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From close cooperation to potential 'cold war': what happened to the U.S.-China relationship?

"The relationship between the U.S. and China has really deteriorated," said Gérard Roland, E. Morris Cox Professor of Economics and professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley. "And it's probably not going to be healed anytime soon."

Introduction

Since President Nixon's historic visit in 1972, U.S.-China relations have been continually evolving. The establishment of formal relations in 1979 was followed by two decades of slow warming, then the watershed decision to admit China to the World Trade Organization in 2001. But soaring trade produced growing unhappiness in the U.S. over trade imbalances, leading TITILE Trump to treat China as the enemy in a trade war.

Now, after four years of the Trump administration, U.S.-China relations have deteriorated to a 21st-century low, culminating in recriminations over Covid-19.

In 1949, after winning the war against the Nationalist government, Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China. As a supporter of the Nationalists, the U.S. did not establish diplomatic relations with China for several decades. After the Korean War broke out, in 1950, China sent troops to North Korea to help fight the U.S. and South Korea when their troops approached the Chinese border. In 1972, Nixon visited China, improving the relations from frozen to a gradually normal status, but progress in relations continued to be slow because of other issues and events, including the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989.

Relations warmed because the U.S. [allowed](#) China to join the WTO in 2001. Normalization of trade relations was significant to China: joining the WTO propelled China's economy into a new era of rapid development. Since then, China's economy and military have continued to grow quickly. In 2008, China became the largest holder of U.S. debt. Two years later, China became the world's second-largest economy.

As the world watched China's fast growth in the last two decades, the U.S. saw a threat. In 2011, the Obama administration announced its "pivot to Asia" – a rebalancing of trade, especially with China. In 2012, the U.S. and its allies accused China of violating international trade norms. That same year, Xi Jinping became president of China, and since then he has consolidated his power.

After Trump was inaugurated in 2017, he led relations into a more confrontational and sensitive stage. The once normal or even good relationship has deteriorated to the current tension, especially in the wake of Trump's trade war and the coronavirus pandemic.

In such a complicated situation, where is the U.S.-China relationship heading?

FIRST PART

From Trump's election to the coronavirus outbreak

Lede:

After Trump won the 2016 election, the two countries' relationship started deteriorating as he tapped into growing anger over Chinese trade practices that he called unfair. In 2018, with the start of the trade war, the relationship turned cold and sensitive.

But even before Trump took office in 2017, there were clues that the relationship would worsen. During Trump's campaign, he vowed to rip up existing trade deals with China.

"We can't continue to allow China to rape our country, and that's what we're doing," he said at a rally in Fort Wayne, Ind., before the election. "It's the greatest theft in the history of the world."

He also said he was very not angry at China, but rather at U.S. leaders. "They are grossly incompetent, and they shouldn't have ever been elected to do this job," he said. "Terrible."

Background

But Trump didn't follow up right after taking office. In February 2017, he expressed support for the [One China policy](#), which insists that Taiwan is part of China. That April, China's Xi visited the U.S. During his meeting with Trump, the U.S. and China achieved a 10-part trade agreement, leading the relationship to "a new high," said Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross.

Even so, the trade war started in earnest in March 2018.

That month, the administration imposed tariffs on at least \$50 million worth of Chinese goods, including clothing, shoes and electronics, indicating that Trump's actual approach to China was what he had said in his campaign: that China was an enemy of the U.S.

But after meeting Xi at the G20 Leaders' Summit in June 2018, Trump announced, "China is going to be buying a tremendous amount of food and agricultural products, and they're going to start that very soon, almost immediately."

"Trump is very opportunistic, and he basically started imposing tariffs," said Gérard Roland, E. Morris Cox Professor of Economics and professor of political science at University of California, Berkeley. "But he hoped to have an agreement with China to kind of stop the trade war. I think that was probably his expectation."

In late 2018, after Vice President Mike Pence said the administration would prioritize tariffs on Chinese goods to defeat "economic aggression" and defeat "growing Chinese military aggression," the Chinese multinational technology giant Huawei became the next target in the trade conflict. In December 2018, Meng Wanzhou, Huawei's chief financial officer, was arrested in Canada on a

U.S. warrant charging her with bank fraud, wire fraud, and conspiracies to commit bank and wire fraud.

The relationship continued to deteriorate in 2019. The Trump administration raised tariffs on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods. China fought back, increasing tariffs on \$60 billion worth of U.S. goods. Meanwhile, the Trump administration banned foreign-made telecommunications equipment that it deemed likely to threaten national security. In addition, pro-democracy actions in Hong Kong since June 2019 have also strained the relationship. After Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which is a U.S. federal law requiring the U.S. to impose sanctions against mainland China and Hong Kong officials considered responsible for human rights abuses in Hong Kong. China imposed sanctions on some U.S. companies, news media and organizations with branches in China. It also suspended U.S. warships' visits to Hong Kong.

In January 2020, the two-year trade war seemed to pause after the two countries signed "Phase One" of a trade deal. By buying an additional \$200 billion in American goods, mainly agriculture products and cars over two years, China had some tariffs removed.

In the trade war, the Chinese economy suffered greatly because the added tariffs hurt China's position as a global manufacturing hub. But American consumers are also victims in this war, since they have to pay higher prices for goods that were cheaper before the added tariffs.

But the relationship between the world's two largest economies didn't have much time to stabilize. Two months after Phase One was signed, coronavirus broke out in the U.S.

SECOND PART

The relationship up to the pandemic

After the January 2020 pause in the trade war, the U.S.-China relationship had a chance to be repaired. But late that month, coronavirus broke out in Wuhan, China, and within weeks spread around the world, hitting the U.S. especially hard by spring. To date, the historic pandemic has caused around 2.04 million deaths, economic recession and even chaos in society.

Amid the pandemic, U.S.-China tensions soared. After a series of actions by the White House, they reached into every corner of the relationship, from travel bans to closed consulates.

Nut graph:

The U.S.-China relationship was heading into its most strained year since 1979 and may even be escalating into another potential cold war. The pandemic is just a trigger; what has significantly worsened the relationship is the narrowing gap between the U.S. and China in economy and military power.

"Coronavirus is only an excuse for worsening the relationship," said an economics professor at a Chinese university who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive political

atmosphere in China. “And the deterioration is reflected in multiple fields, including economy, diplomacy, education and culture.”

List actions:

In early February, the U.S. [banned travelers](#) from multiple countries, including China, to stop the coronavirus from spreading, physically disconnecting.

Later that month, a media war between the U.S. and China began after the U.S. [State Department designated](#) five Chinese media outlets as foreign missions. In response, China expelled three Wall Street Journal reporters. Then the [State Department required](#) five Chinese state media outlets to limit the number of Chinese citizens working for them in the U.S.

The conflicts swelled in March when President Trump first [tweeted](#) the words “Chinese virus.” The day after this tweet, China [expelled](#) American journalists from The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal.

“The relationship got significantly worse,” said Wendong Zhang, assistant professor of economics at Iowa State University, “due to the political bickering regarding the origins and control measures about mitigation measures for the coronavirus.”

“There are a lot of warning signs” for the future, he added.

Then Hong Kong came to the fore of the conflict.

On April 18, Hong Kong police arrested 15 high-profile pro-democracy activists who had participated in large-scale protests last year, and the State Department condemned the arrests. After China passed a new national security law for Hong Kong on June 30 aiming to end Hong Kong’s self-governance, the U.S. [announced](#) it would end exports of U.S.-made defense equipment to Hong Kong and impose the same restrictions on U.S. defense and dual-use technologies on Hong Kong as it does on China. In late May, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a [statement](#): “I certified to Congress today that Hong Kong does not continue to warrant treatment under United States laws in the same manner as U.S. laws were applied to Hong Kong before July 1997,” when the British returned Hong Kong to China after 150 years.

Back in May, there were also conflicts about intellectual property and technology. On May 13, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security [warned](#) organizations researching COVID-19 to be aware that China might have stolen data from the U.S. Two days later, the Commerce Department’s Bureau of Industry and Security [announced](#) plans to ban Huawei from using U.S. technology and software.

In July, the tensions shifted to Xinjiang, Tibet and the South China Sea. After imposing visa restrictions on Chinese government officials involved in banning foreigners’ access to areas of Tibet and violating Muslim Uyghurs’ human rights in [Xinjiang province](#), the State Department also [stated](#) the U.S. position criticizing Beijing’s maritime expansion in the South China Sea. In addition, the Trump administration was considering a [sweeping travel ban](#) on Communist Party

members and their families that, if approved, would widely influence an estimated 270 million people.

Then, on July 22, the U.S. abruptly ordered China to close its consulate in Houston to “protect American intellectual property and American's (sic) private information,” according to State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a [statement](#). A few days later, China closed the U.S. consulate in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, in retaliation.

“Today, we say goodbye to the U.S. consulate in Chengdu.” the U.S. embassy in Beijing on posted on Weibo, a Chinese social medium similar to Twitter. “We will miss you forever.”

The tensions have never stopped rising.

In August, the Trump administration started to bar Chinese companies from using U.S. technology by announcing a [Clean Network](#) program, aiming to safeguard the nation’s assets from intrusions by the Communist Party.

Chinese apps like TikTok and WeChat were the main targets, seen as “untrusted,” in the administration’s word. In a press briefing on Aug. 5, Pompeo said, “With parent companies based in China, apps like TikTok and WeChat and others are significant threats to personal data of American citizens, not to mention tools for Chinese Communist Party content censorship.” The program also restricted the Chinese government from connecting to U.S. telecom networks, including 5G.

In mid-September, TikTok and Oracle reached an agreement under which TikTok would sell its U.S. assets to Oracle. But U.S. Magistrate Judge Laurel Beeler of the Northern District of California blocked WeChat.

“All that is creating a very bad climate,” Roland said. “It's not going to be healed anytime soon.”

The tensions seemed to ease temporarily in October with the U.S. presidential election coming. But experts predicted the relationship would probably remain the same whether Trump or Joe Biden won.

“The general attitudes from the political leadership probably won't change regarding how China is viewed on a global stage,” Zhang said.

2020 was a chaotic year for the U.S.-China relations.

In November, Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election, and his victory was confirmed by Congress on Jan. 7. It is still unknown how Biden will handle the U.S.-China relationship and grapple with all the challenges left behind by the Trump administration. But one thing is sure: the U.S. and China won’t return to their pre-Trump relations. Instead, the two countries see each other more clearly now.

THRID PART

The relationship in the Biden era

President-elect Joe Biden took office on Jan. 20, marking the end of the U.S.-China relationship under Trump's policies. While analysts have said Biden is likely to ally with Western democracies to counter China, it's still unclear how Biden will reconstruct the relationship.

Biden's victory may be good news for China. His administration may be less aggressive than Trump's, and he is already moving to unify America's alliances in Europe and Asia as a champion of democracy. Biden may also change the current situation of "lacking other existing channels for the political sort of dialogue," Zhang said.

As China's economy and military have grown especially strong in recent decades, the gap with the U.S. has narrowed markedly. Xi is much more aggressive than his predecessors and his power more centralized.

No matter what diplomatic policies Biden follows, most Americans are feeling more negative toward China, mainly because of the economic relationship and the pandemic, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center. The U.S. now sees China as a direct competitor and a in both economy and military.

Most experts shared same thoughts that the U.S.-China relationship deems to be colder and colder in a much more competitive era, no matter how the administrations changed.

"Republicans and Democrats have a consensus on fighting China," Zhan said in October. "from the current situation, the consensus including trade, military, culture, and everything will continue."

In fact, the speaking of the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken under Biden's administration conveyed the signal of the U.S.-China relation.

"Increasingly, the US-China relationship has some adversarial aspects to it," he said on his first press conference on Jan 26.

He also highlighted that it was important for the two countries "try to work together."

It is still too early to see how Biden's administration will handle the relationship, but it is obvious that the relationship cannot turn back to before.