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# From Mao to Deng: China's Changing Relations with the United States

By Chen Jian, November 2019





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# From Mao to Deng

## China's Changing Relations with the United States

Chen Jian

**Abstract:** What is the meaning of China's rise? What are its consequences? Are China, the rising power and the world's second largest economy, and the United States, the dominant power in the world, likely to chart a perilous course toward the "Thucydides's Trap"? History alone does not provide direct answers to these critical questions. Yet, reflections on the history of Chinese-American relations in the 20th-century—and the past four decades in particular—may offer some time-tested wisdom, thus letting us occupy a more informed and discerning position to deal with vital challenges facing both the United States and China.

A historical review of the development of Chinese-American relations reveals that during four-fifths of the twentieth century, China and the United States were allies, tacit allies, or constructive partners. Only during one-fifth of the time were they adversaries. When China and the United States were bitter enemies in the first twenty years of the Cold War, both countries suffered. In the last two decades of the Cold War, when China and the United States became "tacit allies," both countries benefited. The United State "won" the Cold War, and China survived it. Cooperation with the United States was from the beginning the cornerstone of Deng Xiaoping's design for China's reform and opening-up grand project. Despite all of China's deep "strategic problems," its economy, society, culture, and popular mindset have experienced profound transformations in the reform and opening era. China today is not Wilhelm II's Germany in the First World War, nor Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, or militarist Japan in the Second World War, and certainly not the Soviet Union of the Cold War. The biggest challenges facing both China and the United States are those from within. None of them can be "solved" through a Chinese-American confrontation. A "grand understanding" between China and the United States, no matter how difficult to achieve, is sorely needed.

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On January 31, 1979, Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader of the post-Mao era, boarded a plane for a historic visit to the United States. Deng was in very high spirits. How could he not be in such a bright mood? A few weeks prior, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States of America established diplomatic relations. This was a gigantic achievement for Deng, as it allowed him to accomplish a critical step toward his plan to launch China's grand "reform and

*The author would like thank John Payne, a recent graduate of Cornell University's China and Asian-Pacific Studies major, for his excellent copy-editing on the text of this article.*

opening-up” project. The United States, as Deng then perceived, should play a central role in China’s drive toward modernity and beyond. Deng was not a talkative person, especially when he was with his associates. Yet he talked a lot during the cross-Pacific flight. Reportedly, Deng said something of the following effect to his associates:

As we look back, we find that all of those countries that were with the United States have been rich, whereas all of those against the United States have remained poor. We shall be with the United States.<sup>1</sup>

This was no ordinary statement by Deng. It represented a huge breakthrough from Beijing’s earlier definition of China’s relations with the United States. Since US President Richard Nixon’s dramatic trip to China in the spring of 1972, which ended the two-decades-long Chinese-American confrontation, a “tacit alliance,” as Henry Kissinger characterized it, quickly took shape between Beijing and Washington.<sup>2</sup> Strategic and geopolitical considerations, ones shaped in response to what both countries perceived as grave security threats by the Soviet Union, served as the cornerstone of the relationship. The new partnership that Deng and the post-Mao Chinese leadership sought to build with Washington would remain highly valuable in terms of geopolitics and security. Yet, more importantly, China’s tacit alliance with Washington had to facilitate Deng’s new vision of looking to the United States and the capitalist West for ways to modernize China.

With respect to the above, Deng was ready to abandon the “revolutionary country” status that China had persistently claimed during the Maoist era. Along with the Chinese leadership’s desire and move to embrace the “world market,” controlled by global capitalism, as a central agent in its modernization drive, China during the reform and opening-up era would also gradually morph into an “insider” of the existing international systems and institutions dominated by the United States and the capitalist West. Thus, from a Chinese perspective, the global Cold War ended in many key senses during the mid-to-late 1970s—rather than the late 1980s and early 1990s—along with the Chinese-American rapprochement and, especially, Deng’s launch of the “reform and opening-up” project.

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<sup>1</sup> Information gained from an August 2008 interview with a leading Chinese party historian.

<sup>2</sup> Kissinger to Nixon, “My Trip to Peking, June 19-23, 1972,” 6/27/72, Box 851, NSF, Nixon Presidential Material, p. 2, National Archive.

Forty years have passed since that critical turning point in Chinese external relations in general and its policy toward the United States in particular. The reform and opening-up process has transformed China's economy, society, population and international outlook. As of the time of writing, China is the world's second largest economy. Chinese society, culture, and popular mindsets have experienced the broadest and most profound changes unprecedented in the country's age-old history. One of the most important results of the transformative reform process, in my view, is that there has emerged in China a massive, diverse and highly dynamic middle class (or, as it is sometimes presented in the Chinese way, "middle-income social stratum"), which accounts for a population of around 400 million and growing (and the number is projected to surpass 800 million in a decade's time). Accompanying the middle class's rapidly expanding strength, I would like to argue, will inevitably be a growing desire and capacity on their part to define "power" and "rights" in their own ways in the years and decades to come. This is a phenomenon never before seen in Chinese history, or even in the history of mankind. Nothing could be more shortsighted and misleading than an attempt to underestimate, let alone ignore (no matter by whom), the enormous political, social and cultural significance and implications that such an unparalleled phenomenon would engender.

China's reform and opening-up process, since its inception, has been characterized by a cooperative relationship between the PRC and the United States on the international scene. Indeed, even the end of the global Cold War, though it tested the relationship in most serious ways, did not undermine it. In the post-Cold War era, as the result of the broadening and deepening of China's reform and opening-up process, the Chinese economy has become increasingly integrated with the global-capitalism-dominated world market—despite the fact that China is still governed by a "communist" party. For over two decades, China and the United States have withstood the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998, the huge shockwaves of the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the prolonged and destructive impact of the global financial crisis of 2008. They have dealt with critical challenges like these ones as fellow "stakeholders" in a shared cause of maintaining and enhancing world peace, stability, and prosperity while simultaneously sustaining and creating momentum for continuous development of globalization, a project now under considerable duress.

Things have changed recently. In the past several years, especially since Donald Trump became President of the United States in early 2017, daunting challenges, unseen in the past four decades, have beset Chinese-American relations. The reasons for the sharp deterioration of the relationship are complicated. China has its share of responsibility, to be sure. Troubling signs indicate that China's reform and opening-up process seriously stalled as it entered its fourth decade. In particular, the Chinese "communist" state, in the face of deep-seated and lingering challenges to its legitimacy (stemming from China's nominally "communist" claim, despite having long since jettisoned "communism" in practice) has adopted a severely repressive approach toward perceiving and managing domestic political, social, and ideological/intellectual issues. The Chinese state has tried to impose substantial control over the private sector of the Chinese economy, despite the latter's extraordinary contributions to China's economic growth. Indeed, even some of the most important achievements of the reform era, such as the introduction of term limits for China's top leaders, face the danger of abandonment. In the meantime, China's behavior on the world stage reflects a sidelining of Deng's wise call for persistent adherence to a "lying low" approach. Consequently, Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive, if not necessarily more aggressive, in the past decade or so.

America's perceptions of and attitudes toward China have also witnessed substantial, even dramatic, change in recent years. What is the meaning of China's rise? What are the consequences? This fundamentally important question continues to puzzle American strategic thinkers, policymakers, and military planners. Moreover, a profound division among America's political elites concerning how to define and deal with many of the country's own widespread and entrenched structural issues (to be elaborated in the latter part of the essay), seems to have pushed many in the United States to identify China not as a strategic partner or fellow stakeholder, but as a strategic rival that now presents, and may continue to present in the future, serious challenges to "vital interests" of the United States as the world's sole dominant power.<sup>3</sup> Since mid-2018, President Trump's decision to wage a large-scale and comprehensive

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy toward China, October 4, 2018. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/>

trade war against China has sunk the relationship between the two countries to its lowest point since the Chinese-American opening in the early 1970s. This endangers not only the steady development of Chinese-American relations, but also the prospects of global strategic, political, and economic stability, as well as the continuous development of trend of globalization.

All of this has required qualified responses to a question of utmost importance: Are China, the rising power, and the United States, the dominant power, likely, as Harvard political scientist Graham Allison warns, to chart a perilous course toward the “Thucydides's Trap”?<sup>4</sup>

History alone does not provide direct answers to such a vital question. Yet, reflections on the history of Chinese-American relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—and in the past four decades in particular—may offer some time-tested wisdom, thus letting us occupy a more informed and discerning position to deal with challenges facing Chinese-American relations and, by extension, the endangered trend of globalization now and in the future. It is with this belief that I write this essay to provide a historical review of the development of Chinese-American relations from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping.

## II

In retrospect, China and the United States shared a tortuous history of encounters in the twentieth century. During the first half of the century, despite their many differences, from their disparate levels of economic development to their types of society and culture, and power and influence in international relations, China and the United States basically stood on the same side of important events in world affairs. In particular, the two countries were allies during the First and Second World Wars. At the end of the First World War, Chinese intellectuals enthusiastically cheered for and embraced the “Fourteen Points” introduced by US President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>5</sup> During the Second World War, Chinese leaders, both Nationalist and communist, loudly and sincerely voiced their support for the “Atlantic Charter,” proclaimed

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<sup>4</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Chen Duxiu, an influential Chinese intellectual who was a Peking University professor and, later, a founder of the Chinese Communist Party, even called Wilson “the first good man under heaven.” *Chen Duxiu, Duxiu wencun* (Chen Duxiu's Writings) (Hefei: Anhui renmin, 1987), p. 388.



by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, as the blueprint for constructing a new world order. Indeed, the Chinese saw the Charter as “the declaration of the coming of a new era in the world.”<sup>6</sup> Both the Fourteen Points and the Atlantic Charter, in hindsight, were central in laying the normative foundation of a “liberal world order.” The original texts of the documents, in addition to emphasizing such basic liberal values as free trade, liberty, and democracy, also highlighted such anti-imperialist and anti-colonist principles as national liberation and self-determination.

Despite this, the general trend of Chinese-American relations changed only four years after the end of the Second World War. When the Chinese communists defeated the Nationalists in the civil war, China and the United States quickly turned from allies to bitter enemies.

In the summer of 1949, Mao Zedong, the Chinese communist leader, made two essential statements concerning the orientation of the foreign policy of the “New China” that he and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were to create. On June 30, Mao announced that the New China would “lean to one side,” toward the side of the Soviet Union and the Soviet-led communist bloc.<sup>7</sup> One month later, the US State Department published a white paper, presenting an American narrative of its relations with China in the previous century.<sup>8</sup> Mao personally drafted five commentaries to rebut the narrative, characterizing the United States as an imperialist country that had carried out policies of aggression against China throughout modern times.<sup>9</sup>

In late September, on the eve of the PRC's establishment, Mao announced to the whole world that “we, the Chinese, have stood up.”<sup>10</sup> This was a huge legitimacy statement intended

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<sup>6</sup> *Jiang Zhongzheng xianshen nianpu changbian* (An Extended Version of Chronological Records of Mr. Jiang Jieshi) (Taipei: Academia Historica, 2014), vol 6, p. 602; CCP Central Committee's Statement on Recent International Events, August 19, 1941, *Jiefang ribao* (Liberation Daily), August 20, 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Mao, “On People's Democratic Dictatorship,” *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Selected Works of Mao Zedong)(Beijing: Renmin, 1965) vol. 4, 1477.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State, *United States Relations with China with Special Reference to the Period 1944-1949* (Washington, DC, 1949).

<sup>9</sup> Mao, “Cast Away Illusions, Prepare for Struggle,” “Farewell, John Leighton Stuart,” “Why It is Necessary to Discuss the White Paper,” “Friendship or Aggression?” “The Bankruptcy of Idealist Conception of History,” *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Selected Works of Mao Zedong)(Beijing: Renmin, 1965), vol. 4, pp. 1486-1520.

<sup>10</sup> Mao, “The Chinese People Have Stood Up,” *Mao Zedong wenji* (A Collection of Mao Zedong's Writings), (Beijing, Renmin, 1995), vol. 3, pp.342-346.

chiefly for the Chinese people.<sup>11</sup> Mao substantiated the statement by establishing two fundamental missions for his “revolution after revolution:” to change China into a land of universal justice, equality, and prosperity; and, by challenging and destroying the “old” world, to revive China’s central position in the international community. Not surprisingly, the PRC under Mao’s reign was to challenge the legitimacy of the existing international order, which Mao and his comrades believed to be the product of Western domination and thus inimical to revolutionary China.

When the PRC was just a year old, the Korean War, the first major hot war of the Cold War, erupted. The United States quickly intervened in support of the Republic of Korea. After four months, when the tide of war turned decisively against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Mao and the CCP leadership decided to send “Chinese People’s Volunteers” to Korea, and the war transformed into a major Chinese-American military confrontation.

Why did China enter the Korean War? Security and geopolitical concerns certainly played an important role. After all, Korea is China’s neighbor and, in history, it once belonged to China’s sphere of influence. For Mao and his fellow CCP leaders, to allow Korea to be controlled by hostile imperialist forces was to allow for a grave threat to China’s security interests. On a deeper level, though, Mao and his comrades decided to join the Korean War mainly to convert pressure created by external crises into the dynamics for enhancing the CCP’s control of China’s state and society. China’s intervention in Korea also represented a crucial step by Mao and his comrades to restore China’s central position in East Asian international affairs, which, in turn, would serve as a powerful source of domestic mobilization. Mao hoped to use China’s victory in Korea to tell the world and, especially, China’s own people that “we, the Chinese,” had indeed “stood up.”

American policymakers and military planners—in particular General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the US and UN forces in Korea—seriously misjudged the intension and capacity of the “New China” led by Mao and the CCP. They did not believe that China, backward and

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<sup>11</sup> The “legitimacy” of a state or a regime is defined here as everyday people’s “inner acceptance” of the policies, strategies and, in the final analysis, constitutional representation of the state/regime.

weak, would dare to wage war against strong America.<sup>12</sup> Mao was genuinely offended by this notion. What enraged Mao more than American hostility toward China was the perceived American disdain of China and the Chinese as backward and even inferior. The discourse of anti-US-imperialism became a major theme of extensive domestic mobilization throughout China in the Korean War years and long after.

China's intervention in Korea caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of Chinese lives (including Mao's own son), burned hundreds of millions of dollars at the expense of the nascent country's reconstruction, and resulted in its prolonged confrontation with the United States. Yet, for Mao and his fellow CCP leaders, China stood to gain considerably by fighting the war. During the war years, by hoisting banners of revolutionary nationalism and patriotism, the CCP found itself in a much enhanced position to penetrate almost every area of Chinese society through intensive mass mobilization, dramatically promoting its authority and legitimacy in the minds of the population. Internationally, Mao and his comrades also found that they, by repulsing the American military advance toward Korea's border with China, could now reasonably expect friends and foes to accept China's status as a great power.<sup>13</sup>

During the Korean War years, China was further excluded from the existing international system and institution. The Cold War had resulted in profound division between the Allies of the Second World War. In Asia, this was most clearly demonstrated by the difficulty involved in the making of the peace treaty with Japan. When China and the United States were engaged in the war in Korea, the San Francisco Conference for making peace with Japan was convened. The PRC did not attend. Thus the treaty of peace with Japan signed at the conference was made without any of Beijing's input, although China was one of the "Big Four" Allies during World War II. From the beginning, Beijing challenged the San Francisco System as a seriously flawed peace settlement for East Asia, deriding it as a product of the Cold War.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For more detailed description and analysis, see Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 164-171.

<sup>13</sup> *Mao Zedong xuanji*, vol. 5, pp.101-106; *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* (Selected Military Papers of Zhou Enlai)(Beijing: Renmin, 1997), vol. 4, pp. 292-307.

<sup>14</sup> Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai's Statement on the U.S.-British Draft Peace Treaty with Japan and the San Francisco Conference, August 15, 1951, *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), August 16, 1951.

Beijing's grievance reflected deeper concerns, especially with respect to the normative and moral foundation of a "just peace." As China was a principal member of the victorious Allies during the Second World War, any postwar peace settlement involving China's interest would not be legitimate if China was not involved in the settlement's making. The San Francisco System, therefore, was not a binding settlement for China. Rather, from a Chinese perspective, it obscured the normative and moral foundation of the existing international system and structure, rendering them sources for potential crisis in the long run. Substantially damaged were the moral authority and practical consistency of the liberal world order. It was here that one finds some of the deep sources of the territorial disputes that now involve China and other countries in the East and South China Seas.

A prolonged, total confrontation persisted between China and the United States in the wake of the Korean War, specifically during the rest of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s. In China, anti-US-imperialism became a central component of China's mainstream political discourse, defining the basic tones of Chinese international policies and serving as a powerful driving force for Mao's excessive domestic mass mobilization strategies.

On the American side, policymakers in Washington believed that Communist China, compared with the Soviet Union, was a "more daring, therefore more dangerous enemy." Although the emphasis of America's global Cold War strategy lay in Europe and the Soviet Union was America's presumed primary enemy, a large portion of America's resources were being deployed in East Asia to cope with the "Chinese communist threats" there. In 1954, when US President Dwight Eisenhower formally introduced the "domino theory" in the context of an imminent communist victory in Indochina, he had in his mind the grave impact the influences of the Chinese communist revolution would exert if they were allowed to spread unchecked in East Asia.<sup>15</sup> The two Taiwan Straits crises of 1954-1955 and 1958 brought China and the United States to the verge of another direct military confrontation. In managing these two crises, military planners in Washington even considered the possibility of using nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1960), pp. 381-390.

<sup>16</sup> See H. W. Brands, "Testing Massive Retaliation: Credibility and Crisis Management in the Taiwan Strait," *International Security*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 124-151; Gordon H. Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United*

Then, largely because of worries of threats from Communist China, America entered the Vietnam War, the "longest war" in American history.

China and United States, however, managed to avoid another military showdown over Vietnam or elsewhere in East Asia. There were some deep, sophisticated yet crucial reasons to be learned here. Both Chinese and US leaders regarded the other as an enemy. But, as it seemed, they were willing to count upon the consistency and "limited rationality" of the other side to avoid another deadly war between the two countries. What was interesting to note was that a certain form of "mutual confidence" seemed to undergird Beijing's and Washington's strategic thinking in the wake of the Korean War: Without yielding to the legitimacy of the other side's policy goals and ideological commitments, leaders of both countries nevertheless developed a conviction that the other side would prove willing and able to persist in a limited and pragmatic course of action in accordance with its own rationale, logic and perceived interests. This "mutual confidence" was clearly demonstrated in Washington's and Beijing's "signaling" in 1965 and 1966 about what they might and might not do with respect to the escalating war in Vietnam, helping to make the Vietnam War a "limited war" as the military conflict wore on.<sup>17</sup> Even at the height of the Chinese-American confrontation, both Chinese and American policymakers demonstrated that they were rational actors.

Why did the above happen? One of the root causes was that, in spite of its aggressive rhetoric and behavior in international affairs, Mao's China was not an expansionist power as the term is typically defined in Western strategic discourse. While they made use of force, largely because of their legitimacy-related concerns at home, what the Chinese leaders hoped to achieve was not the PRC's direct control of foreign territory or resources, but the spread of the Chinese revolution's influence to the "hearts and minds" around the world. It was this aspiration for "centrality," rather than the pursuit of "dominance," that characterized the

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*States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948-1972* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 126-128, 189-190.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed examination of the Chinese-American "signaling" over Vietnam, see James G. Hershberg and Chen Jian, "Informing the Enemy: Sino-American 'Signaling' and the Vietnam War, 1965," in Priscilla Roberts ed., *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam and the World beyond Asia* (Washington, DC and Stanford, CA: The Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2006), pp.193-257.

external policy of Mao's China. All of this, I would like to argue, is indispensable to understand China's external behavior then, now and in the future.

The PRC's domestic-oriented approach to foreign policy also shaped the rise, and eventual demise, of Beijing's strategic relations with Moscow. The Korean War, as it seemed at the time, significantly enhanced the strategic alliance between China and the Soviet Union. Recognizing China's merit, Moscow's post-Stalin leadership provided China with comprehensive and substantial economic, technological and military support in the 1950s. This, at the time, could defensibly be called the greatest transfer of modern industry from one country to another ever to occur in human history, and a feat unlikely to be bested in the future. Consequently, China's levels of industrialization/modernization rose to a much higher level within just a decade's time.

However, in the late 1950s, Mao and the Beijing leadership made the decision to split with Moscow. Why did they do so? Domestic considerations were again the main reason. China's "younger brother" status in its alliance with the Soviet Union was in fundamental conflict with Mao's and the CCP's China-centered legitimacy narrative. In the beginning of the 1960s, when Mao began to push China toward the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," a project he intended to prevent a "Soviet-style capitalist restoration" from happening in China, he contended that "Soviet revisionists" and "social-imperialists" had long carried out a policy of "great power chauvinism" toward China, and characterized Moscow as a serious threat to Chinese sovereignty and independence. No other Chinese leaders were in a position to rebut this revolutionary nationalism-inflected Maoist rhetoric.



In the mid-1960s, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, plunging China's state and society into total chaos. China's relationship with the two Cold War superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, also plummeted to the lowest possible levels in PRC history.

Two interrelated purposes guided Mao's decision to launch the Cultural Revolution. First, he hoped that it would allow him to find new means of advancing China's transformation in accordance with his ideals, so as to instill a new social order in the hearts and minds of the

Chinese people. Second, he sought to use it instrumentally to enhance his weakened authority and reputation in the wake of the disastrous “Great Leap Forward.” For Mao, these two purposes were interwoven, as he believed that his preeminent leadership would best guarantee the success of his revolution.

By 1968–1969, it had become evident that Mao had easily accomplished the second objective, as his authority and power had reached a height unprecedented even in his own political career. Yet it was also apparent that he had failed to reach the first, and more fundamental, goal. Still, to reconstruct the communist state’s control over Chinese society that, in the most hectic days of the Cultural Revolution, had been so thoroughly destroyed, Mao was ready to curb the movements of the “revolutionary masses.” In late July 1968, Mao decided to dispatch the “Workers’ Mao Thought Propaganda Teams” to various Beijing universities to reestablish the party-state control system. When the Red Guards there opened fire on the team, Mao ordered the Red Guards movement to be dismantled.<sup>18</sup> For two decades, “mobilizing the masses” had been Mao’s most powerful means to promote his “continuous revolution.” The moment that he stood in open opposition to the “revolutionary masses” who had heeded his call to launch the Cultural Revolution, his revolutionary programs aimed at creating a new order in the Chinese people’s hearts and minds failed.

Around this time, the PRC became one of the world’s most isolated countries. It faced serious security threats from all directions. America’s intervention in Vietnam kept great pressure on China’s southern borders. Hostilities between Beijing and Moscow culminated in March 1969, when two bloody clashes erupted between Chinese and Soviet garrisons on Zhenbao Island on the Ussuri River.<sup>19</sup> China also faced fierce enemies from the east (Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea), and from the West (India).

Consequently, China’s international policies underwent drastic, unforeseen changes: The declining status of Mao’s “continuous revolution” programs, combined with the grave security situation facing the PRC set the scene for a gradual process of Chinese-American rapprochement. Beginning in late 1969, a series of secret meetings occurred between Beijing

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<sup>18</sup> *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts since the Establishment of the PRC) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, ), vol. 12, pp. 516–517.

<sup>19</sup> Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” *Cold War History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (August 2000): pp. 25-31.

and Washington. By spring 1971, when the Chinese and the Americans played ping pong, first in Nagoya, Japan (the site of that year's world table tennis championships), and then in Beijing, the world suddenly realized that the political atmosphere of abject enmity for almost two decades between China and the United States was fading away. In October 1971, the PRC, after having been excluded from the United Nations since its establishment in 1949, claimed its position as a UN member and a permanent member of the Security Council. This was by itself a loud declaration that Chinese foreign relations in general and its policies toward the United States in particular were to enter a new era. US president Richard Nixon's meetings with Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai in Beijing, during the "the week that changed the world" in February 1972, confirmed as much.

The Sino-American joint communiqué was signed in Shanghai on February 28, 1972. It was an unconventional document. In addition to spelling out common ground, it also highlighted differences between Beijing and Washington, with both sides using their own language to outline their different policies on important international issues. They concurred that neither "should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and each is opposed to efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony"—a declaration implicitly aimed at the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> The twenty-year-long Sino-American confrontation came to a close.

The Chinese-American rapprochement was, without a doubt, one of the most important and influential events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In terms of its impact on East Asian and world politics, the Chinese-American opening dramatically shifted the balance of power between the two Cold War superpowers. While policymakers in Washington found it possible to devote more of America's resources and strategic attention toward dealing with the threats posed by the Soviet Union, Moscow's leaders, forced to confront the West and China simultaneously, seriously overextended the Soviet Union's strength and power.

In a deeper and more basic sense, the Chinese-American rapprochement changed the essence of the Cold War. A fundamental confrontation between communism and liberal

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<sup>20</sup> *Renmin ribao*, February 28, 1972; *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1972* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1974), pp. 376–79.



capitalism, two different and mutually exclusive paths toward modernity, had characterized the Cold War since its breakout in the mid- and late 1940s. The rapprochement between Beijing and Washington obscured the distinction of these divergent paths. Indeed, together with the Sino-Soviet split, the Chinese-American opening effectively buried the shared belief among communists worldwide that communism was a workable solution to the problems created by the global process of modernization.

Critically, China's rapprochement with the United States also created conditions for practical changes in the Chinese pattern of development. In 1972–1973, Beijing approved 26 major projects, collectively worth US \$4.3 billion, involving the importation of new equipment and whole-set technology from Japan and such Western countries as Australia, Canada, France, the Netherlands, West Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>21</sup> The implementation of these projects would represent an enormous step toward bringing China in line with the “world market” dominated by the United States and Western capitalist countries. This was not the equivalent of the “reform and opening-up” project that China would launch in the post-Mao era, to be sure. But it must be regarded as an extremely important precursor to the program that followed.

Mao introduced his “Three Worlds” theory in 1973-1974, against the above backdrop. The Chinese chairman asserted: “The U.S. and the Soviet Union belong to the First World. The middle elements, such as Japan, Europe, Australia and Canada, belong to the Second World. We are the Third World.... The U.S. and the Soviet Union have a lot of atomic bombs, and they are richer. Europe, Japan, Australia and Canada, of the Second World, do not possess so many atomic bombs and are not so rich as the First World, but richer than the Third World.... All Asian countries, except Japan, and all of Africa and also Latin America belong to the Third World.”<sup>22</sup> On 10 April 1974, Deng Xiaoping, heading a Chinese delegation to UN general assembly, publicly presented Mao's “Three Worlds” notion; he emphasized that the “Third World” comprised the vast majority of *developing* countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Chen Jinghua, *Guoshi yishu* (Recollections and accounts of State Affairs) (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi, 2005), chap. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Mao Zedong on Diplomacy* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), p. 454.

<sup>23</sup> *Renmin ribao*, April 11, 1974, 1.

Mao's "Three Worlds" theory was not a simple reiteration of his previous international statements that centered on the discourse of "international class struggle." Instead, the issue of economic development served as the primary concern of the "Three Worlds" theory. As far as the theory's basic *problematique* is concerned, it already highlighted "development" as a question of fundamental importance for China.

In early 1975, with Mao's approval, a "Four Modernizations" discourse (publicly articulated by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1964) reentered China's domestic affairs. In a speech to a National People's Congress assembly, Zhou announced that China should aim to modernize its industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology by the end of the century.<sup>24</sup>

How could Mao, who had championed transforming China and the world through revolutionary means, issue the development-oriented "Three Worlds" theory and accept the "Four Modernizations" representation toward the end of his life? This was Mao's way of dealing with the worsening legitimacy crisis that his "continuous revolution" faced. Ever since Mao proclaimed at the time of the PRC's founding that "we, the Chinese, have stood up," he legitimated his idea of "revolution after revolution" by repeatedly emphasizing how his revolutionary programs would turn China into a country of "wealth and power." When the Chinese communist state dealt with an ever-deepening legitimacy crisis brought about by the economic stagnation and political cruelty that Mao's revolutions had imposed on the Chinese people, the Chairman debuted the "Three Worlds" and "Four Modernizations" notions for emphasizing—first and foremost to the Chinese people—that his revolutions played a constant, central role in elevating China's stature and transforming the world. However, in the instant that Mao placed such emphasis on "development," he opened a door that he did not mean to open, and the boundary between revolutionary China and the "outside world," once seen as insurmountable, began to erode.

Again, as emphasized in the opening part of this essay, from a Chinese perspective, the Cold War, in many ways, ended not in the early 1990s, but in the 1970s, in the wake of the Chinese-American rapprochement. This is a crucial point for understanding not only why

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<sup>24</sup> *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976* (A Chronological Record of Zhou Enlai)(Beijing: Zhongyang wanxian, 1998), vol. 3, p. 691.

“communist” China survived the end of the Cold War, but also why—and how—China’s drive for modernity assumed the forms it did in the post-Cold War era.

## IV

Mao died on September 9, 1976. An era, the revolutionary Maoist era, ended. After a brief transitional period, Deng Xiaoping emerged as China’s paramount leader. A new era for China began.

Deng abandoned Mao’s class-struggle-centered discourse and revolutionary practice almost immediately. At the center of Deng’s political philosophy was his pragmatic “cat theory”—“black cat or yellow cat, so long as it catches mice, it is a good cat.” Deng did not intend to deride communism, but it was for him a vision for the remote future. On the contrary, Deng’s preoccupation was how to live through the present. And Deng never meant to give up the banner of socialism, yet “socialism is not poverty.” So Deng emphasized that economics must take precedence over “revolutionary politics.” Guided by this principle, Deng understood that it was necessary to transform the rigid state-controlled “command economy” that had prevailed in China for three decades. He sensed that the failure of Mao’s “continuous revolution” had caused an abysmal legitimacy crisis for the Chinese communist state. He hoped that the improvement of people’s living standards brought about by reform and opening-up would help restore legitimacy to a Chinese state that was still ruled by a “communist” party.<sup>25</sup>

In light of Deng’s “cat theory,” his views of Chinese-American relations, as mentioned earlier in this essay, reflected a transformed approach toward the capitalist-dominated world market. Throughout the Maoist era, market economics and the pursuit of profits had been treated as values and practices inimical to genuine socialism. Deng and the post-Mao Chinese leadership began to perceive China’s path toward modernity from a totally different perspective, and they looked to the West for ways to formulate China’s own development strategy. This was why Deng so strongly emphasized the PRC’s gaining full diplomatic recognition from the United States.

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<sup>25</sup> For an excellent and highly insightful study on Deng Xiaoping and his launch of China’s “reform and opening-up” project, see Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

To lay the foundation of this reform project, China under Deng significantly broadened its external connections by dispatching Chinese students to study abroad, promoting China's trade with Western countries, welcoming foreign investments, and, among other measures, establishing special economic development zones along China's coast. Meanwhile, Beijing gradually reduced and, finally, cancelled its support for foreign communist insurgences.

The global Cold War was then still underway. China's confrontation with the Soviet Union continued, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Deng asserted that the Soviet invasion, "an important step toward pursuing worldwide hegemony," seriously jeopardized world peace and security. He announced that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had erected a new barrier to Beijing's efforts to improve relations with Moscow.<sup>26</sup> This was Deng's signal to Washington that in the ongoing Cold War, China would stand on the side of the United States and the capitalist West.

Vietnam was also China's enemy at the time. Beijing's relations with Hanoi deteriorated rapidly after the Vietnamese communists unified the country in 1975. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 further damaged Chinese-Vietnamese relations. Beijing's leaders claimed that Hanoi acted as an agent of Soviet expansionism in the region neighboring China. In February 1979, Chinese troops invaded Vietnam to "teach the Vietnamese a lesson." Throughout the 1980s, the borders between China and Vietnam were turned into a front of protracted warfare between the two countries.<sup>27</sup>

By 1982-1983, China's domestic and international policies had reached another critical juncture: the reform and opening process, in political, social, economic and ideological terms, had pushed China beyond the point of no return. Indeed, it was by then next to impossible for any force to restore to China its former command economy, tightly closed society, Maoist ideology and Maoist mass mobilization phenomenon, utopian-style justification of the legitimacy foundation of the state, or its isolated international status and Maoist "revolutionary country" identity.

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<sup>26</sup> Leng Rong et al., *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* (A Chronological Record of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1997) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 2004), vol. 1, p. 589.

<sup>27</sup> Zhang Xiaoming, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

Soviet leader Leonid Brazhnev declared in 1982 that Moscow was willing to improve relations with China. In the meantime, Beijing encountered an obstacle in promoting its relations with Washington when President Ronald Reagan adopted a highly friendly attitude toward Taiwan, which Beijing regarded as a part of China. Deng and the Chinese leadership found it necessary to rethink how best to define the scope and essence of Sino-American relations. In September 1982, Beijing announced that Chinese foreign policy would accord the principle of “independence and self-determination,” and thus would attempt to maintain neutrality between both superpowers.<sup>28</sup>

Yet Sino-Soviet relations did not much improve. Ostensibly, the main barriers to better relations between the two countries were the Soviets’ invasion of Afghanistan and, more importantly, the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia. But both international and, more importantly, domestic considerations underpinned Beijing’s attitudes toward Vietnam. Deng’s “long war” with Vietnam throughout the 1980s created a sustained source of domestic mobilization—one that appealed to the Chinese people’s patriotism. At a time when reform policies produced ever-widening economic inequality within Chinese society and, as a result, the legitimacy of the Chinese communist state was seriously imperiled, the confrontation with Vietnam, and Beijing’s representation of the conflict to the Chinese people, worked to retain ordinary Chinese’ support for the state.

A more fundamental reason for Beijing’s reluctance to improve relations with Moscow was the priority that Deng and his fellow Chinese leaders sought, after much deliberation, to give to China’s relations with the United States. In the final analysis, Deng and other reformist-minded Chinese leaders understood that China’s reform and opening-up process required the cooperation and support of the capitalist West in general and the United States in particular. On the American side, Beijing’s adoption of a foreign policy of “independence and self-determination,” along with the emergence of new tensions in US-Soviet relations after 1983, effectively alerted Washington, pushing President Reagan and other American policymakers and military planners to reemphasize America’s “tacit alliance” with China. In the wake of

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<sup>28</sup> *Renmin ribao*, September 2, 1982.

President Reagan's visit to China in 1984, tensions in US-China relations gave way to closer economic, diplomatic and even strategic cooperation between the two countries.<sup>29</sup>

The biggest challenges that Deng and the Chinese leadership faced throughout the 1980s were primarily domestic. The Chinese reform and opening-up process had since its inception taken place almost exclusively in the economic sphere, leaving the Chinese Communist Party's one-party domination of the political system virtually untouched. Deng had choices. In the early years of the post-Mao age, a chorus of powerful voices among the citizenry and Party cadres alike advocated for pursuing a "fifth modernization"—modernization of China's political system and institutions. Some prominent thinkers within the Party also called for "socialism with a human face."<sup>30</sup> But Deng was worried that this would result in China's "total embrace" of Western-style democracy. Therefore, though he promoted economic reforms and opening-up, he repeatedly called on the whole Party and country to fight against "bourgeoisie liberalization" and adhere to the "four cardinal principles" (i.e., adhering to the socialist road, proletarian dictatorship, the leadership of the CCP, as well as Marxism-Leninism and Mao Thought).<sup>31</sup> All of this revealed the continuity between Mao's revolution and Deng's de-revolution process, setting up a rigid political guideline for the CCP leadership to follow during and after Deng's times.

A dramatic yet decisive turning point in Chinese international affairs and Sino-American relations finally came in 1989. The huge gap between political stagnation and rapid economic and social change brought about by reforms bred deep tension between China's state and society, as well as within Chinese society. In May-June 1989, this tension erupted in the bloody Tiananmen tragedy—the popular protests in Beijing and the CCP leadership's decision to use force to suppress the protesters.

The Tiananmen massacre stunned the entire world. In a sense, it also triggered the chain of a series of historic events that made 1989 a landmark year in world history. November

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<sup>29</sup> See Ezra Vogel, Yuan Ming, and Tanaka Akihiko eds., *The Golden Age of the U.S.-China-Japan Triangle, 1972-1989* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), especially chapters 4 and 5 by Robert S. Ross and Jia Qingguo.

<sup>30</sup> Xiao Donglian, *Lishi de zhuangui* (Turning Point in History, 1976-1981) (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008), pp. 449-457.

<sup>31</sup> *Deng Xiaoping xuanji* (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping), (Beijing Renmin, 1983), vol. 2, pp. 144-170.

1989 saw the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the real and symbolic line that divided the East and the West for almost three decades. In December, Romania's communist dictator Ceausescu and his wife were executed after they tried, unsuccessfully, to use military force to suppress mass protests in Bucharest. Two years later, the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc in East Europe collapsed. In turn, the global Cold War met its end.

The People's Republic survived the shockwaves of 1989 and the end of the Cold War. One main reason was that, as described earlier, China had virtually left the battleground of the Cold War in the 1970s. Another reason lay in Deng's management of the crisis associated with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the wake of Tiananmen, Deng put forward what would later be called his "24 character statement," defining how China should view itself and its role and position in the post-Cold War world:

Observe carefully; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacity and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.<sup>32</sup>

This was a strategic, rather than a tactical, statement. It revealed Deng's vision and determination that China should resume the reform and opening-up project, and should not challenge, let alone replace, America's position as the dominant power in the world for a very long time to come, if ever. In early 1992, Deng, at the age of eighty-eight, embarked on another southern tour. On the tour, he delivered a series of statements, emphasizing that reforms should be carried out more deeply. He contended that "the market is only a means of economic development, and it is not necessarily in conflict with socialism." The essence of socialism, stressed Deng, should be "the development of productivity." On February 28, 1992, the CCP leadership formally issued its No. 2 Document of 1992, which relayed the main points of Deng's talks to all Party members.

What followed was the revitalization of the reform and opening project. Like the reform process of the pre-1989 period, it concentrated on promoting economic development, and exempted from its reform program the transforming of China's one-party-reigned political structure and institutions. Yet, compared with the pre-1989 period, it more boldly embraced

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<sup>32</sup> There are varying translations of the 24 character statement. The translation used here is cited from Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), p. 438.

the global-capitalism-dominated world market as the central agency in unleashing productivity and creativity. In October 1992, the CCP's Fourteenth Congress formally adopted the concept of a "socialist market economy." China then registered rapid economic growth and experienced profound social and cultural transformations throughout the rest of the 1990s, a phenomenon that, especially after China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, further flourished during most of the first two decades of the 21st century.

## V

Thirty years have passed since the end of the global Cold War. The People's Republic celebrated its seventieth anniversary in October 2019. Four decades after the launch of the reform and opening-up project, China is now at another crossroads. Chinese-American relations also face a prospect of severe uncertainties.

China's economic growth in the reform and opening-up era is both extraordinary and real. In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the second largest economy in the world. In a few short years, the size of the Chinese economy was already more than twice that of Japan. The political cruelty of the Maoist era is long gone and has no hope of returning. Chinese society has become more dynamic, diverse, and plural.

Internationally, China and its economy have been further integrated into the world market and the global community, playing positive and constructive roles at many critical junctures. Do we still remember, for example, how China and the United States worked together to stem the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998? Or how Beijing and Washington, by bridging their political and strategic differences, joined forces to repulse the outburst of global terrorism in the wake of 9/11? Or the huge role that China played in helping control the impact of the 2008 worldwide financial crisis? All of this, in my view, has demonstrated China's strong desire and deep capacity to be a responsible stakeholder—indeed, a genuine "insider"—in the increasingly integrated global community.

China today is not Wilhelm II's Germany in the First World War, not Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, or Militarist Japan in the Second World War, and certainly not the Soviet Union of the Cold War.



China's relationship with the United States today is fundamentally different from Soviet-American relations during the Cold War: First, unlike the Soviet Union, China today does not present itself as an alternative—in terms of how the mainstream path toward modernity/postmodernity should and can be defined—to the American model for development and way of life. Second, unlike the Soviet Union, today's China comprises an integral part of the world economic system and institutions: It is no "outsider" on that front. Third, China today, unlike the Soviet Union, does not have its own military alliance or bloc that stand in defiance against America's global alliance system.

Yet, for many American policymakers, strategic thinkers and military planners, what is most troublesome is the prospect that, with the Chinese economy surpassing American economy sometime in the future (or even the near future), China may not only challenge but replace America's position as the dominant world power while, at the same time, undermining the existing international norms and codes of behavior.

Many of the complaints that we have heard about China's contravention of international trade and business norms are not unreasonable. All of the following surely are unacceptable: China's failure to adhere to its commitments made at its accession to WTO; its offering subsidies to Chinese exports while imposing restrictions on imports; and its forcing foreign companies to share their intellectual property as a precondition to access Chinese market, etc. Yet, none, nor all, of the above justify making China a strategic rival or enemy of the United States. Indeed, almost all these problems are ones that have also existed between America and its Western allies and Japan in the past (if we still remember, for example, the "America's coming war with Japan" rhetoric of the late 1980's and early 1990's).

Will a "New Cold War" emerge between China and the United States? Those who have answered "yes" have misread the history of Chinese-American relations in the twentieth century (including during the Cold War). During four-fifths of the twentieth century, China and the United States were allies, tacit allies, or constructive partners, and only during one-fifth of the time were they enemies. In the first twenty-some years of the Cold War, when China and the United States were bitter enemies, both countries suffered. The United States fought two costly "hot wars" in Asia and found itself seriously overextended; and China experienced such

tremendously disastrous chapters as the “Great Leap Forward/Great Famine” and the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” when it was locked in a state of complete isolation from the international community. In the last twenty years of the Cold War, when China and the United States were “tacit allies,” both countries benefitted. The United State “won” the Cold War, and China survived it.

The biggest challenges facing China are those from within, not without. In the recent US-China trade war, those Chinese “structural problems” that President Trump and his hawkish trade negotiators have tried to force Beijing to agree upon are rooted in China’s own increasingly problematic economic system, which is permeated by rampant state power. As many prominent Chinese economists have pointed out, such a flawed system has become a big barrier to China’s own continuous economic growth. Even without American pressure, powerful voices within the Chinese political and economic elites have called for their removal as the first yet most critical step to regenerate China’s stalled reform and opening-up process.<sup>33</sup>

China’s large-scale international initiatives, such as the gigantic “One Belt, One Road” project, as well as its persistent sovereignty claim in South China Sea and military deployment there in recent years, are not born out of expansionist purposes but, crucially, of domestic considerations. Briefly, these initiatives have temporarily served the Chinese leadership’s need to cope with the profound and lingering legitimacy challenges that the Chinese “communist” state faces.

After the collapse of the Maoist modernity design and legitimacy narrative, the CCP leadership has taken full advantage of China’s continuous economic growth for legitimacy reconstruction. They linked growth with Mao’s “we, the Chinese, have stood up” rhetoric and retooled it into a key pillar of the PRC’s legitimacy narrative in the post-Mao era. The representation of China’s great international gains, especially its rise as a prominent world power, is a critical component of this endeavor to consolidate legitimacy. However, “legitimacy” so defined is in truth no more than a “performance-based” one, and depends on China’s rapid economic growth lasting forever. A narrative like this is also too narrow and

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<sup>33</sup> A clear indication of such voices was the decision on deepening and broadening reforms adopted at the third plenum of the CCP’s 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in November 2013.

outdated to satisfy the rights demands and social, intellectual and cultural aspirations of the new, massive, and powerful middle-class-centered social forces, phenomena without precedent in China's millennia of history.

But this is a challenge so fundamental that only the Chinese themselves can and will come up with qualified answers. It is beyond America's capacity and mandate to try to impose answers upon the Chinese in American ways. Any attempt to do so will only trigger China's lingering "victim mentality" and mobilize radical Chinese nationalism centered on an anti-American-hegemony discourse. The biggest beneficiary of such a scenario will, ironically, be no one else but the Chinese "communist" state.

In fact, the biggest challenges facing the United States are also those from within, not without (including from the perceived "China threat"). I have lived in the United States for over three decades. I have never seen American politics so "ideologized," or ideological representations so polarized as they are today. American society is deeply divided. The critical and independent free press, a key pillar of American democracy, has become demonized (as evidenced by the now prevailing "Fake News" naming). Poverty has crept back to everyday life. Social inequality, in numerous forms, has not only persisted but also deepened. A pervasive sense of anxiety, coupled with confusion about the future and meaning of life, can be easily detected almost everywhere. America is a great country. It will remain so unless the Americans themselves make serious mistakes.

One such a serious mistake could be an attempt to "solve" all the challenges facing America through a confrontation with China.

Instead, China and America, as the two largest economies in the world, and two peoples of very high moral self-expectations, should work together on global issues of tremendous consequence, ones that concern not only the vital interests of the two countries but also the basic welfare of mankind. By coordinating their efforts, China and the United States certainly could play a leading role in dealing with such essential threats facing humanity as climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and a possible resurgence of global terrorism.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Is 9/11 just an event of the past? In actuality, the world, and the United States in particular, are still living in its dark shadow.

A “grand understanding” between China and the United States is thus sorely needed. This is difficult to achieve. But the hope of achieving it should never die.

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