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European Hub
for Contemporary China

July 2024

China 'under siege': How the US's hard- ening China policy is seen in Beijing

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Co-funded by
the European Union

SUMMARY

-  The emergence of a more contentious China-US rivalry is a result of both Washington's China containment strategy and China's own economic downturn. The relationship between these two great powers, both vying for global influence, is shaped by complex two-way dynamics. China's continued pursuit of its own economic and scientific self-reliance is likely to only further accentuate competition with the US.
-  While much has been written about hardening US perceptions of China, there is limited available analysis on Beijing's own shift in strategic thinking under intensifying China-US competition. This paper aims to highlight the significant changes in Chinese strategic thinking and their implications for Beijing's US policy.
-  The paper concentrates on four particularly thorny issues - the struggle over the global order, economic security, regional flashpoints including Taiwan and the South China Sea, and the war in Ukraine - that reflect the breadth of contestation between the two countries and their increasingly fraught relationship.
-  Despite the centralization of foreign policy decision-making under Xi Jinping, Chinese leaders still seek a range of expertise from the country's wider strategic community - including academics, policy experts and former officials - to inform decision-making. As a result, these voices still have perceptible impacts on final policy outcomes.
-  Beijing's US policy is always a product of China's own evaluations of events at home and abroad. So, while Washington's policy to contain China is an important factor in the latter's approach to the US, the more critical components of China's US policy are domestic politics, the country's long-term economic prosperity and, ultimately, national survival.

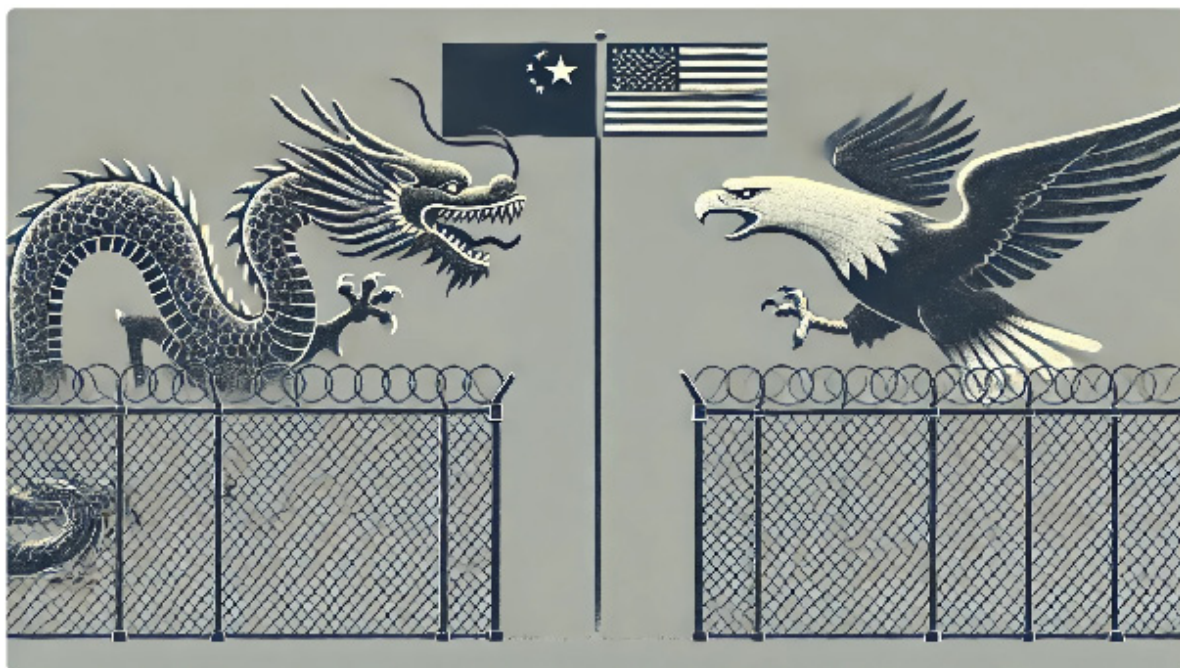
Keywords

China

US Foreign Policy

China's Foreign
Relations

China's Domestic
Politics



Introduction

The hardening of US policy towards China in recent years has largely been framed by America and its allies as a response to economic and political changes in Beijing implemented by Xi Jinping, the Chinese president and general secretary of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC). But the relationship between these two great powers vying for global influence is much more complicated and is shaped by complex two-way dynamics. While much has been written in international relations circles about changing US perceptions of China, there has been much less analysis of the shift in Beijing's own strategic thinking under intensifying US–China competition. Some influential Chinese academics and policy experts have long expected, and some even desired, an era-defining showdown with the US. But, even with the centralization of power and the further erosion of space for public debate under President Xi, until recently, there was still a relatively broad discussion within China's strategic community – policymakers, influential academics and those associated with the People's Liberation Army – about the space for co-existence and cooperation with the US.

Some in Beijing's policy circles hoped that the election of US President Joe Biden in 2020 might herald a softening of the confrontational China policy of his predecessor, Donald Trump. However, those hopes have been dashed as President Biden has pursued a similarly tough China policy, executed in a more sophisticated, coordinated and substantive manner. As a result, the predominant view in Beijing has shifted from a sense of cautious optimism that China can bide its time in a long-term, low-intensity rivalry with the US to a bleaker assessment that, as Xi himself has stated, the country faces 'protracted competition' with the US.[1] The Biden administration says that it is not seeking to 'contain' China or launch a new Cold War. However, Beijing sees clear evidence of a containment strategy in Washington's

intensifying efforts to maintain its own technological supremacy, curb China's access to global markets and build a coalition of allies to tackle the 'China challenge'.

Decision-making in Beijing does not take place in a vacuum. This sense of China being 'under siege' will shape Beijing's future policies, as it prepares for long-term enmity with the world's largest economy. In a similar way to the call by Christopher Wray, the director of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, for a 'whole-of-society' response to what he termed the 'China threat', China's policymaking towards the US has now become a 'whole-of-country' approach beyond the realm of foreign affairs, which involves stakeholders and resources across the country.[2] Policy initiatives such as 'dual circulation'[3] as well as those aimed at scientific self-reliance and boosting the values of Chinese exports are all parts of the response to the perception that Washington is pursuing containment.

Although Chinese policy debates about the US span many subject areas, this paper concentrates on four particularly thorny issues that reflect the breadth of contestation between the two countries and the increasing inflexibility of Chinese views of the US: the struggle over the global order, economic security, regional flashpoints including Taiwan and the South China Sea, and the war in Ukraine. Despite the centralization of power under Xi, the leadership of the CPC still turns to a small array of influential academics and policy experts for advice. By critically examining their writing and analysis, it is possible to better understand the shifting direction and contours of Chinese foreign policy and how it is changing in response to hardening China policies across Washington's network of allies and partners.

Evaluating the nuances of China's US policy remains a fraught task. The Chinese political system is at its most opaque when it comes to foreign affairs priorities. As the space for debate within China has shrunk, it is inevitable that outsiders assume that the political elites and strategists speak with one voice regarding the US. But the analysis here of the public remarks of Chinese leaders, opinion pieces in the media, and academic and think-tank publications shows that there is still a range of views, even if this range is narrowing.

This paper attempts to answer three vital questions across the four issue areas discussed here: 1) to what extent has the Chinese political elite changed its view of the US?; 2) what are the key factors in driving those changes?; and, 3) who are the established and emerging players shaping China's policymaking towards the US? In addition, the paper will offer an early assessment of how Beijing might perceive a possible return of Donald Trump as the 47th president of the United States (see Box 1).

The research here draws on a combination of selected recent influential publications of top Chinese strategists, official remarks, state-media editorials and private conversations with leading Chinese and Western strategists. While there are many Chinese voices commenting on the country's relationship with the US, this paper focuses on those who

exert policy influence, either through direct access to senior leaders or through indirect channels, such as by shaping public opinion through media appearances and articles.

Centralizing foreign policy under Xi Jinping

The ruling communist party is omnipresent in decision-making across China's political apparatus. The all-powerful politburo provides the strategic overview and long-term policy goals of Beijing's external affairs, including its relationship with the US. Under President Xi, Beijing's foreign policymaking has evolved from a more pluralistic approach - with various ministries and agencies partially shaping the final decision - into a form of centralized decision-making by President Xi and his lieutenants within the politburo.

As a result, the renamed Central Foreign Affairs Commission, currently headed by veteran diplomat Wang Yi, is now the chief coordinating body for matters related to China's foreign affairs decisions and deliberation.[4] As Xi pointed out in his own speech at the end of 2023, 'We must unswervingly uphold the CPC central leadership's ultimate authority over foreign affairs'.[5] This was on the occasion of the party's Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs. Such a gathering was the third held under Xi Jinping's leadership, with earlier iterations held in 2014 and 2018. All three convenings are a clear sign that key Chinese foreign affairs decisions, including the country's US policy, are no longer determined by the State Council, which reports to the national congress. Instead, it is now the most senior leaders in the communist party central committee that make these decisions.[6] As such, ministries with foreign affairs portfolios that report to the central committee have begun to hold significant sway in shaping Beijing's ties with the US.

"President Xi's view on China-US relations has shifted from a sense of triumphalism with a belief in the global power shift towards China in 2019 to a more sober evaluation over the last three years."

President Xi's approach to foreign affairs and to China-US ties is one of the critical components for gauging Beijing's present policy towards the US. His view on China-US relations has also shifted from a sense of triumphalism with a belief in the global power shift towards China in 2019 to a more sober evaluation over the last three years. Such a fundamental transformation in Chinese outlook is also a direct response to the pursuit of what Beijing sees as a China containment strategy by two successive US presidents.

He Yiting – who is a close adviser to President Xi on party ideology and the deputy dean of the Central Party School of the CPC, where senior Chinese officials are trained – first alerted Chinese leaders to the drastic changes in external attitudes to China. Although he noted that a more limited 'period of strategic

opportunity'[7] still existed for the country, in a commentary published in the People's Daily.[8] His view marked a deepening sense of anxiety among senior party leaders, most notably President Xi himself, on Beijing's volatile relationship with Washington.

Between 2021 and 2022, Xi's own assessment of China's external environment became even starker, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Xi and Chen Yixin, who is the secretary general of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Committee of the CPC central committee, openly referred to 'three severe shocks' – the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic recession and intense economic competition with the US – and suggested America's containment strategy is likely to lead to a protracted war with China.[9] In October 2022, during the 20th party congress, Xi completely abandoned the 'new type of great power relations' concept that had previously been used in political strategies, first under Hu Jintao, as an approach to avoid conflict.[10]

The omission of this established concept shows that Beijing has concluded that its fraught relationship with the collective West is here to stay, with little prospect of improvement soon. To mitigate the impact of this deteriorating relationship, China needs to prepare for the worst of decoupling its economy from the West and, at the same time, become more self-reliant in terms of markets and technologies.

Perhaps Xi hinted his clearest thinking on China's relations with the US on 6 March 2023. During Beijing's annual 'Two Sessions',[11] Xi offered his most honest view on China's co-existence with the US and the wider collective West: 'Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China. This has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development'.[12] His own evaluation of China's external environment has shifted from relatively positive to more pessimistic amid a protracted war in Ukraine and the ongoing challenges for China's economy because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also the first time President Xi openly named the US as the leading force in containing China's rise.

The enduring importance of China's strategic community

Even with more centralized foreign policymaking in China, Xi and other top leaders still need to turn to experts within the country's strategic community for advice. While these advisers are more wary of the consequences of dissent than in recent years there is still a varied range of views within this group. This paper uses a common definition of China's strategic community, which is made up of academics, policy experts, former officials and ex-military personnel who directly advise the Chinese central government or the ruling communist party. Unlike the familiar China hands in the US strategic community, their Chinese equivalents often keep a low profile in international media. Within China's strategic community, there are three main groups. The first group consists of scholars from some

of China's most prestigious universities and research institutes affiliated with the central government – to name a few, Wang Jisi and Jia Qingguo at Peking University, Da Wei at Tsinghua University and Wu Xinbo from Fudan University. They have all advised Chinese political elites on elements of foreign affairs through various channels or by sitting on the external advisory committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The second group consists of retired senior diplomats that served in G20 countries and international organizations who are actively participating in the decision-making process by providing advice to senior Chinese leaders. Examples include former ambassador Cui Tiankai, who was Beijing's representative in the US for eight years, and former ambassador Wu Hongbo, who served as undersecretary general of the United Nations.

The third group consists of those who have formerly served in China's military. Many of these former officers believe that despite intensifying competition with the US, China holds the upper hand as both sides seek 'a fragile balance' in the relationship.[13] Retired major general, Professor Jin Yinan – who is not a US specialist but is closely associated with the Central Military Commission and taught at the National Defense University in Beijing – is one of the main advocates of this position.

Key issues for the China–US relationship

The struggle for the global order

There is broad consensus within the Chinese strategic community that the core drivers of Beijing's deteriorating relationship with Washington cannot be reversed. However, influential scholars and policy practitioners differ widely on whether the US is in terminal decline and whether the global order is shifting in China's favour. There are three main schools of thought in regard to the changing relative positions of China and the US in the global order.

The first can be categorized as 'international pessimists', this includes those who tend to travel regularly to the West and frequently discuss these issues with their Western peers. They seek to persuade the Chinese leadership that it should take a more measured approach to the US, based on an assessment of enduring US power. This group includes some of the country's most prominent international relations scholars. They tend to argue that US decline is likely to be very gradual in nature, possibly nonlinear, and is less predictable as Washington acclimatizes to a more multipolar world.

A good example is Yan Xuetong, professor in international relations at Tsinghua University, one of China's leading research institutions, and secretary general for the World Peace Forum, a security meeting backed by the Chinese government. As one of the most influential Chinese strategic thinkers, Yan has consistently argued that 'the US decline is only in relative terms and such a decline might not always develop as China expects'.[14]

Another prominent strategic thinker, Professor Zhu Feng at Nanjing University, a leading specialist on US foreign policy, who directly advises the Chinese government on South China Sea matters and security aspects of China–US relations, has presented a stark narrative that challenges the perceived view of US decline. Most notably, his view on China–US relations has shifted from being relatively favourable to a more pessimistic assessment of ‘qualitative change and protracted chill’ between Beijing and Washington.[15] His change of outlook on Sino-US relations mirrors how the political elites in Beijing have come to view their Washington counterparts in the last few years.

“As one of the most influential Chinese strategic thinkers, Yan has consistently argued that ‘the US decline is only in relative terms and such a decline might not always develop as China expects’.”

The second school of thought emerges from experts in China’s government-affiliated think-tanks. They can be categorized as ‘cautious optimists’. They tend to explicitly assert that the US is in steady decline, resulting not only from China’s rise but also because of the growing political polarization within the US. They accept that competition will remain a permanent feature of Sino-US relations, but they equally advocate for the two sides to break the traditional security dilemma to find a path of peaceful co-existence.

For example, Dr Fu Mengzi, deputy director at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a prominent Beijing-based foreign affairs think-tank affiliated with the security apparatus of the Chinese government, falls into this category. In a long piece published in the Journal of National Security Studies, he made a strong case arguing that while the two sides might not be able to resolve their fundamental security dilemma any time soon, Beijing and Washington could find common ground pursuing elements of global human security – such as anti-drug campaigns, anti-piracy campaigns, and initiatives to tackle climate change and food security.[16]

Likewise, his colleague Dr Chen Wenxin, who is director of American studies at CICIR, argued that the relative decline of the US and the rise of China have driven the two countries towards a period of ‘strategic stalemate’. This ‘stalemate’ can serve as an important prerequisite of peaceful coexistence. But it can also break down because of ongoing conflicts over economic and military power.[17]

The third school of thought can be categorized as the ‘ultra optimists’. Most of them are not US foreign policy specialists unlike in the previous two groups, but they have a triumphalist view of China’s global role. They firmly believe that Beijing can and will outcompete the US because of China’s increasing economic power, unique political system, military might and technological prowess.

One such 'optimist' is Professor Zhang Weiwei from Fudan University in Shanghai, who is a social media influencer with millions of followers. He has been a leading figure in arguing that the US is in permanent decline and that the global power shift is travelling towards China. In 2021, he gave a lecture on China's global communication strategy and the positive presentation of China's own narrative to politburo members.[18] In his regular social media appearances, he often bluntly dismisses the 'end of history' argument – the idea that liberal democracy has defeated other forms of government, such as fascism and communism after the Cold War – asserting that 'both hard and soft power of the United States are declining significantly, and the world is destined towards a "post-America supremacy era"'. [19]

Other pundits such as retired Major General Dai Xu, who served in the People's Liberation Army and taught military strategy at the National Defense University in Beijing, has also echoed the view of US decline and argued, 'Beijing should not be scared by the renewed strategic pressure from the US in regional flash points, one must let the US know that China should not be bullied'. [20]

Judging from these three diverse viewpoints, it is rather difficult to conclude which school of thought is prevailing and shaping the country's policy and influencing senior leadership. Beijing's current US policy is influenced by all three perspectives. Chinese leaders are navigating a volatile external environment compounded by a domestic economic downturn, which sometimes drives Beijing to seek to lower the temperature with Washington and its neighbouring countries. At other times, Chinese leaders seek to turn up the rhetoric about the US, in order to pin the blame for China's woes on Washington.

Economic security and technological rivalry

Although China has been promoting economic and technological self-reliance for at least a decade, the country has intensified this push in response to the expanding technological and industrial restrictions implemented by the Trump and Biden administrations. Unlike the past diplomatic lexicon created by Beijing to spin a positive light on Sino-US relations, senior officials in China quietly dropped the notion that 'the economic and trade ties serve as a stabilizer for [China's] ties with the US'. [21] The Chinese strategic community has rallied around this push to counter what is seen as an attempt by Washington to choke off China's access to the technologies of the future and stall its development.

Both scholars and retired senior diplomats from Beijing have extensively criticized Washington's ever more stringent export controls on semiconductor, critical raw material and quantum computing sectors. [22] Most notably, the former Chinese ambassador Cui Tiankai attacked the 'small yard, high fence' strategy [23] asserted by Jake Sullivan, the US national security advisor, as 'looking at the sky from the bottom of a well', a Chinese idiom to reprimand those who are blinded by their own world view. [24]

Scholars have also debated whether China can overcome restrictions and catch up with the US on high-end technology. One example is Li Wei, a professor of international relations at the politically influential Renmin University, where he leads the Center for American Studies and publishes extensively on China–US relations, particularly economic security issues. He recognizes the severe challenges posed by the intense US focus on slowing down China’s tech advancements.[25] But rather than doubling down on self-reliance, he has argued that Beijing must find the right balance between government-led innovation and market innovation. He compared the situation to the arms race between the US and Soviet Union, and he warned that innovation cannot happen exclusively within an economically independent country or led by the state, it requires international talent to flow and market-induced investments in science and technology.[26]

While some nationalistic commentators have called for China to take retaliatory measures against the US, there has been extensive debate within the strategic community about the need for a smarter response. One approach that has been regularly discussed, and is being implemented by Beijing, is to build a wider trade and critical materials supply chain network with other regions to counter US efforts to isolate China in technological and industrial terms.

The second proposed approach is to maintain a balance in investments between state-owned companies and the private sector in frontier technologies such as AI, quantum computing and semiconductors. This runs counter to the state-led innovation system that has been deeply embedded in China’s pursuit of scientific self-reliance under Xi.

Regional flashpoints: Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea

For both China and the US, disputes over Taiwan and the South China Sea are the thorniest and most risk-laden issues in the bilateral relationship. The Chinese strategic community blames recent increased tension in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea on the governments of the US, Taiwan and the Philippines for upsetting the status quo and furthering their bilateral cooperation.

Taiwan Strait

Despite speculation from some US political and military leaders and international media outlets, public sources in China do not suggest that Beijing is preparing a military escalation across the Taiwan Strait with any specific date.[27] However, members of the Chinese strategic community consider the current situation with the incumbent pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government increasingly unsustainable and precarious, requiring stronger deterrence actions to send warnings to both Taipei and Washington.

The US is also taking a similar deterrence-centred approach to the cross-strait relationship.

It is therefore clear that aspects of confrontation over Taiwan are well established, and may well worsen unless the two sides can agree on a crisis-prevention framework to reduce misunderstandings.

Overall, statements from Chinese leaders and government policy documents on Taiwan have been consistent in advocating China's position, even before President Xi Jinping came to power. There has been remarkable consistency over the last 20 years between different iterations of Beijing's two most important political planning documents, namely the National Congress Political Report of the CPC and the Chinese State Council Government Work Report. Both documents include one or two paragraphs on the topic of Taiwan for each edition. The standard wording is something like:

We will adhere to the major principles and policies on work related to Taiwan, uphold the one-China principle, and promote the peaceful growth of relations across the Taiwan Strait. We will resolutely oppose and deter any separatist activities seeking 'Taiwan Independence'.

Although critical elements of Beijing's Taiwan policy have not shifted fundamentally under President Xi Jinping's stewardship, two new aspects have emerged in the last few years. The first noticeable element is the explicit link being made between reunification with Taiwan and Xi's 'China Dream' and planned national rejuvenation by 2049.[28] Yet, Xi's two predecessors also made similar remarks. For example, President Jiang Zemin stated in 2002 that 'China will be reunified, and the Chinese nation will be rejuvenated'.[29]

The second noticeable feature is the growing sense of urgency to deter pro-independence supporters and the sharp criticism of 'separatists' inside Taiwan, as Xi and his lieutenants have made several official comments on various occasions – particularly after Nancy Pelosi, at the time speaker of the US House of Representatives, visited Taipei. Both changes reflect Xi's own belief that there has been a serious deterioration of the Sino-US relationship. Related to this shift, Chinese leaders and official media use coded vocabulary, such as 'external forces', to criticize US interference in matters related to Taiwan under both the Trump and Biden administrations.

Beyond official rhetoric and statements, state media editorials serve as a useful window into Beijing's position on the cross-strait relationship. These editorials are often blunt and tend to be more confrontational than public statements and official speeches. For example, Zhong Sheng, a pseudonym that literally means the 'voice of China', is named as the author of People's Daily editorials that focus on China-US relations and China's position on Taiwan. Under this name, the People's Daily runs editorial pieces periodically when there have been major issues or disputes between Beijing and Washington.

“Beyond official rhetoric and statements, state media editorials serve as a useful window into Beijing’s position on the cross-strait relationship.”

In the last three years, Zhong Sheng has commented on the China–US–Taiwan triangle dozens of times. In particular, Zhong Sheng published a series of commentaries to reprimand Nancy Pelosi’s trip to Taiwan and directly criticize the US political establishment’s abandonment of what was agreed with Beijing regarding Taiwan in 1979.[30] All of these editorials were vociferously critical of the governing DPP party in Taiwan and the US government.

Overall, Chinese academics that focus on Taiwan have a fairly pessimistic assessment of the current situation. Apart from stating official lines, some scholars have also argued that so-called ‘peaceful reunification’ will only happen under a degree of coercion either in economic or military terms.

For example, Professor Zuo Xiyong, at Renmin University’s School of International Relations, noted that, ‘the key feature of the trilateral relationship between Mainland China, the United States and Taiwan is that uncertainty is rising, and the probability of conflict is increasing.’[31] In agreement with this position, Dr Li Yan, another specialist focused on China, US and Taiwan dynamics, made a similar case in 2021.[32]

One commentator who has millions of followers on Chinese social media platforms went even further. Hu Xijin, the former Global Times editor-in-chief, stated that reunification, ‘must be based on the condition that the DPP authority feels cornered and will perish if they do not accept reunification’.[33]

While Chinese official statements about Taiwan scarcely mention how the changing power balance across the Taiwan Strait influences Chinese actions, the conviction of Chinese media commentators is that Beijing’s increasing military capability and regional influence means that time is on China’s side. In contrast, Chinese scholars express a clear sense of pessimism and believe peaceful unification will only happen when coupled with some form of coercion. Careful observation of such scholarly views, which might eventually translate into a policy blueprint for Beijing, offers particular value and insight for those monitoring the situation in the Taiwan Strait.

South China Sea

China’s position on the South China Sea is one of assertiveness, primarily driven by its historical claims and strategic interests in breaking out of ‘the first island chain’.[34] China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, demarcated by what is now known as the ‘ten-dash line’, which extends hundreds of miles south and east from the

country's southernmost province.[35] The country's activities in the South China Sea include a number of grey zone tactics, such as the construction of artificial islands, military installations and the declaration of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the area. These actions have raised tensions with neighbouring countries, most notably with the Philippines, which has competing claims over parts of the South China Sea.[36]

This ongoing dispute dates back to the second term of the Obama administration and has now become a permanent security irritant between China, several Southeast Asian countries and the US. Through its active military network in the Indo-Pacific and treaty alliance with the Philippines, the US is intricately linked to this tense situation.

When Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. was elected as president of the Philippines in 2022, Beijing presumed that he would continue to tilt towards China in line with his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte.[37] However, it soon became evident that Marcos was conducting a foreign policy U-turn and looking to boost the country's alliance with Washington. From Manila, the perception of a maritime threat is ever present. China's seizure of Mischief Reef in 1994–95 and Scarborough Shoal in 2012 is deeply embedded as an injustice in the collective memory of the Philippines. Marcos is determined to prevent a similar situation in the Second Thomas Shoal.

However, what really worries Beijing is recent US moves to strengthen its alliance with the Philippines in regard to Taiwan, while deepening coordination with other US allies such as Japan and Australia. The further involvement of US allies has only worsened Chinese fears of an opposing bloc formation. Wu Shicun, one of the most influential specialists on the South China Sea in the Chinese strategic community, lamented that, 'Washington has conducted the most effective alliance building by playing the South China Sea and Taiwan cards simultaneously, it is a major disruption to China's relations with ASEAN'.[38]

A fear of encirclement by the US has emboldened China to be more assertive. In doing so, Beijing has further toughened its diplomatic rhetoric by directly suggesting that, 'China will not tolerate the Philippines's futile challenge, and therefore, will respond in kind'.[39] Meanwhile, China has also increased the intensity of grey zone activities ranging from coastguard patrols to increased artificial island construction in recent years. None of these activities has directly targeted the US Navy. Instead, the focal point remains to deter activities launched by US regional allies.

Judging from the rhetoric and public statements from Beijing, China's priorities are to articulate its position on South China Sea sovereignty and intimidate and threaten Southeast Asian countries, mostly the Philippines, which seek to challenge Beijing claims in the region. Similar to Taiwan, there is no clear timeline or favoured method for when and how Beijing will fully take over the South China Sea. Such ambiguity should not be read as China's

willingness to make a concession to the US or the Philippines. Beijing does not want to corner itself through its rhetoric and would like to have other options to assert its claims over the South China Sea, if the time and conditions are right.

A Chinese scholar associated with the People's Liberation Army, Professor Li Chen, who is emerging as one of Beijing's most influential experts on China-US military ties, recently led several of Beijing's Track 1.5 dialogues between the two militaries. In 2020, Li noted that, 'due to the lack of clear parameters for each other's military activities in the South China Sea, both sides should upgrade their competition management mechanism as China and the United States have not yet found each other's bottom line on South China Sea matters.'^[40]

The war in Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has presented three intertwined challenges to Beijing's diplomatic priorities. First, China's support for Russia contradicts the former's traditional policy of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs. Second, China values its closer relationship with Russia resulting from the war, particularly as both countries share concerns about perceived Western encroachment and resentment towards the US hegemony. Third, and most challenging, is how Beijing can balance its economic and diplomatic support for Russia with its desire to maintain stable relations with the US and Europe, which are China's two main trading partners.

"The key aim of Beijing's approach is to prevent a sustained, simultaneous deterioration of its ties with the US and Europe. Yet, its damage limitation efforts have not been very convincing in Washington and European capitals."

Since February 2022, Beijing made several attempts to justify its position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and communicated this with US and European leaders. The key aim of Beijing's approach is to prevent a sustained, simultaneous deterioration of its ties with the US and Europe. Yet, its damage limitation efforts have not been very convincing in Washington and European capitals. Chinese leaders and diplomats have attempted to deflect US criticism of China and the accusation of Beijing providing military support to Moscow. For example, Qin Gang, the former Chinese ambassador to the US, wrote a piece for the Washington Post on 14 March 2024 explaining that China's position was an example of Beijing's efforts to differentiate itself from Moscow.^[41] However, all of Beijing's explanations have stoked a sense of deep mistrust between China and the US. In the eyes of Chinese officials, it was the US and US-led NATO that provoked Russia, using Ukraine as a proxy to weaken Russia.^[42]

The Chinese strategic community has also intensely debated the three challenges related to the war in Ukraine. The subject has raised many questions that have proven difficult

to answer, including: to what extent can China support Russia and maintain stable ties with both the US and Europe, while not facing secondary sanctions from the collective West? When and how will the war end? Should China play a more active mediation role between Russia and Ukraine given the current stalemate on the battlefield?[43]

But opinions are divided on the fundamental questions of whether China should align with Russia and what the likely repercussions would be for China's ties with the US and Europe. Arguments by the academics Feng Yujun and Sun Zhuangzhi are a good example of the contrasting views. The former is a professor at Peking University, who recently published a long commentary in the Economist, which argued that China should not get any closer to Russia, as this will increase strategic pressure on China's neighbours and unite the West more than ever.[44] Meanwhile, Sun Zhuangzhi, who is the director of the Russia and Eurasia Institute at the state-affiliated Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), advocated closer ties between Beijing and Moscow as he believes that Russia is merely addressing its own justifiable grievances against a US-led NATO over the last decade.[45]

As Beijing focuses on damage limitation, the US is keen to limit the extent to which China can support Russia, particularly with respect to substantive military assistance. Washington has continued to send warnings to Beijing with a threat of imposing secondary sanctions against Chinese companies and financial institutions that have close relationships with Russia. Repeated strongly worded warnings from a string of US senior officials over the last two years has increased the level of strain and mistrust in this fragile China-US relationship.[46]

Diplomatically, war in Ukraine has firmly united the collective West while straining ties with China. As competition between Beijing and Washington continues, China wishes to avoid a rift with Europe. In order to maintain its diplomatic and trade channels with European capitals, Beijing's main strategy is to reassure Europe that it seeks to restrain the Kremlin from entertaining the idea of deploying nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, Beijing is on a charm offensive with the Global South where many governments do not view this war in black and white moral terms as is more common in the West. So long as the war continues, Beijing will have to navigate through a contradictory set of interests while attempting to prevent the country's bilateral relations with the US from worsening further.

Box 1. China's view of Trump 2.0: transactional but with no bottom line

With the US presidential candidates likely to compete with one another to sound tough on China, Beijing's strategic community does not expect any significant improvement in the Sino-US relationship before the US elections in November 2024.

As the election nears, Chinese strategic experts are contemplating what the possible return of Donald Trump to the White House might mean for their country.

Trump 2.0 is seen with looming dread in Europe, given the former US president's apparent antipathy towards transatlantic allies during his previous term in office. Trump's frequent talk of withdrawing support for Ukraine would be particularly difficult for Europe. Yet for China, the political re-emergence of the former property developer could pave the way for improved relations with Brussels and European nations. China is not necessarily viewed as an existential threat to Europe; rather the country is seen more as a combination of strategic competitor (to a greater degree) and partner (to a limited extent).

Besides the prospect of a possible yet very difficult reconciliation between China and Europe, a second Trump term would bring more unpredictability that could worsen already thorny bilateral issues between China and the US – such as trade, tech export controls and Taiwan. For example, Robert Lighthizer, the US trade representative under the first Trump administration, has already passionately advocated a total decoupling from Beijing irrespective of the consequences.[47] Furthermore, Republican hawks have already proposed formally labelling China as a 'national threat' to the US.

Meanwhile in Beijing, most scholars and senior diplomats have refrained from publicly commenting on the likely return of Donald Trump to avoid being seen to engage in election interference, which might stoke further fears of Beijing in the US Congress.[48] That said, Professor Yan Xuetong's words demonstrate that there is a sense of deep anxiety among the Chinese strategic community, 'a victory for Trump may cause even greater volatility in Sino-US relations from the beginning of 2025'.[49]

With the possible return of Donald Trump, Chinese leaders would likely reinforce the narrative that the US is the single and most disruptive source of global instability, while portraying China as a responsible and confident world power able to stand up to the US hegemony. As Wang Yi, the Chinese foreign minister, stated recently, China's broader global 'proactive diplomacy' is an indication of the country's future role in a world increasingly dominated by China's rivalry with the US. As such, Beijing will continue to try to reshape the global governance agenda both at the bilateral level and at the multilateral level to counter US influence.[50]

For Beijing, the return of Donald Trump might well be a rare opportunity to recalibrate its bilateral relationship with the US, as he is often willing to make deals outside

traditional political parameters. However, his leadership style will cause further anxiety for Chinese leaders as Trump tends to focus on his own interests regardless of the consequences, as was illustrated by the Trump administration ignoring the well-established approach of generations of US and Chinese leaders to Taiwan.

Conclusion

The above analysis has sought to shed light on changes in the views of China's leaders and policymakers towards the US. Overall, the approach of Chinese leaders to the US is hardening as a direct result of Washington's continuous pursuit of a China containment strategy, as well as China's own domestic economic downturn. A reactive cycle is further exacerbating mostly competitive elements of China-US ties, such as in economic security, military capability and global influence.

There are three emerging trends in China's US policy evident from this research paper. Firstly, China's foreign policy decision-making has become more centralized under President Xi Jinping, like all aspects of China's policymaking today. Beijing's US policy has inevitably followed this pattern.

The ruling communist party and President Xi Jinping himself have had decisive roles in Beijing's policy towards the US. President Xi's twin policy priorities of comprehensive national security and self-sufficiency have not only diminished cooperation with the US but also accentuated competition with Washington. Despite the centralization of decision-making, Chinese leaders still seek a range of expertise from the Chinese strategic community to inform decisions. As a result, these experts still have perceptible impacts on the final policy outcomes.

Meanwhile, party-led institutions have become more involved in setting the tone and terms of China-US relations. The group of agencies directly managed by the CPC central committee, such as the International Liaison Department of the CPC and Central Foreign Affairs Commission, are not only implementing foreign policy decisions, as would be the convention, but more importantly they are shaping the direction in which decisions are being made at the highest levels in Beijing.

Linked to the first trend and President Xi's policy priority of achieving self-reliance, the second trend is that, as has happened on the US side, Chinese leaders have deprioritized the typical buffers and stabilizers of the China-US relationship such as trade and investment. The tangible benefits of the China-US relationship in the past, namely trade and investment, have rapidly diminished due to increased commercial competitiveness and Beijing's

decisive pivot from low-end, export-led growth to a high-end manufacturing growth model. China's rapid progress in manufacturing electric vehicles and end-consumer focused semiconductors have now become a source of economic contention rather than a buffer to stabilize bilateral relations with the US.

China feels strongly about the importance of its major technological progress and innovation capability. The country is explicit about its need for technological self-reliance and its desire to become a global champion in certain tech sectors. Efforts to achieve have been severely disrupted by the waves of US sanctions imposed on Chinese tech companies and individuals, with the aim of denting Beijing's innovation ambition.

The third trend is emerging from certain regional flashpoints. Beijing is anxious in regard to US attempts to connect matters in the South China Sea with issues related to Taiwan. At the same time, China's close alignment with Russia in the war in Ukraine has further strained Beijing's relations with Washington.

Taiwan remains the most sensitive subject in bilateral relations. Despite no formal changes of wording in Beijing's political blueprints, on balance Chinese political elites and influential scholars consider the current situation to be precarious with the pro-independence DPP government in Taiwan, which is likely to result in more active Chinese deterrents to confront the Taiwanese government as well as the incoming US president, irrespective of who that is. To avert the worst-case scenario, it is necessary for there to be clear, face-to-face conversations between President Xi and his US counterpart on a regular basis.

With a similar deterrence-centred mind-set dominating in Washington, it is accurate to say that elements for a potential China-US confrontation over the Taiwan Strait are in place. Yet both sides should show more maturity about managing the most sensitive elements in their bilateral relationship to avoid conflict that they would all regret.

Similarly on the South China Sea, Beijing continues to articulate its position on sovereignty in the region and the country remains reluctant to direct its grey zone activities towards the US military. To date, neither China nor the US has established any crisis prevention mechanism, so a local confrontation between Chinese and Filipino fishermen might well precipitate a direct great power conflict between the US and China.

Looking ahead, it would be naive to assume Beijing and Washington can work towards a reconciliation. Clearly, Beijing is unwilling to make any concessions to what it perceives as the US's containment strategy. Yet, their bilateral relationship should not be viewed with excessive pessimism. China's US policy has always been and will continue to be a product of China's own evaluations of what is happening at home and abroad. Despite major changes in China's political landscape under President Xi Jinping, the country's elites will continue

to decide Beijing's US policy based on a balanced examination and deliberation that takes into account China's own national needs. The varied voices of the Chinese strategic community will contribute to this important process.

China's ultimate goal is to ensure that the further erosion of China–US relations does not hinder domestic economic growth, which is key to giving the ruling regime legitimacy. The overall strategy for Beijing to deal with the US is to minimize damage from Washington by maximizing China's economic and political influence in the rest of the world, most notably with large parts of the Global South. Such a move might well buy time for China to speed up its own economic resilience and technology development.

Global foreign policy practitioners outside of Beijing and Washington must pay continuous attention to the China–US dynamic. Only through thoughtful and balanced assessments can countries in the West and Global South formulate effective policies to navigate a world dominated by a strained China–US relationship.

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Co-funded by
the European Union

The project "European Hub for Contemporary China (EuroHub4Sino)" has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 101131737.

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.