

Avoiding a U.S.-China cold war

Пише: Henry A. Kissinger
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The [upcoming summit](#) between the American and Chinese presidents is to take place while progress is being made in resolving many of the issues before them, and a positive communique is probable. Yet both leaders also face an opinion among elites in their countries emphasizing conflict rather than cooperation.

Most Chinese I encounter outside of government, and some in government, seem convinced that the United States seeks to contain China and to constrict its rise. American strategic thinkers are calling attention to China's increasing global economic reach and the growing capability of its military forces.

Care must be taken lest both sides analyze themselves into self-fulfilling prophecies. The nature of globalization and the reach of modern technology oblige the United States and China to interact around the world. A Cold War between them would bring about an international choosing of sides, spreading disputes into internal politics of every region at a time when issues such as nuclear proliferation, the environment, energy and climate require a comprehensive global solution.

Conflict is not inherent in a nation's rise. The United States in the 20th century is an example of a state achieving eminence without conflict with the then-dominant countries. Nor was the often-cited German-British conflict inevitable. Thoughtless and provocative policies played a role in transforming European diplomacy into a zero-sum game.



Sino-U.S. relations need not take such a turn. On most contemporary issues, the two countries cooperate adequately; what the two countries lack is an overarching concept for their interaction. During the Cold War, a common adversary supplied the bond. Common concepts have not yet emerged from the multiplicity of new tasks facing a globalized world undergoing political, economic and technological upheaval.

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That is not a simple matter. For it implies subordinating national aspirations to a vision of a global order.

Neither the United States nor China has experience in such a task. Each assumes its national values to be both unique and of a kind to which other peoples naturally aspire. Reconciling the two versions of exceptionalism is the deepest challenge of the Sino-American relationship.

America's exceptionalism finds it natural to condition its conduct toward other societies on their acceptance of American values. Most Chinese see their country's rise not as a challenge to America but as heralding a return to the normal state of affairs when China was preeminent. In the Chinese view, it is the past 200 years of relative weakness - not China's current resurgence - that represent an abnormality.

America historically has acted as if it could participate in or withdraw from international affairs at will. In the Chinese perception of itself as the Middle Kingdom, the idea of the sovereign equality of states was unknown. Until the end of the 19th century, China treated foreign countries as various categories of vassals. China never encountered a country of comparable magnitude until European armies imposed an end to its seclusion. A foreign ministry was not established until 1861, and then primarily for dealing with colonialist invaders.

America has found most problems it recognized as soluble. China, in its history of millennia, came to believe that few problems have ultimate solutions. America has a problem-solving approach; China is comfortable managing contradictions without assuming they are resolvable.

American diplomacy pursues specific outcomes with single-minded determination. Chinese negotiators are more likely to view the process as combining political, economic and strategic elements and to seek outcomes via an extended process. American negotiators become restless and impatient with deadlocks; Chinese negotiators consider them the inevitable mechanism of negotiation. American negotiators represent a society that has never suffered national catastrophe - except the Civil War, which is not viewed as an international experience. Chinese negotiators cannot forget the century of humiliation when foreign armies exacted tribute from a prostrate China. Chinese leaders are extremely sensitive to the slightest implication of condescension and are apt to translate American insistence as lack of respect.

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North Korea provides a good example of differences in perspective. America is focused on the proliferation of nuclear weapons. China, which in the long run has more to fear from nuclear weapons there than we, in addition emphasizes propinquity. It is concerned about the turmoil that might follow if pressures on nonproliferation lead to the disintegration of the North Korean regime. America seeks a concrete solution to a specific problem. China views any such outcome as a midpoint in a series of interrelated challenges, with no finite end, about the future of Northeast Asia. For real progress, diplomacy with Korea needs a broader base.

Americans frequently appeal to China to prove its sense of "international responsibility" by contributing to the solution of a particular problem. The proposition that China must prove its bona fides is grating to a country that regards itself as adjusting to membership in an international system designed in its absence on the basis of programs it did not participate in developing.

While America pursues pragmatic policies, China tends to view these policies as part of a general design. Indeed, it tends to find a rationale for essentially domestically driven initiatives in terms of an overall strategy to hold China down.

The test of world order is the extent to which the contending can reassure each other. In the American-Chinese relationship, the overriding reality is that neither country will ever be able to dominate the other and that conflict between them would exhaust their societies. Can they find a conceptual framework to express this reality? A concept of a Pacific community could become an organizing principle of the 21st century to avoid the formation of blocs. For this, they need a consultative mechanism that permits the elaboration of common long-term objectives and coordinates the positions of the two countries at international conferences.

The aim should be to create a tradition of respect and cooperation so that the successors of leaders meeting now continue to see it in their interest to build an emerging world order as a joint enterprise.

The writer was secretary of state from 1973 to 1977.