

# U.S.-China Relations

HOW SHOULD WASHINGTON RESPOND TO CHINA'S RISE?

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Despite what realist international relations theory might say about the inevitable clash between rising and status quo powers, nothing is preordained that the United States and China will become enemies. In fact, it is profoundly in the interest of both sides to prevent this. Bilateral economic ties are expanding rapidly, as each side relies increasingly on the health of the other for its own economic security. Transnational threats such as drugs, piracy, infectious disease, environmental degradation, and radical jihadism require (at least) bilateral cooperation. The two sides will have a common interest in ensuring adequate global energy supplies, their efficient consumption, and development of clean energy alternatives. Beijing will be consumed with a series of difficult domestic transitions that will require a peaceful international environment, and good relations with the United States in particular, for the foreseeable future. The United States will be focused on threats from rogue regimes, failed or failing states, nonproliferation challenges, a fanatical ideology bent on its destruction, and extricating itself from economic crisis, against which Washington will need substantial international cooperation, including from China.

Meanwhile, growing social and cultural contacts, and educational exchanges help to overcome potential misunderstandings that can breed emotional antagonisms. Indeed, neither side's population is inclined instinctively to view the other as an enemy. Nonetheless, economic integration and social ties are not necessarily enough to prevent official miscalculation, mistrust, clashing interests, or populist emotions on either side from plunging the relationship into crisis, if not conflict, in coming years. Historians will note the example of Europe before World War I as a cautionary tale in this regard.

The rise of China will require a change in the respective psychologies of the two sides to prevent the development of serious tensions in the relationship. Beijing, for instance, can no longer affirm credibly that a foreign policy premised on a desperate need for internal development is a purely domestic matter that does not affect the security of others, particularly when it facilitates the violation of international norms by unsavory regimes. Nor can Beijing aver that its power and influence in international affairs is minimal due to a "developing world" self-image. The policies and actions of a nation of 1.3 billion people necessarily will affect the management of a peaceful and stable global system. As China rises, Beijing will need to acknowledge this fact and assume greater responsibility to act in ways that reinforce international norms above and beyond its immediate self-interest—becoming what former deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick calls a "responsible stakeholder." Failure to do so will create frictions not only with the United States but also with others whose security and interests are tied to the international system.

Likewise Washington will need to be prepared psychologically for the impact China's rise may have on the relative power and influence of the United States in East Asia and beyond. Although China is unlikely to challenge this preeminence in political, economic, or military power fundamentally for the foreseeable future, the rise in China's relative power will likely lead to, or at least be associated with, economic dislocations in the United States and may alter U.S. strategic relationships with friends and even allies around the world as nations accommodate themselves to China's new status.

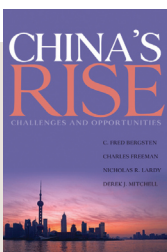
The temptation for the United States to fall back on an actively hostile or antagonistic posture toward Beijing as a result, however, is a dangerous one for U.S. interests. Without serious provocation from Beijing, such a policy would isolate the United States and put Washington at odds with allies and friends around the world who will rely increasingly on China, economically and otherwise. To safeguard its long-term strategic position, therefore, Washington must consider the implications of its China policy on its strategic relations with other nations. The United States should remember that the international community is as uncertain and concerned about the implications of China's rise for their interests as is the United States and will support, if sometimes tacitly, reasonable U.S. moves to prevent the development of an irresponsible or dangerous China.

In fact, there is nothing inherently nefarious or unnatural about China's ambitions to become a major power given its size, location, and history. A strong and prosperous China could add a major new market and strategic asset to global growth, development, scientific discovery, and strategic stability. Nonetheless, the uncertainty of China's future is an inescapable component of the U.S.-China relationship, since no one—not even the Chinese—can predict for certain the trajectory of China over time. The United States and others will necessarily hedge against worst-case scenarios resulting from China's rise, and the Chinese will need to understand and not overreact to such policies.

Similarly China has fundamental uncertainties and suspicions about U.S. intentions that will need to be broached openly, both publicly and privately, and discussed in a spirit of candor and good faith.

In the end, however, Washington and Beijing will continue to have clashes of interest and vision in coming years under the best of circumstances, particularly as China becomes a stronger and more assertive and influential player on the international scene. Differences in values, culture, historical experience, and political system will also pose substantial challenges to the relationship, and frictions will be inevitable. It is urgent, therefore, that

neither side adds to the burden by injecting artificial or emotional elements into the mix. More informed public discussion, debate, and education about China will be required in the United States. Beijing must be careful about its public rhetoric, through its media and otherwise, to provide accurate and balanced information and avoid inflaming popular opinion in China concerning the United States. Sober-minded management of this critical relationship in coming decades will be the ultimate challenge for both societies as they navigate a delicate period of transition, with serious implications not only for the two sides but also for the stability and well-being of the global community as a whole.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:  
SEE CHAPTER 10: "CHINA AND THE WORLD" IN *CHINA'S RISE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES* BY C. FRED BERGSTEN, CHARLES FREEMAN, NICHOLAS LARDY, DEREK J. MITCHELL & CHAPTER 5: "CHINA'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY: PARTNER OR RIVAL?" IN *CHINA: THE BALANCE SHEET: WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS TO KNOW NOW ABOUT THE EMERGING SUPERPOWER* BY C. FRED BERGSTEN, BATES GILL, NICHOLAS LARDY, DEREK J. MITCHELL