the likelihood of hostilities and to maximize the opportunities for pragmatic cooperation on common interests. If the United States and China can restrain their strategic competition, they will be able to both cooperate and compete. This is the challenge of leadership in the United States and China.

## Reference

- Goldstein, Avery. 2001. The diplomatic face of China's grand strategy: A rising power's emerging choice. *The China Quarterly* 168: 835–864.
- Heginbotham, Eric, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob L. Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Li, Jeffrey Engstrom et al. 2015. The US–China military scorecard: Forces, geography, and the evolving balance of power, 1996–2017. Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND\\_RR392.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND_RR392.pdf). Accessed 22 May 2020.
- Larter, David B. 2020. Defense department study calls for cutting 2 of the US Navy's aircraft carriers. *Defense News*. <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/04/20/defense-department-study-calls-for-cutting-2-of-the-us-navys-aircraft-carriers/>. Accessed 22 May 2020.
- Lee, Hsien Loong. 2019. PM speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2019. Prime Minister's Office Singapore. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-IISS-Shangri-La-Dialogue-2019>. Accessed 22 May 2020.
- Liff, Adam P. 2018. China and the US Alliance System. *The China Quarterly* 233: 137–165. [https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/1FF369905B4A8110DC8693A3C8A7857B/S0305741017000601a.pdf/china\\_and\\_the\\_us\\_alliance\\_system.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/1FF369905B4A8110DC8693A3C8A7857B/S0305741017000601a.pdf/china_and_the_us_alliance_system.pdf). Accessed 22 May 2020.
- Lynch, Colum. 2020a. Despite US sanctions, Iran expands its nuclear stockpile. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/08/iran-advances-nuclear-program-withdrawal-jcpoa/>. Accessed 22 May 2020.
- Lynch, Colum. 2020b. North Korea continues to flout trump, advance nuclear ambitions. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/20/north-korea-trump-advance-nuclear-ambitions/>. Accessed 22 May 2020.
- McLeary, Paul. 2020. Indo-Pacom presses all domain ops; sends plan to hill soon. *Breaking Defense*. <https://breakingdefense.com/2020/03/indo-pacom-presses-all-domain-ops-sends-plan-to-hill-soon/>. Accessed 22 May 2020.
- Meltzer, Joshua P., and Neena Shenai. 2019. The US–China economic relationship: A comprehensive approach. Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/us\\_china\\_economic\\_relationship.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/us_china_economic_relationship.pdf). Accessed 22 May 2020.
- Pompeo, Michael R. 2019. The China challenge. Secretary of state speech. <https://www.state.gov/the-china-challenge/>. Accessed 22 May 2020.
- Rank, David. 2018. Leveraging US–China cooperation to build a regional consensus on Afghanistan. US Institute of Peace Special Report No. 420. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/03/leveraging-us-china-cooperation-build-regional-consensus-afghanistan>. Accessed 22 May 2020.

- Ross, Robert S. 2020. The changing East Asian balance of power and the regional security order. In *US-China-EU relations in a new era*, eds. Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø, and Wang Dong. London: Routledge.
- Serletis, George. 2019. Deadly high-purity fentanyl from China is entering the US through E-Commerce Channels. US International Trade Commission Executive Briefings on Trade. [https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/executive\\_briefings/ebot\\_george\\_serletis\\_fentanyl\\_from\\_china\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/executive_briefings/ebot_george_serletis_fentanyl_from_china_pdf.pdf). Accessed 22 May 2020.
- US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2019. NCHS releases new monthly provisional estimates on drug overdose deaths. Statcast, September 11, 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/podcasts/20190911/20190911.htm>. Accessed 22 May 2020.
- US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). 2020. Investment plan for implementing the national defense strategy, fiscal years 2022–2026. <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6864-national-defense-strategy-summ/8851517f5e10106bc3b1/optimized/full.pdf?page=1>. Accessed 22 May 2020.