

FRAYING TIES

// The Securitization of the US-China Relationship

The security dimension has long been the most contentious aspect of US-China relations, marked by strategic mistrust, great-power competition and several flashpoints in East Asia. Until recently, these tensions were moderated by much warmer and closer economic ties, civil society exchanges in business, education, academia, culture and tourism, as well as shared interests in globalization and trade. However, recent moves by the US and Chinese governments to “securitize” the previously cooperative aspects of their relationship have fundamentally altered this dynamic and greatly increased the likelihood of a permanent confrontation between the two great powers.



At eye level? The Chinese and US governments' security policies follow similar patterns (Photo: Wikimedia Commons).

by **Pascal Abb**

One of the most worrying geopolitical trends in a year that has seen no shortage of candidates is the rapid and seemingly unstoppable deterioration of China-US relations. Tensions had already been running high for several years, but flared further over issues like the handling of the coronavirus pandemic, the Hong Kong protests and subsequent crackdown, 5G equipment, and lately even comparatively innocuous social media platforms. Outright hostility and scorn now dominate official diplomatic statements by both sides, with few

traces left of earlier commitments to shared interests and “win-win” cooperation.

Some observers had long expected an eventual confrontation between both sides based on fundamentally incompatible interests between rising and declining powers, with tensions inescapably mounting as both sides get closer to parity. In its most recent and influential formulation, this situation has been described as a “Thucydides trap”, after the eponymous Athenian general’s account of his state’s conflict with Sparta.¹

An almost equally fundamental, but less structurally determined conflict exists between the high-level political agendas of both governments. In this view, Trump’s “America First” approach and its focus on reducing trade deficits, protecting a national manufacturing base and reducing global governance commitments is the direct antithesis of Xi Jinping’s vision of a globally connected China, remaking a globalized world in its image as its influence extends across a network of “Belt and Road” links.

Missing from this list are the issues that had previously been expected to spark a confrontation, like the flashpoints in Taiwan, Korea and China’s maritime boundary. Still, security considerations are very much at the forefront of deteriorating China-US relations, but the problem lies mainly in their extension to fields that previously allowed for positive interactions – a process described as “securitization”. Both countries have been actively cutting back on ties that bind, by forcibly closing consulates and cultural offices, expelling journalists, cracking down on academic and student exchanges, and banning each other’s tech companies while

Securitization

- Securitization is the act of interpreting a political issue primarily or exclusively as a security concern. Compared with other frequently-used frames, e.g. the pursuit of growth or mutually profitable international partnerships, viewing an issue from this angle usually results in significantly different assessments of risks and appropriate policy responses, seeking to minimize potential danger.
- To be successful, securitization requires consensus-building between political actors and the general public. This process can be observed by studying the rhetorical frames actors use to describe the issue and possible solutions.
- Securitization can be highly problematic by limiting the number of actors who are authorized to deal with an issue, restricting debates over policy alternatives, and tarnishing advocates of these positions as naive or even malicious.

exhorting their own to retrench at home. Positive civil society connections across these fields were supposed to balance out the growing strategic distrust at the top level. Now, they seem to be the first casualties in a process described as “strategic decoupling” – severing links that are seen to benefit the adversary more than oneself, and urging third countries to follow suit.

A Cold War in Technology?

This trend has played out most prominently in technology and innovation, where since 2015, China has followed an ambitious plan to become a world leader in key technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous systems, telecommunications and next-generation computing. This policy quickly became a bone of contention with the US and other developed countries. The main concerns were that unfair advantages enjoyed by Chinese tech companies – state subsidies, forced intellectual property transfer, denial of market access to foreign competitors in China, and even industrial espionage – would, if left unchecked, eventually allow them to dominate these fields.

Due to the dual-use potential of such technologies in military as well as civilian applications, US policymakers have increasingly viewed this competition through a national security lens.² This has been an especially big concern under the Trump administration, which made it a strategic priority to shore up a domestic manufacturing base and increasingly identified “economic security” as a fundamental building block of national security. This view can be found in the most recent US National Security Strategy (NSS)

published in 2017, as well as in public statements by key advisers like Peter Navarro, often in the context of framing China as an explicit threat to American security.³

Both this definition of security, and the policies designed to safeguard it, have steadily become more expansive. This can be clearly seen in the most recent US moves against Chinese tech companies: the campaign against Huawei, once focused on its evasion of sanctions against third countries and pressure on allies to exclude its equipment from 5G infrastructure, has now escalated to a ban on any supplies designed with the help of US technology – essentially severing its micro-processor supply lines and putting its survival at risk.⁴ The US ban on the video-sharing platform TikTok, followed soon after with a similar move against the all-purpose messenger WeChat, targeted internationally successful Chinese apps whose connection to national security is even more tenuous. User data privacy is a different concern, but their Chinese parent companies had complied with stringent requirements during the US roll-out and no significant breaches have yet been reported. This is characteristic for an attitude in which the mere possibility of security disadvantages outweighs potential benefits elsewhere, and can be used to justify actions deeply at odds with liberal economic principles. Moreover, with its move against TikTok (and its parent ByteDance), the US is punishing exactly the kind of company that most resembles the Silicon Valley archetype of private-sector innovators, rather than the state-owned or highly politically connected “national champions” held to be characteristic for China’s innovation system. Accordingly, these bans were registered in China as an enforcement of US technological hegemony by cracking down on globally competitive Chinese offerings, further strengthening the narrative that the US is seeking to prevent China’s rise.⁵

Securitizing and Severing Civil Society Ties

Beyond the high-profile tech war, the broader securitization trend has also affected numerous civil society ties between both countries. In January, the US Peace Corps announced it would end its China program, under which more than a thousand volunteers had travelled to rural China mainly as English teachers. Despite the organization’s independence, political pressure by Republican senators and a direct intervention from the National Security Council reportedly prevailed in forcing this decision.⁶ Many graduates of the program had used it as a stepping stone for China-focused careers in academia, business or the foreign service, a pipeline that will now be lost. Confucius Institutes on US campuses, already under fire for seeking to influence the curricula of their host universities, have

now been designated as Chinese “foreign missions”, increasing documentation requirements and probably leading more hosts to reconsider their arrangements.⁷ New visa restrictions on Chinese students and researchers are likely to disrupt previously booming enrolment and may even force many out of the country altogether.⁸ All of these decisions have been justified on national security grounds, either directly in the respective announcements or in statements made by their political proponents.

These moves are not just evidence of a much more expansive definition of national security, they are also striking in how closely they have come to mirror Chinese thinking on this issue. China’s own approach to security has long been marked by two factors: first, a conflation of national and regime security; and second, a highly ambivalent view of its ties to the outside world. On the one hand, the latter are necessary to drive domestic development and regain international status; on the other, fields ranging from academia to culture are regarded as potential entryways for destabilizing foreign influences.⁹ These concerns have been used to justify the tight control, and sometimes outright severing, of civil society links at the hands of the government.

Likewise, the goal of maintaining ideological hegemony over the Chinese information space has led to a conception of “internet sovereignty” that extends to

the physical separation of network infrastructure, the banning of platforms outside of Chinese control, and widespread censorship and manipulation of the remaining content.¹⁰ However, the previous principled opposition of the US to such moves and its advancement of a different, much more open vision for internet governance makes it striking that its current policy seems to follow very similar premises.

A similar point can be made over the economic security concept at the heart of the 2017 NSS. In the late 1990s, Chinese scholars had begun to advance a very similar framework that was named identically, explored many of the same concerns and shared the overall view that strategic competition between states would ultimately be settled through an economic-technological race.¹¹ Specifically suggested policies, like building and protecting a national innovation base, or developing independent world-class capabilities in the IT sector, both inspired China’s subsequent innovation strategy and are now being mirrored in US security policy.

This bilateral dynamic is a particularly troubling aspect of securitization, since it creates an imperative to match the other side’s policies or risk a competitive disadvantage. By simultaneously embracing this line of thinking, the US and China have entered a new kind of security dilemma, marked by a technological rather than a military arms race. Clashes over fundamental-



Tit for tat: the forced closure of US and Chinese consulates is one of many symptoms of fraying bilateral ties (Photo: David J. Philip/AP Photo, © picture alliance).

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ly incompatible political agendas and visions of world orders may have contributed to the unfolding US-China confrontation, but this is an aspect in which their increasing similarity is the problem.

A “New Normal” in US-China Relations?

Will this shift be permanent, or could the US-China relationship be restored to its previous dynamic? One reason for cautious optimism is that the sources of the current antagonism are not entirely (or even primarily) structural in nature. Securitization, and the interpretation of what “national security” entails, is a political act, and political leaders could reverse these choices. Such a shift may be triggered by a victory of Democratic candidate Joe Biden in the upcoming US presidential elections. However, statements by the candidate himself and advisers who are expected to occupy key positions in his administration make it doubtful if they would implement such a turnabout. In stating that “economic security is national security”, describing China as an economic threat, and calling for an innovation strategy with the explicit purpose of “winning the competition for the future against China”, Biden has echoed Trump and the 2017 NSS verbatim.¹² Meanwhile, Biden campaign advisers have proposed a detailed China strategy similarly centered on shoring up US technological leadership, using economic leverage to force Chinese compliance on trade and other norms, and selective decoupling.¹³ They do, however, depart from the Trump administration’s approach in understanding competition as restricted to specific issues, rather than all-pervasive, and urging broader

alliances with other developed economies to confront China.

This emerging consensus is characteristic of successful securitization, especially against the backdrop of great-power tensions. In an electoral environment in which three quarters of Americans (and two thirds of Democrats) now view China unfavorably, committing to a hawkish stance is a political imperative regardless of party affiliation.¹⁴ While dissenting voices still exist,¹⁵ and while it is unlikely that China-US tensions will ultimately resemble those seen during the Cold War, a new confrontative dynamic is now firmly established. Even a milder variant of decoupling will still result in significant pressure on third countries to choose between their economic and security relationships with the two giants. In any case, smaller states seeking to navigate this “new normal” will have to adjust for an environment in which securitized US-China relations are a permanent feature, driven by strategic elites in both countries and across party lines.

References:

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