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# CHINA US FOCUS DIGEST



## Diplomacy Starts With Education

Distinguished scholar Da Wei explores the importance of educating the next generation of global thinkers as people-to-people relationships take center stage.

Dialogue Builds Bridges

*Dennis Wilder*

Peering Past U.S. Elections

*Rorry Daniels*

America's Post-Election  
China Policies

*David Shambaugh*

Diplomacy in Motion

*Vuk Jeremic*

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# CHINA & US FOCUS

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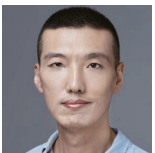


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CUSEF x Columbia SIPA Initiative, January 2024.

# Fostering Understanding Through **Exchange** and **Dialogue**

*Columbia's young minds immersed themselves in the ancient art of Chinese calligraphy "Fu" (meaning Blessings in Chinese). Sponsored by the China-United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF), the Columbia SIPA students embarked on a transformative journey through Beijing, Chengdu, and Shenzhen in January 2024.*



INTERVIEW: **DA WEI**

## Diplomacy Starts with Education

*On the historic campus of Tsinghua University in Beijing, Professor Da Wei, a distinguished scholar of international relations, explores the current state of global affairs, the evolution of U.S.-China relations and the role of education in shaping future leaders with China-US Focus host James Chau. Professor Da recounts his experiences growing up in an “urban island” within rural China during the country’s reform era and discusses his current role of helping to educate the next generation of global thinkers. This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*





▲ Professor Da Wei, Director of Center for International Strategy and Security and Professor at Tsinghua University, is interviewed by China-US Focus on Tsinghua University campus in June.



*Scan the QR code and watch the interview.*

**James Chau:**

Da Wei, thank you for being with us here and for having us here on the campus of Tsinghua University. It's really special.

**Da Wei:**

Thank you, James. Thank you and welcome to Tsinghua.

**James Chau:**

Da Wei, you recently spoke about the world, describing it in terms of being very, very difficult. There are multiple stress points that the world is trying to navigate or trying to survive. But what are those stress points for you when you think about the world and its complexities? What comes to mind? And what does it mean?

**Da Wei:**

I think there are several things that I really have some very heavy, very big concerns about. First, I think there is a tendency that this world is splitting into different camps. I don't know how many, maybe two different camps. So the economy becomes, you know, decoupled. Of course, everybody says I just want to de-risk, I don't want to decouple. But I think because of the lack of trust, and because of the complexity of one of the most advanced technologies, it's really hard to limit the scope of this de-risking, and it very easily expands into decoupling, and then the standard of new technology, then the way to run the different countries and regions, then the global governance institutions. I think we are facing a very real challenge.

Now about this word "splitting" into different camps. If that happened, if it becomes more serious in the coming years, I think the quality of life will decrease. We will waste a lot of potential that humans should have to make everyone have a better life. I think we are facing the danger that — probably because of

this split, because of this bloc politics — we may have problems.

**James Chau:**

You're using words like bloc and camps. And it makes me think also of the social fabric. Because around the world, of course, there is an emergence of tribalism as well in society — one example being what's referred to as the woke culture. In a sense, that has value because people are awakened to past injustices. And how do you address those? Is there a link between that kind of bloc and camp to the bloc camps that you described just now?

*Saying that we need a peaceful world is one thing, how to make it happen, I think it's another thing.*

**Da Wei:**

You can say tribalism between the countries, or between different countries. And you describe what you mentioned, like a woke culture, it's mainly a separation in one society, or in one country. For example, in the West, different people have different identity problems now. But that kind of place, I think, well, it's not so serious in terms of its economic and social or technological consequences. It's more or less the social split. What I am describing — this international split — I think it will, for example, reduce the economic efficiency. When we were in the globalization period, everyone, or all the countries, different companies, they are interconnected to each other. But now they're split. And in the future, maybe when you come to China, you need to use another cellphone, because maybe your cell phone in other countries cannot be used here. So everybody will need two or three cellphones. When you go to another country, you want to drive a car, but you find the auto-

matic system is totally different. So that will make us suffer a lot. And in this split, in this bloc politics, people will have strong tension. And probably it will also lead to conflict and war. So that is, I think, very serious.

**James Chau:**

As we have this conversation I think about my 6-year-old nephew, and I'm sure you think about your 15-year-old teenager. So when we think about the people who are important in our lives, among them may students here at Tsinghua University, are you confident that we have the experience, the incentive, the willingness and the skill set to address the very, very difficult world that you see?

**Da Wei:**

I am not so confident, to be honest. I think we as adults, I think all of us are talking about maintaining the peace, avoiding a war or maybe reinforcing globalization — these kinds of things everybody talks about. But can we, particularly the policymakers, and those, you know, who can have impact on this can really do something — for example, to correct the mistake that we, I mean, different countries made by ourselves? Are you willing to admit and recognize that “I'm sorry, I messed it up, this is something, you know, I've done mistakenly.” And maybe China needs to do this, the U.S. needs to do that, Russia needs to do that, and other countries. I mean, saying that we need a peaceful world is one thing, how to make it happen, I think it's another thing. It's very costly. I don't think we can do that.

**James Chau:**

And not only peace, but lasting peace, a very different version of peace. You bring up the United States and China, and I think about 45 years of normalization of diplomatic ties. It is now 2024 and we should be using the verb celebrate. So we should be saying we are celebrating 45 years of U.S.-China relations in the



modern era. But instead, we use words like “honor” or “mark” as a more neutral approach to it. Where did that trust go? And was there real trust to begin with when you reflect on almost a half-century of relations?

**Da Wei:**

I think that trust actually has grown in those 45 years. I’m not very confident about 45 years ago because I was too young at the time. But my hunch is, at that time, we of course had some strategic consensus — like we needed to balance the Soviet Union together. We may have had that consensus, but for ordinary people, for a lot of decision-makers, I think at that time, we still had very strong suspicion about each other. For example, China believed we are a socialist country, the U.S. is a capitalist country, so can I really rely on or trust them? But I think in those 45 years, you know, both countries — China and the U.S. — got benefits from that process. The Cold War concluded peacefully, right? And then the two countries’ economies grew very dramatically after the end of the Cold War. So in that process, the trust has grown dramatically. Having said that, in the last eight to 10 years this trust declined dramatically for different reasons. In short, the U.S. believes China takes advantage and utilizes it, it’s not fair and it’s not in the U.S. interest; while China thinks U.S. policy toward China is so harmful in the past eight years. So this trust has been damaged dramatically. This is quite a complicated process, I will say.

**James Chau:**

Let’s look at the Middle East today, and Russia, Ukraine and what’s happening over in Yemen and other parts of Africa are really concerning. And they’re not separate to the U.S. and China, both in the joint ability to meet the moment of these challenges and also to understand that the world is not separated into regions. What one does has an impact on the other, on our neighbors, whether our nei-

ghbors be the person living next door or the person on the other side of the world on the next continent.

You said recently that what’s happening in the Middle East in terms of the decision-making around international policy is still being determined by a few major powers, rather than by the collective multilateral system that was established and designed to do that very thing — to provide a representative and inclusive voice. We’re not really seeing that. We’re just seeing a few countries trying to moderate, or even intervene. How do you change that, so the world moves on from a postwar architecture that was very relevant in 1945? We’re not in 1945 now.

***I think we’re facing a danger that those global platforms or mechanisms will collapse.***

**Da Wei:**

I think now we’re saying farewell to that old world order of 1945, or even post-Cold War structure. We are gradually departing from that. How to transform it to a more effective way to govern today’s global challenges and also reflect today’s international politics is a huge challenge. Ideally major countries like China, the United States, Russia and other countries need to sit down together to discuss it. But obviously, this won’t happen. So we are facing a possibility that this real global governance mechanism — like what we have seen after 1945, the UN system or later, like the WTO system — I think we’re facing a danger that those global platforms or mechanisms will collapse. Or maybe they will be there but to not actually work. I think this is a big challenge we are facing.

**James Chau:**

I'll touch on the UN in just a moment. But before that, some Americans, including one of the speakers at your conference, say that the United States is aware that this system is beginning to withdraw but that Americans are not ready to let go of that yet. What's your take?

**Da Wei:**

There is a strong mood in the United States that asks, why should the U.S. take the responsibility to take care of that system? Or why should the U.S. pay the cost for that? I think there is a sense, a sentiment of isolationism that's rising in the United States. I think ordinary people don't want to spend money on that, or don't want their soldiers die for that. I think the reason for this global governance mechanism collapse can be attributed partly to America's unwillingness to maintain it. I respect this sentiment, this mood, because this is a choice of American people. As the U.S. is withdrawing from that, who can fill that vacuum? I don't think any country can fill the vacuum.

**James Chau:**

I'm going to be a little provocative over here and ask you: Should we not have empathy and gratitude for the United States? Given what [Japanese] Prime Minister [Fumio] Kishida that said of Washington a few weeks ago? He said America has taken on this burden. Now, some people will say that that was a choice, that was a voluntary choice to take on that burden. But should we also thank the United States for ultimately taking on something that exerts a lot of pressure on itself, with its own voters?

**Da Wei:**

Of course, to be honest, I think we should

## CUSEF x Young Leaders Initiative, August 2024

Twenty-five U.S. students from two high schools and six universities join this program, including Sidwell Friends School, Germantown Friends School, College of William and Mary, Haverford College, University of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Tech and Washington University of St. Louis.



▲ The students visit the Hong Kong Palace Museum in West Kowloon.



▲ The students from Georgetown University, University of California and Fudan University visit the Sky of Edge in Shenzhen.

## CUSEF Next Gen - U.S.-China Student to Student Dialogue





wloon.



fornia San Diego, Peking University



▲ The students share their experience of cultural exchanges with their peers from Tsinghua University High School in Beijing.

logue, May 2024

thank the U.S. In the world there has to be some country playing a bigger role to maintain the system. I think the U.S. played that role and the paid the price. Actually, on that order, a lot of countries benefit, including China. China probably has been the biggest beneficiary from that system, particularly after the end of the Cold War. So the U.S. played a basically a constructive role to maintain that order. But, of course, at the same time we have also need to admit that the U.S. made many mistakes as it tried to maintain that responsibility. These are two separate things.

***What China wants is not to construct a totally new system.***

**James Chau:**

Americans then feel that China has benefited, and even exhausted the benefits of that system. So it's now convenient for China to move on and construct a new system that will then ensure that it continues to benefit going forward in other ways.

**Da Wei:**

What China wants is not to construct a totally new system. Actually, I think China has for very long time argued that we want to maintain the current system, we want to maybe make more contributions to the system. And China also wants to, of course, reform some elements of that. But the problem is, for different reasons, the U.S. believes China is an illiberal country. It asks, are you really qualified to make a bigger contribution to this system or to reform while only liberal countries can play that role in this liberal international order? So I think both China and the U.S. maybe missed some opportunities. Maybe the U.S. missed some opportunities to work with China together, you know, to try to share the burden and also make the system better. But the U.S., more or less, views China as revisionist when China says I want to make

some contribution or reform. Then the U.S. believes that China wants to overturn the whole order, the whole system. I think that's wrong. That's a misperception. But that's the widely accepted perception in the West. It's very unfortunate.

**James Chau:**

Let's apply some of these discussions to the United Nations. China has contributed richly to that system, to that existing system, in the form of being the largest contributor of peace-keeping forces and also as a major funder to the outcomes of the Sustainable Development Goals, so that countries in the Global South have a shot — or a better shot — at achieving those goals nationally. The UN reform discussion has continued for some time. A number of countries really want to get on the Security Council, whose gatekeepers, in effect have been five countries — and possibly in some discussions being six, the P5 plus one, Germany. These are largely the P5, the victors of World War II. You've got Germany as a sixth in some ways, as a major global economy, I think No. 4 in the world. But I have a concern that if you reform and bring in more voices (which I'm in favor of), then then it doesn't become a checklist for affirmative action, that it needs to be set up with guarantees, so that those new members, those new countries that will benefit from reforms, will also be allowed to take part in the decision-making process and leave their imprint on the results that come out of those decision-making processes. What's your take on reform?

**Da Wei:**

I think that's too difficult a topic to address the reform of the UN. The UN is a product of the World War II, so at that time, it was relatively easy to create a new organization like the UN and decide who should be the P5, because those P5 were the countries that won the war. But now that we are in a peaceful transitional period, we want to reform something peacefully. That means difficult — like when you are eating your lunch and suddenly I say I need to



reform the food on your plate and I give some food to others and add some food to your plate. So everybody has a very complicated calculation here.

Last week I was in Europe, and we also touched upon these questions. And then one of the participants asked other European participants, Do you think we can reduce our representation in the UN to one vote as Europe? And the other interlocutor immediately said no, because now they have France and the UK, in the council. So then you bring in Germany, so then you have three votes. Bringing in new members also may mean lower efficiency. I think this is already a problem with the UN and other multilateral organizations.

I think we need a very, very long process. We need to be very patient. But most important, I think that China, the U.S., Russia, Europe — those players need some consensus first. We cannot do anything without a consensus by those major players. Because those countries' relations are now so bad that they don't talk to each other. Sometimes the UN becomes an arena for great powers to compete. Under that circumstance, how can we expect them to work together to reform it? I'm very pessimistic about that.

**James Chau:**

You know, I've moderated and chaired many discussions at the United Nations, both in New York and in Geneva, in my UN role, and you find all these representatives of member states coming to the table and reading their set pieces that were passed to them by their capitals. And it's frustrating in the sense that you use the opportunity of being in the same room together to simply come with what you were told to come with, but not reflecting what you're hearing in the room and finding common cross points that could actually build to consensus.

Let's leave the UN. As you said, it's a complex subject and one that would require a much longer exploration. I want to ask you: You were about 5 years old in 1979. So probably not too

many memories of Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and President Jimmy Carter, up on the White House lawn. What was your first exposure to the United States, your first memory of the idea of America?

**Da Wei:**

The first time, I think I watched an advertisement on TV at that time. My parents bought a TV set — a black-and-white one, Hitachi, a Japanese one. There was a Procter & Gamble ad on TV. That was the first TV ad I'd seen. I think that was a very interesting ad. I will say it was at an American house. Very nice house, and the housewife was washing dishes in the kitchen. And then the camera turned away to a lawn and the kid, a Chinese kid, playing baseball there. And then there was a song that said Xiao Hua went to the U.S. and learned to play baseball, and his mother now loves to use the company's product. So that's the first American image in my memory. It's a kind of typical American Dream thing.

**James Chau:**

So the mother and son in that commercial were Chinese ethnicity?

**Da Wei:**

Yes, ethnic Chinese. Obviously, they moved to the U.S. maybe immigrated to the U.S., so it's blue sky, green lawn, beautiful house. Basically, that's the image of the USA in the early 80s.

**James Chau:**

Did it shock you that, you know, you were living in China, which was still mired in the problems of poverty in the 1980s? Were you shocked by what you saw on screen that people could have houses and gardens? And, you know, the son would have time to go and play baseball? Did that shock you?

**Da Wei:**

Of course. At that time, there was a big gap bet-

ween the living standards of the two countries. So at that time, you could not imagine some people living in such a beautiful single house. At that time, we didn't have that in China. So it's a totally different lifestyle.

**James Chau:**

Your parents were really better off. They were professionals. They were university-educated. But also you could afford a television set that was made in Japan. It's funny how, when you talk about Chinese people of the 80s, or even 70s, it always comes down to television sets. In a conversation with Ambassador Cui Tiankai, who of course served eight years as China's top diplomatic envoy in Washington, he said in 1979 that his memory of being a graduate student in Shanghai was seeing the two leaders waving from the balcony of the White House over the lawn. And he watched it on a neighbor's television set. There was maybe one family that had a small television set in a compound, and everybody crowded around and watched it. Your story is similar, as it speaks to the idea that the American Dream was also the idea of globalization, of watching an American consumer commercial in 1980s — on a Japanese-made television set. It seems sweet and innocent and a lovely era to go back to. Tell me about your childhood. You were born in Xi'an, a historic city, a former ancient capital, the home of the Terracotta Warriors. What was life like?

**Da Wei:**

I grew up there because my parents worked there. Both my parents worked for the defense industry in China. They were from Shanghai, actually, in eastern China. But they had the opportunity to go to college in the early 1960s. After graduation, before the Cultural Revolution, China's external environment was already very serious. At that time, it had a very bad relations with both the Soviet Union and the United States. So China moved a lot of factories and research institutes deep inland. It's hard to imagine now, because my father is from Shang-

hai, the most modern city in China. He grew up there. So actually, when he came here, he told me, the lifestyle, the living standard, was really low at that time. Because he was from Shanghai they had rice every day, but when you go to the northern part of China, they don't have rice. They had mantou, actually, the steamed buns. So for them, that's very hard. My mother worked in a factory. But when she first went there, it was nothing but bare ground, so they started to construct the factory. That was a hard life in the 1960s.

I was born in the early 1970s. So I have almost no memory of the Cultural Revolution, but when I do have a memory, I remember those hard times. My parents were in the middle class at that time, still not very comparable with today. You know, life was very, very hard. I'm fortunate that they could get me a good education. We were an island in a rural sea.

When I was a kid, I didn't speak the local dialect because everybody spoke Mandarin. I even thought everybody should have a college degree because all my parents' colleagues had college degrees. But when I grew up, I found it was something quite unique. I grew up in that urban island, speaking Mandarin, getting a good education. But that was a good time because China was starting its reform and opening-up, I started my [formal] education in 1979 — the year that China and the United States established diplomatic relations. So, basically, I can represent the generation that grew up in the era of opening-up and the reform. We received the benefit of that.

**James Chau:**

Is life in China good today?

**Da Wei:**

I think so. Yes. Particularly for people like me. Of course, different people have different stories. As for me, I think I have a life that I never expected when I was a kid in the 1980s. When I was a kid, I still remember that in Xi'an we

had the first five-star hotel, which was run by a Hong Kong businessman. So some of the teenagers in our island found a job there. At that time in the 1980s, they could earn 200 yuan per month. At that time, I thought, wow, that's a wonderful job.

**James Chau:**

Two hundred yuan, which is about 30 U.S. dollars a month?

**Da Wei:**

Two hundred at that time was already much higher than my parents' salary of about 100 yuan.

**James Chau:**

Is the hotel still there?

**Da Wei:**

I think so. But obviously, it's not a very good hotel now. At that time, I thought, if one day when I grew up, I could work at that hotel, that will be my dream life.

**James Chau:**

I want to finish with where we are. And in some way circle back to where we began in this conversation. We're on the extraordinary grounds of Tsinghua University, a world-leading university, which was established in 1911. It was a moment of absolute transformation here in China, which went from many dynasties of imperial rule to the Republic and to the People's Republic after that. This was the site of an imperial garden. This university was set up with some reference to the United States and China — the relationship to follow. But what are your students being taught? What are they learning? To go back to our first question, is that sufficient to meet the needs of a world that is in constant flux?

**Da Wei:**

I think Tsinghua University and Peking University are regarded in China as the top two universities. Probably this is one of the best universities in China, and or maybe in Asia. The students here, particularly the undergraduate students, went through the extremely competitive gaokao system — the entrance examination for university students in China and very, very competitive. So they are all very talented, top students here.

For example, I teach in the Department of International Relations. So my students take courses such as international relations, theory, research, methodology, mathematics. And yes, they learn, of course, foreign languages, and they also learn a lot in courses such as China-U.S. relations and history. The theory they are learning here, I think, is just basically the same as in American universities. The reading material we give them — most of them — are also in English. So some courses are taught in English. Basically, what we are providing here I think is quite similar to what you can imagine at an American university.

But to your question, is that adequate? Is that good enough? I don't think so. I think beyond what you can learn from a class there are still a lot of things to do. I think the students today, particularly in the university — in particular, in the so called elite universities — I think the task for them is not only to acquire some knowledge but to be the future leaders, the future leadership of a country, or maybe global leadership or for an industrial company, a society or a community. So they need to understand the dramatically changing globe, as we discussed earlier. I always encourage them to pay attention to what is happening in the world — for example, in the Middle East.

I always want them to debate, you know, the pros and cons of the two sides — I mean, the Palestinian people and the Israeli people. What is wrong? What is correct? As a Chinese stu-





▲ Professor Da Wei and the Tsinghua University research students visit Professor Paul Gewirtz, director of the Yale China Center, at the Yale Law School library in July 2023.

dent, what is your position? All of you can have a debate on the Russia and Ukraine issue, right? What is the rationale behind each side? Why did Russia do that? Why did Ukraine do that? I think the students need to pay more attention to what is happening now. Or a new technology, AI, this kind of thing. They need to understand what is happening now. Also, they need to think about why those people, the Palestinian people, are really different. People have different rationales. Why do they have different values? Why different policies? I mean, the logic behind that. I want them to step further.

So in that regard, I think our students do have a long way to go, I think our university needs to provide them more opportunities to think, to reflect. That's a reason every summer vacation I always bring my students to the United States to talk to American government officials, university professors and of course, their peers, the university students in the U.S., to understand why these two great nations have such different policies. And also why we have so many tensions now. I want them to understand this. And then when they return to their country, they know the world better.

**James Chau:**

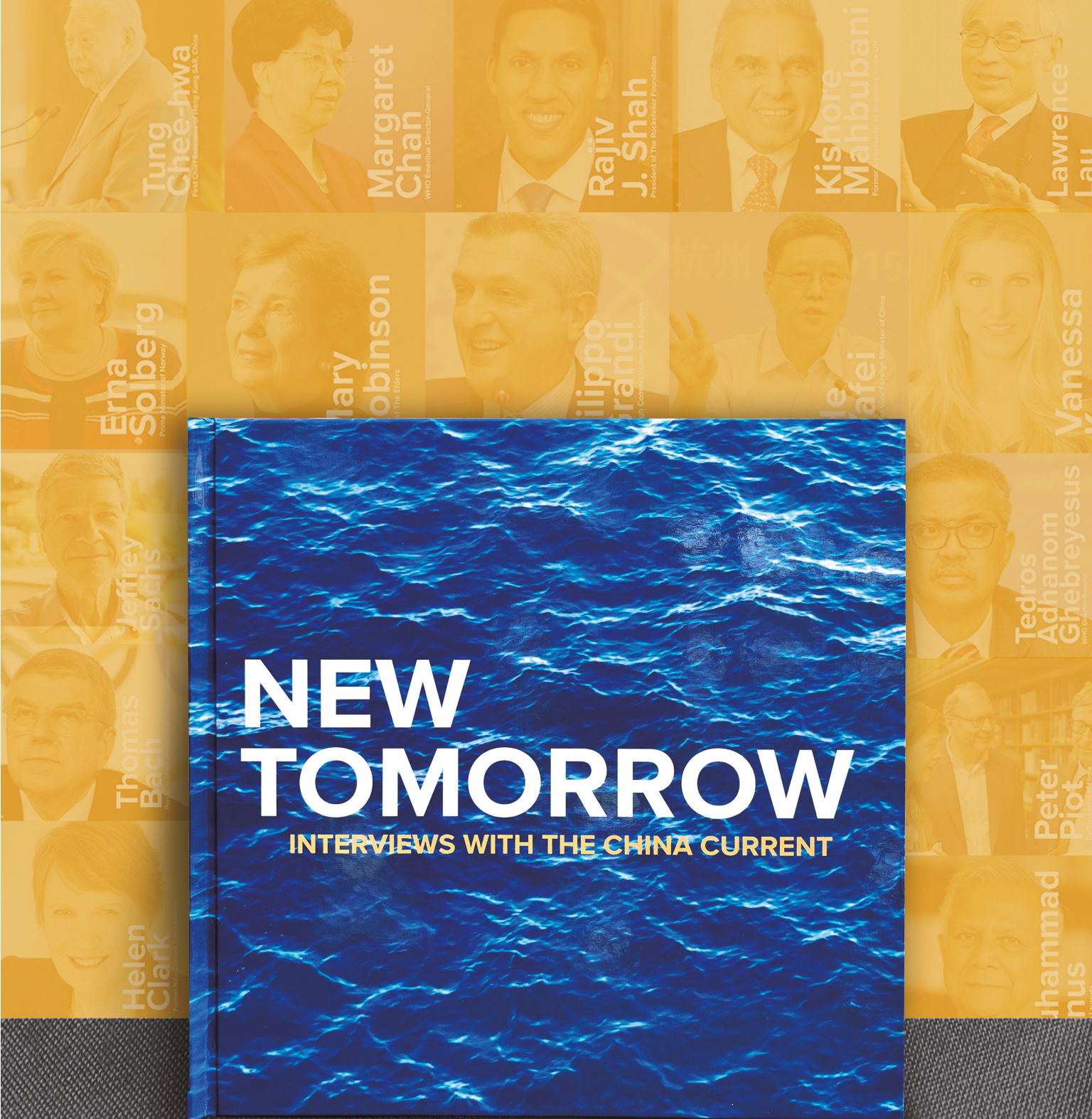
Unfortunately, I'm not one of your students. I wish I were. But we did start off the year in America, in three different places — in Atlanta, and then Stanford in Palo Alto and of course in Washington, D.C. So it means so much to me that as we reach the midpoint of this year, we're finally speaking at your home at Tsinghua, here in Beijing.

*I think the task for them is not only to acquire some knowledge but to be the future leaders.*

**Da Wei:**

Thank you. Well, thank you, James, for coming to Tsinghua and I hope you can visit more often and we can continue this discussion — in Beijing, Hong Kong or somewhere in the United States. Thank you so much.





***Conversations by James Chau of hope and purpose***  
***with*** Tung Chee-hwa, Thomas Bach, Margaret Chan, Helen Clark,  
Filippo Grandi, He Yafei, Vanessa Kerry, Kishore Mahbubani,  
Peter Piot, Mary Robinson, Jeffrey Sachs, Erna Solberg, Rajiv Shah,  
Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Muhammad Yunus, ***and more.***





# America's China





# Post-Election Policies

■ **David Shambaugh**

*Gaston Sigur Professor of Asian Studies and Director of the China Policy Program at George Washington University*

As the 2024 U.S. presidential election takes an unexpected turn, with Kamala Harris stepping in as the Democratic candidate and Donald Trump showing strong poll numbers, speculation has turned to the future of U.S. policy toward China. As in past presidential campaigns, adopting a “tough on China” stance tends to be a winning strategy with voters.

Now that the 2024 presidential race in the United States has been turned upside down by Vice President Kamala Harris’s replacement of President Joe Biden as the Democratic Party’s candidate, and with former President Trump’s surprisingly strong poll numbers, it is timely to ask: What might the differences in U.S. policy toward China be if either candidate wins the election?

***There has been a “through train” of China policy in virtually all policy domains with essential continuity from the Trump administration through Joe Biden’s.***

It is tempting — and probably not inaccurate — to surmise that both candidates and their administrations’ previous China policies would be a good guide to what each would do if they returned to the White House. After all, each has a four-year track record of a fairly coherent and sustained set of China policies. The single most notable aspect of the two administrations’ China policies has been their consistency and continuation. Their differences have been

minor and more a matter of degree than fundamental substance. There has been a “through train” of China policy in virtually all policy domains — diplomatic, political, military, security, economic, ideological, cyber/ espionage, technology, education, human rights and others —with essential continuity from the Trump administration through Joe Biden’s.

While the rhetoric has varied, the substance of policies has not changed much. There have been a few differences. Trump and his senior officials were much more critical in their rhetoric than Biden and his senior officials have been. Trump and his administration offered many public condemnations of China, whereas the Biden team has offered fewer. They also produced several comprehensive statements on China policy. The Trump administration had a much more sophisticated public diplomacy approach to China than the Biden team has had. By contrast, Biden has done far more to strengthen alliances abroad and build coalitions against China than the Trump team ever did, while at home Biden has worked with Congress on passing important legislation intended to strengthen American technological, educational and research infrastructure to effectively compete with China.

Thus, the first thing we can anticipate is further continuity with the past eight years of China policies. China should not expect significant changes. Four years ago, some America-watchers and officials in Beijing anticipated that Biden would break with Trump's radical shift on China and return to the previous policies of engagement. They were proved dead wrong (and it revealed a fundamental intelligence failure by China's America specialists). And they will be proved wrong again if they think that U.S. policy is going to revert to the pre-2017 cooperative policies of engagement with China. Comprehensive competition is here to stay is the guiding strategy of the U.S. government.

Nonetheless, there could be some differences in degree between Trump and Biden/Harris 1.0 and 2.0. First of all, a President Harris could well be different than Vice President Harris. We should not assume a simple continuation of either policies or personnel from the Biden administration. Similarly, a second Trump administration may also contain some changes and surprises.

***Comprehensive competition is here to stay is the guiding strategy of the U.S. government.***

### **Prospects under Trump**

Trump personally is the biggest wild card because of his demonstrated unpredictability. Although he and his administration were, after their first year in office, highly critical of Chinese Communist Party and government policies — as well as critical of Chinese leader Xi Jinping himself — Trump 2.0 could abruptly pivot and reach out to Xi in the same way he did with North Korea's Kim Jung-un. Recently, at a July 21 campaign speech in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Trump

used fawning language and made clear his respect for Xi — describing him as “brilliant,” “smart” and “a fierce person because he controls 1.4 billion people with an iron fist.” If he tried such a gambit to orchestrate some kind of rapprochement directly with Xi, Trump would be putting himself deeply at odds with the entire Republican Party, his own administration, many in Congress, most Democrats and most American citizens — all of whom view China as America's No. 1 competitor and adversary.

***A Trump administration trade policy would likely be a doubling down on the aggressive one he adopted the first time around.***

Concerning America's support for the defense of Taiwan, Trump has indicated that he views Taiwan in the same financially transactional way he views NATO allies: “Taiwan should pay us for defense. You know, we're no different from an insurance company,” Trump told Bloomberg in a July 17 interview. It is difficult to know if Taiwan could “buy” renewed commitments for its defense from Trump and his administration, or what this would mean in practice. In addition, a Trump administration trade policy would likely be a doubling down on the aggressive one he adopted the first time around. China, the world and America's own economy should prepare for considerable stresses (and inflation) from even tougher tariffs.

If Trump were elected, there is also the important question of who would serve in his administration that could impact the approach to China and what impact those views might have. At present, I can only identify two — possibly three — individuals as being on board the Trump train: former National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien,





▲ U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and her running mate Governor of Minnesota Tim Walz enter the stage at the rally in Liacouras Center at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA on August 6, 2024.

former U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and possibly former Deputy National Security Adviser and China expert Matt Pottinger. O'Brien and Pottinger are ideological hawks with deep antipathy for China's regime, while Lighthizer is an aggressive trade hawk. Former congressman and uber China hawk Mike Gallagher could also get a senior position, as could Senator Marco Rubio (another China hawk whom Trump considered for vice-president).

***Given the importance of Southeast Asia in Washington's China strategy, we can anticipate a continuation — if not an elevation — of attention to the region during a Harris presidency.***

At this stage, it is hard to identify others who might be tapped for a second Trump administration in the security/defense realm, but keep your eyes on Elbridge Colby (The Marathon Initiative), Oriana Skylar Mastro (Stanford University and Carnegie Endowment) and Zack Cooper (American Enterprise Institute). All three are China defense hawks.

### **Prospects under Harris**

As vice president, as far as we know, Harris has not been involved in formulating China policy. But she was a dutiful and disciplined implementer. That is, she made several trips to Asia (though never to China), delivered few speeches that touched on China and closely stuck to her talking points in meetings with foreign officials. She apparently did not interact at all directly with Chinese officials in Washington or in other

countries, although she did briefly meet with Xi on the fringes of the November 2022 APEC meeting in Bali, Indonesia. On January 27 this year she similarly met momentarily with Taiwan's new president, Lai Ching-te, at the inauguration of Honduran President Xiomara Castro.

While she has not focused on China, Harris has been very involved with the Indo-Pacific region, including five visits to Southeast Asia and other areas seven times as vice president. On each occasion she gave carefully choreographed speeches, sticking closely to Biden administration policy language. One example was her August 2021 speech in Singapore, which included some tough words concerning China's "illegal" island occupations in the South China Sea. Her carefully scripted speeches and all of her public remarks concerning the Indo-Pacific over the past four years apparently belie a deeper personal, intellectual and cultural interest she is said to hold about the region. Similarly, Harris's own personal heritage and affection for India augers well for a strengthened U.S.-India partnership. Given the importance of Southeast Asia in Washington's China strategy, we can anticipate a continuation — if not an elevation — of attention to the region during a Harris presidency. This would be welcome, as it has long been neglected.

On other China-related issues, Harris does not have much, if any, track record. One area where she does concerns human rights. As a senator she co-sponsored the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act in 2020, and she was active in introducing legislation to protect human rights in Hong Kong and sanctioning Hong Kong officials. We might anticipate a tougher human rights stance toward Chi-

na (something the Biden administration has virtually abandoned since its first year in office).

Thus, much remains unclear about Kamala Harris's thinking and approach to China. In this context, one should not dismiss the fact that she comes from California — a state with a strong record of engagement and commercial ties with China. Dwarfing all other states, California led the nation with \$138 billion in trade with China in 2023, and it has a politically influential Chinese-American community, many of whom are pro-China.

Another uncertainty concerns the officials Harris might surround herself with if she became president. Would she retain members of the Asia and China team from the Biden administration? Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell is the key person to watch, as it's possible that he could be elevated to either national security adviser or secretary of state. Campbell has been the principal architect of China and Indo-Pacific policies for the Biden administration.

In addition to Campbell, a key person to watch — and a key unknown — is Phillip Gordon, Harris's foreign policy adviser over the past four years and an experienced Democratic Party foreign policy insider who has served in multiple administrations and think tanks. He has substantial expertise on Europe (he is fluent in French) and the Middle East. But he has next to no track record on Asia or China. (His public comments following those of Vice President Harris in Singapore in August 2021 were hesitant and superficial.) Yet, Gordon might be a leading contender to become Harris's

*China, too, is an actor and possesses its own agency — but Beijing cannot help itself or improve China's image in America.*

national security adviser, as they have worked closely together over the past four years.

Another notable candidate for high office (possibly secretary of state) is Nicholas Burns, the Biden administration's ambassador to China. It is uncertain what views Burns would bring back after his four years of service in Beijing, but they have clearly hardened during his tenure. Burns is a deeply experienced and highly professional diplomat, and he now possesses considerable firsthand experience (much of it not so pleasant) with China.

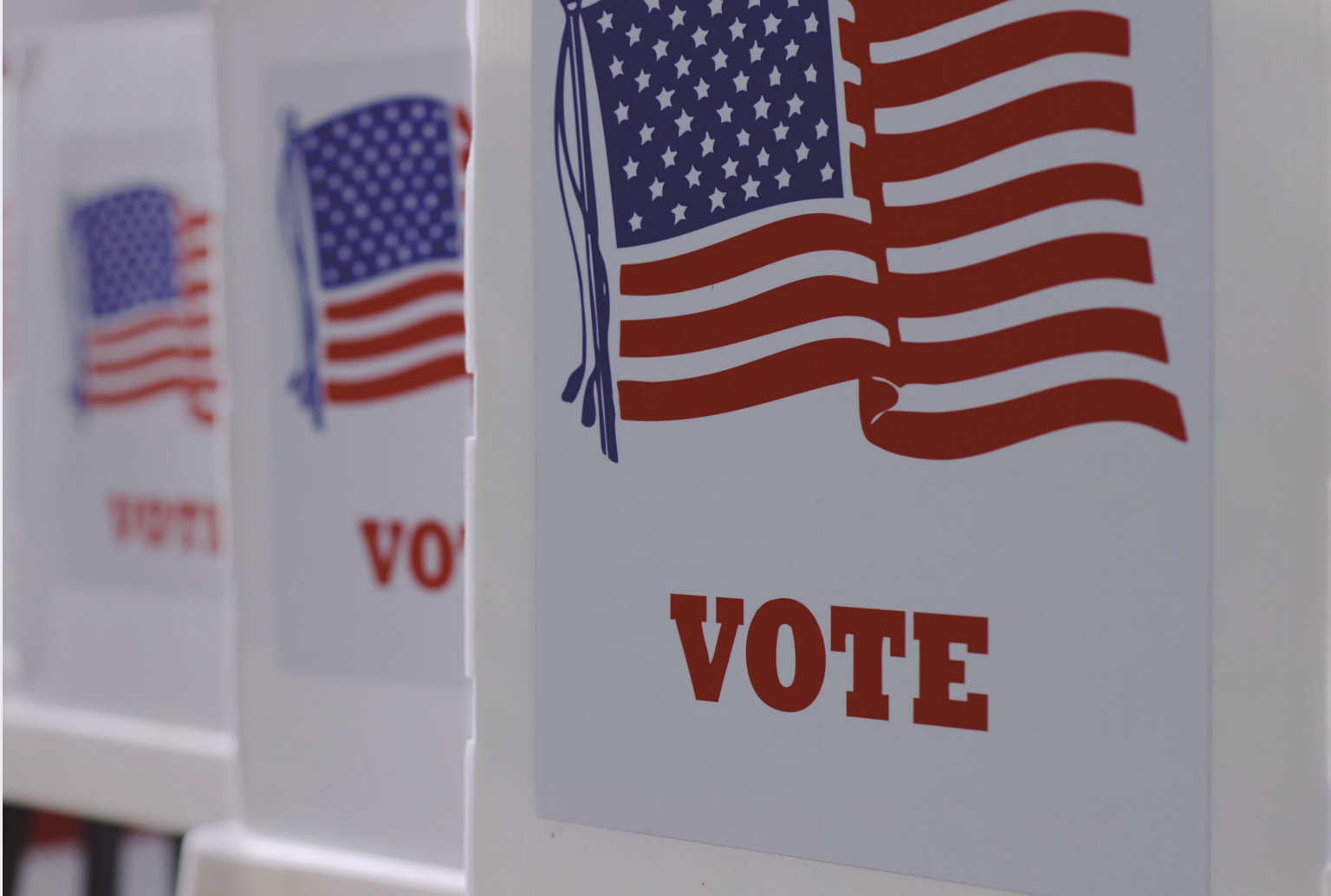
Several other members of the Biden China team have already departed from their positions in the National Security Council, Department of State and Department of Commerce. And so a new group would fill the senior positions in several government departments. There is no shortage of knowledgeable younger China specialists both in and outside of Washington who stand ready to populate a Harris administration.

### **Wait until January**

While these speculations might open the aperture somewhat on what either a Trump 2.0 or a Kamala Harris administration China policy may look like, there is still much time before the November election and before either would take office in January. During this interim period there will be much jockeying for position within both camps, and both candidates and their campaigns will be pressed to specifically formulate and publicly articulate what their China policies will be.

As in all previous presidential campaigns, being “tough on China” can be expected and is a winning strategy with the electorate. We can thus anticipate considerable criticism to come over the next three months. China, too, is an actor and possesses its own agency — but Beijing cannot help itself or improve China's image in America. It can only further hurt itself through its words and actions.





## Uncharted Waters

■ **Christopher A. McNally**

*Professor of Political Economy, Chaminade University*

The upcoming presidential election in the United States could significantly impact China-U.S. relations, though it's uncertain how each candidate will ultimately approach Beijing. Neither major candidate is perceived as being willing to improve the bilateral relationship at this point, so things could very well get worse.

China-U.S. relations are about to enter uncharted waters, a new era defined by who wins the U.S. presidential election. As many Chinese analysts have pointed out, no candidate is perceived as being willing to improve the China-U.S. relationship. In fact, things are likely to get worse.

***This year provides a serious backdrop, one that makes the U.S. presidential election a major geopolitical event.***

To begin, the U.S. election is occurring against a backdrop of intensifying geopolitical struggles, both old and new. They are old in the sense that a rising power is facing an established hegemon intent on protecting its preeminent position in the international system. They are also new, since China and the United States differ so greatly historically, culturally and in terms of their governance systems and philosophies.

Perhaps even more important, we are living in an era of unbridled technological innovation, with many key technologies playing into national strength and, thus, national security. It's not just chips, but AI advances, robotics, genetic engineering, LIDAR and so much else that could transform an arms race into actual war. Nuclear arms, though, remain by far the most destructive weapons and if deployed could spell the end of humanity.

This year provides a serious backdrop, one that makes the U.S. presidential election a major geopolitical event. Yet, with fewer than 100 days to the election, not much is known about how the two candidates will face China. Foreign policy (except, per-

haps, the Gaza war) has played a minor role in both campaigns.

For sure, both candidates have put forward policy proposals that are negative for China, though Kamala Harris's positions are unknown for the most part. She is likely to continue the main policy planks of the Biden administration. Alas, ambiguity about how she would handle China could bedevil the relationship from the get go.

More is known about how Donald Trump would approach Beijing. His first administration showed a penchant for trade wars based on tariffs, combined with a willingness to make deals. Ultimately, though, his inclination to absolutely offend his counterparts could upend everything. Proposals such as the one to ban Chinese citizens and entities from buying land in the United States are likely to sour relations regardless of other trends.

Trump has proposed 60 percent tariffs on all Chinese goods and 10 percent on everyone else's. But he has recently walked back his rhetoric on tariffs under pressure from major business donors. It is therefore likely he would try to use the threat of tariffs as a stick to cudgel China, perhaps extracting concessions on market access or more significant geopolitical matters.

For China, Trump's proposed 60 percent tariff, if implemented, could be devastating. The Chinese economy is reeling because of the real estate downturn and subdued consumer and investor confidence. Exports thus remain an important driver of economic well-being in China.

Trump has been more ambivalent on Taiwan and the U.S. defense posture across East Asia in general. He has been asking allies and partners, including Taiwan itself, to pay for their own defense. He has

not committed to helping Taiwan defend itself if attacked, a significant departure from the Biden administration.

An American retreat across East Asia could be beneficial for China, but also open a Pandora's box as regional powers jockey for influence. Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of a second Trump administration would be less geopolitical pressure on Russia combined with frayed alliances, opening up international space for China. But again the resulting uncertainty in international relations could destabilize global power balances in ways that might not benefit Beijing at all.

On the other side, a Kamala Harris administration could end up being indistinguishable from a second Joe Biden term, but little is known about her precise views on the globe's most important bilateral relationship. What is known is that she is a typical member of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, focusing on China's human rights regime and authoritarian governance. As a senator she co-sponsored legislation on Chinese human rights abuses with a focus on Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

One area where Harris is likely to continue Biden policies is seeking to suppress key technological advances in China. Efforts to forge tighter export regulations for chipmaking gear are thus likely to continue. These might go far beyond those at present, perhaps even to the point where key makers of photolithography machines, especially the Dutch company ASML, are barred from selling any products to China at all.

Harris has also been hawkish on the South China Sea, visiting the Palawan Province in the Philippines (which borders the sea) in 2022. This was a symbolic statement of U.S. support for Philippine territorial claims, a position that could put the United States in direct conflict with China. She is also likely

to be hawkish on Taiwan — perhaps more so than Biden. She has publicly committed to strengthening Taiwan's defense ties with the United States.

Nonetheless, on the campaign trail Harris's foreign policy statements have mainly focused on deflecting pressure from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party regarding the Gaza war. She has also hewed closely to Biden's talking points on the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

Uncertainty is perhaps the most pervasive hallmark of this election cycle, both domestically and internationally. The exact inclinations of Kamala Harris with regard to China remain nebulous. Even the addition of Tim Walz, who has in-depth knowledge of China, to the Harris ticket hasn't added much light.

Trump, on the other hand, prides himself on changing positions and making deals. Under certain circumstances, his administration might grow more friendly with China. But in the final analysis, neither candidate currently has a coherent, workable China policy. Uncertainty abounds, and the world is heading into uncharted waters.

*But in the final analysis,  
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currently has a coherent,  
workable China policy.*





INTERVIEW: **RORRY DANIELS**

## Peering Past U.S. Elections

*Rorry Daniels is managing director of the Asia Society Policy Institute think tank, which is affiliated with the Asia Society, a global organization of nonprofits dedicated to navigating the shared future of the United States and Asia through the arts, culture, education and policy.*

*In this interview with KJ Kerr of China-US Focus, Rorry Daniels talks about her speculations on the U.S.' China policy after the presidential election. This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

**KJ Kerr:**

We're so glad to have you today. We're going to start with perhaps a slightly more challenging question, as there's little concrete information at this point. But, if Kamala Harris is elected president of the United States, what are your expectations for her approach to China? Is there anything that we can speculate about? How might this differ from current or past administrations?

**Rorry Daniels:**

I think Kamala Harris will bring to the table a different set of policy assumptions than perhaps the Biden administration does. What those policy assumptions are has yet to be articulated, but we can speculate just a bit based on her background and her advisers.

Right now, her national security adviser is Philip Gordon. He's a well-known expert in international relations, mostly focused on the Middle East and the transatlantic alliances, and he's been quite clear that he finds U.S. foreign policy to have been overly ambitious in the past few decades when it comes to advancing U.S. interests in the world through the process of regime change. So I expect to see a Harris administration look at Asia from a slightly different, less ideological lens, perhaps, than other administrations, both Republican and Democrat.

I think there are a lot of opportunities for practical cooperation with regimes that don't look like the United States. And Mr. Gordon has articulated his interest in exploring those opportunities and really right-sizing where the U.S. has influence to improve human rights standards, to promote democratic development and where the U.S. can better use its influence to advance American interests, despite differences in those types of regimes. That's a broad approach. However, he's only one person inside a likely administration made up of hundreds of officials.



■ Rorry Daniels specializes in U.S.-China relations and security competition, relations across the Taiwan Strait and the North Korean nuclear issue.

And, of course, Kamala Harris herself comes from two important backgrounds for looking at Asia and looking at China in particular. First, she was a senator, so she served in Congress. And Congress has a kind of notion written into its DNA, into its operating system, that America should be a beacon for the world when it comes to democracy and human rights promotion. So how will those ideas interact, given Kamala Harris's background?

In thinking about human rights, she did sponsor legislation in Congress related to Hong Kong and the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang that were very human-rights focused, while also having an adviser that really sees the limitations on American capabilities to advance the human rights agenda in the world.

Kamala Harris also comes from California, and California has its own quite unique working relationship with China. California is actually the fifth-largest economy in the world, if it's separated out. So it has a lot of the dynamics of economic cooperation with China that Kamala Harris should be intimately familiar with. That includes not only some of the effects that have been, perhaps, detrimental to American workers — that have put pressure on the U.S. labor market — but also that have brought substantial benefits.

She comes from Northern California, an area where there is, of course, a lot of tech development, and China has been participating in the U.S. tech ecosystem for a number of years. There are a lot of synergies there. So those are the kind of factors that I'm looking at and considering as she articulates her vision of foreign policy in the world.

I'll add one note, which was in her recent Democratic National Convention speech: She did reference China one time. And I really want to right-size that reference. She said (and I'm paraphrasing) that in the battle for the 21st century, we need to make sure America wins — wins the war of ideas, wins the competition of ideas — and not China. I find that to be a very general thing to say. Winning a battle of ideas is something that a politician will absolutely say, aspirationally, and it doesn't preclude any sort of strategy or strategic prioritization for how you achieve the goal.

So we're in a wait-and-see period with Kamala Harris. This has been a very atypical campaign, and I think we need to have patience with a nominee who has come in quite late in the process — really just one month ago — and is still concentrating on shoring up her own domestic support for taking over this campaign at a very, very

advanced stage. Foreign policy doesn't animate the American electorate as much as many other issues that are on the table. And I expect her focus will remain more on domestic issues rather than on foreign policy in the weeks and months ahead.

**KJ Kerr:**

I think those are really interesting and significant factors that you're looking at. If, on the other hand, we were to have a Trump administration return to office, what changes or continuations do you think we'd see in U.S. policy toward China given that scenario, and how might that impact the broader China-U.S. relationship?

**Rorry Daniels:**

I think the changes that we're likely to see in a Trump scenario really have to do with a narrowing space for diplomacy. In many ways, the Trump administration and the Biden administration identified similar problems with regard to China. The military development, the tech competition, the unfair, perhaps, economic relationship between the two sides. ... Now, the two sides have had very different tactics for how to deal with those things, but in some cases, those tactics overlapped, be it tariffs or other types of export control restrictions.

So how might Trump differentiate himself from the Biden administration? I see three major lines of effort. One is to go much harder on the punishments — and I expect that that would happen. That is what Trump has telegraphed. He has said, "I will double tariffs. I will triple tariffs. I will do 100 percent tariffs on some items" to create leverage to have a different type of economic relationship with China. And in the absence of exercising that leverage, at least to create some kind of benefit to



the American people in the form of the revenue of those tariffs.

Second, I expect to see a narrowing of space for diplomacy. Although there's a lot of criticism of the Obama administration's strategic engagement of China, it is important to observe that when the Trump administration came into office in 2017 we went from hundreds of channels of engagement to four. That became even narrower as time went on and those channels of engagement became less productive.

The Biden administration has really reopened channels of engagement. We don't have hundreds. And there may never be a return to that time where both sides feel comfortable discussing that wide range of issues with a wide range of officials. But we do have trusted sources of communication that are regularly meeting at senior levels. That fulfills important functions in the U.S. government, including consolidating our own collective opinion of what we should do and how we should approach policy for China. That will not happen in a Trump administration. The Trump administration's China policy is set at the top, and it is a very top-down directive.

***The Trump administration's China policy is set at the top, and it is a very top-down directive.***

The third major change that I would expect to see is in U.S. alliance strategy and policy. And this is a very important distinction. The Trump administration, and particularly Trump himself, has really outlined a vision for U.S. alliances that is very transactional in nature. I do "X" for you, and you give me "Y," whether that's money or access or influence — typically money. You pay for the basing of our troops — and yeah, we'll be there for you

if you need it. But it ultimately considers what we are getting in return. The Biden administration has taken a much more flexible and strategic approach to alliances, saying these are our force amplifiers, these are our influence projectors. How do we create partnerships of value for both sides so that we can capitalize on common interests? And I expect that a Harris administration would be quite open to the value of deepening U.S. alliance partnerships as well.

**KJ Kerr:**

Thank you. You mentioned the narrowing of diplomacy under Trump and how some channels reopened with Biden — not as many as before, but some. Now, we have a vice presidential candidate in Tim Walz on the Harris ticket who has quite notable experience with China. Do you think that his background might have any influence on the Harris administration's approach to China, particularly in promoting the kinds of dialogue and channels of cooperation you discussed? And then, alternatively, what are your thoughts on Republican vice presidential nominee JD Vance's views on China, and how might his stances and experience impact a Trump administration's China relationship?

**Rorry Daniels:**

Thank you. These are great questions. I think when it comes to the vice presidential candidates there's a huge gap of experience on China. Tim Walz has spent time living in China and teaching Chinese students. That brings with it an understanding of Chinese culture that's really invaluable in creating high-level diplomatic relationships, and it counters some simplistic zero-sum thinking that Chinese culture is a monolith, that all Chinese think the same way — that the government of China not only represents the people but that there's not a divergence of views either inside the government or inside society that can temper or



moderate Chinese ambition. That's a common theme inside the United States right now.

I expect Walz's experience living and working in China will deflate that balloon a bit. That said, he was in China during a particularly sensitive time, and I think that his experience in seeing a democracy movement in China fail will be instructive in how he thinks about China's development over time. That doesn't mean that it has to negatively impact the relationship, but I think it was a significant event and it will factor into how he thinks about the relationship.

I think the Republican vice presidential candidate really presents a stark contrast here. He, to the best of my knowledge, does not have experience living and working in China. His rhetoric on China really does echo what the Trump campaign sounded like in 2016. It's very focused on speaking to the American worker about unfair business practices in globalization and using China as a flag, as a proxy and as a focal point of how those processes of globalization negatively impacted the American worker. He has taken that idea into the offensive of the political campaign, saying not just you have been poorly served by your government's fostering business ties with China, but literally saying the Democrats are conspiring with China in order to maintain this negative trend for you.

So when he's in Michigan, when he's in all these other places in the United States, speaking directly to people who are in those manufacturing labor markets, he's saying Chinese investment hurts you. That's his stance and his position. It's certainly one that resonates with part of the American electorate. From my perspective, it remains to be seen how much it resonates at this point. These are talking points from eight years ago. The country in lots of ways has moved on from this set of concerns to other sets of concerns that have to do much more with global corporates and

global business that is operating in the U.S., China and many other places in the world, and a little bit less with seeing China as a proxy for the hollowing out of the manufacturing sector in the United States. So we'll see how much it resonates.

**KJ Kerr:**

Generally, what policy recommendations would you offer the next U.S. administration, whoever they might be, in managing the complexities of this bilateral relationship?

*Diplomacy is not appeasement.*

**Rorry Daniels:**

That is a very big question, because the two administrations are going to have a vastly different approach. So I'll be very generalized, but I'll say this: The U.S.-China relationship is complex and dynamic and consequential. I think that the way forward to manage a relationship this complex, dynamic and consequential is to continue an active process of diplomacy. Diplomacy is not appeasement. It's not an agreement that the other side is right or you are wrong. It's really a process of better understanding each other, better understanding each other's priorities, our strategic intentions, and mapping that against evidence that we see of actions countries are taking, or evidence that we see of trends in the way that the world is working.

So I would encourage the next administration to take an active approach to diplomacy, to continue some of this high-level diplomacy, including the diplomacy that's happening this week between the U.S. national security adviser and one of China's top leaders, Wang Yi, who also serves as foreign minister and as



▲ Senator JD Vance (left) and Donald Trump during a rally on July 27, 2024, in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

a member of the Politburo. These are the types of interactions that stabilize a relationship that could go out of control if both sides are planning their policy strategies in reaction to worst-case scenario fears. So active diplomacy is a really important part of the next administration's successful China strategy.

The second piece of this is to really be humble in your policy assumptions about China, to understand that Chinese society is almost as dynamic, if not more dynamic, than American society; that there's a host of different views inside the country about the best way forward for China; that the leaders are navigating a really complex system of governance; and that it doesn't bend to the will of any other country outside of its own interests. I would give this advice to Chinese leadership, too — not that I've ever been asked. But it's really important to come into diplomacy with humility and with attention and curiosity about what the other side thinks, rather than defen-

*But it's really important to come into diplomacy with humility and with attention and curiosity about what the other side thinks, rather than defensiveness and attention to the problems the other side needs to fix on your behalf.*

siveness and attention to the problems the other side needs to fix on your behalf.

We don't have problems in the U.S.-China relationship that will be unilaterally fixed or managed. It's not possible. It's too complex, it's too dynamic, and our governments are both too invested in ensuring success for their own people to allow those types of things to happen. What we need to do is look at our problems and recognize that we have shared problems. Some of them are obvious. We have a shared problem in climate change. Then ask, What do you want to contribute? What can I contribute in order to alleviate this problem a little bit, not just for us, but for the future of the world?

I would also say we have to take that same approach to the issues where we really don't agree, such as tech development or overcapacity, that are perhaps less sensitive than Taiwan or other issues. We have a shared problem with overcapacity, and it serves no one for one side to deny that it's a problem. If it's a problem for one side, it's a problem for both sides. And that's how we need to approach the relationship in order to come to some sort of stabilizing formula that both sides can use to guide the future of these interactions.

**KJ Kerr:**

You mentioned the need for active diplomacy, trying to better understand each other's priorities, and the significance of curiosity about what each other thinks. One facet of that can also be seen in people-to-people exchanges, be they academic or cultural or business or between educators. How crucial do you think those kinds of people-to-people contacts are in maintaining a stable and productive China-U.S. relationship, and how should — or could

— the next administration prioritize those types of exchanges?

**Rorry Daniels:**

This is another really important point and question. When Xi Jinping was in San Francisco last year, he made a point that people-to-people ties are stabilizing for our two societies, and I think the U.S. government also shares that perspective that people-to-people ties are really important. Over the last six to eight years, people-to-people exchanges have been under a lot of pressure due to security concerns about people traveling from one side to the other and misrepresenting who they are. And that is the first problem that needs to be addressed and solved. That is a problem to which both sides could bring a little bit more curiosity and a little bit less defensiveness. But there are other problems and issues in people-to-people exchanges where the government may not be the best actor to facilitate the outcomes that it wants to see.

***If it's a problem for one side, it's a problem for both sides.***

I think there are areas where governments are either not doing enough or not doing the right things in order to facilitate exchanges. Take one example: quotas. Quotas for students. We'd like to get 10,000 American students to China. It's a great idea. It's aspirational. But it doesn't create the demand inside the U.S. for students to want to go to China. Just saying we want it doesn't make it appealing. What would make that type of exchange appealing are some things technical that the government can do and some things more cultural that



civil society on both sides should take up.

On the U.S. side, it's very difficult for universities to conduct exchanges in China right now because the State Department's travel warning is high. And the reason that the State Department's travel warning is high is in part due to the security concerns of people-to-people exchanges. China is currently (according to the U.S. government) holding hundreds of people in exit bans inside China in order to create leverage for bringing people that the Chinese government has identified as criminals back to China for prosecution — or for other reasons, for investigations. Talking through those cases and resolving them so the travel warning could go down would allow universities to carry insurance and to feel a sense of safety for their students to complete exchanges in China.

There are probably similar concerns on the Chinese side about students coming to the United States. We've just been through a period where the U.S. has demonstrated very damaging intentions toward Chinese nationals through the FBI's China Initiative, where nationality and ethnicity became the first criteria for investigating someone over [alleged] crimes related to regulatory issues, exchanges, espionage, etc.

The U.S. could do better, and has done better, on that. The China Initiative has ended. And I think that civil society in the United States really took up this cause and said, "Hey, do we want to treat people this way? Is this part of our American ideal to say we'll start with your ethnicity and then find out if you're guilty? No, that is not what we do." But those are the types of things that I think civil society has to do, creating a welcoming space inside China or the U.S. for students to come. And not just to come in order to check the box on your resume that

you did it, but to come and really integrate into society, to have meaningful experiences, meaningful relationships. ... That's the stabilizing part of people-to-people exchange. And it will never be done by governments. It will be done by people.

So, how can governments facilitate people's curiosity? How can governments facilitate people's willingness to be open? I think that's the question we should be focused on, rather than this sort of end game of how many students we can get exchanged, and calling that a success.

#### **KJ Kerr:**

I appreciate your thoughts on this, and the significance of meaningful experiences and relationships ultimately coming from people. We are so grateful, Rorry, for your sharing your time and insights with China-US Focus.

*And it will never be done by governments. It will be done by people.*

INTERVIEW: **DENNIS WILDER**

# Dialogue Builds Bridges

*In this interview with China-US Focus, Dennis Wilder, senior fellow for the Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues at Georgetown University, emphasizes the significance of student exchanges between China and the United States and recounts his extensive experience in national security — particularly his role in editing the president's daily brief during his time in the White House, and his trip to the 2008 Beijing Olympics with the presidential delegation.*



Scan the QR code and watch the interview.



▲ Dennis Wilder takes the Georgetown University students to Hong Kong and Shenzhen in May, attending the “U.S.-China Student to Student Dialogue 2024”, which is part of CUSEF Next Gen Initiative.

The student delegates are from four top universities of the U.S. and mainland China, including Georgetown University, University of California San Diego, Peking University, and Fudan University.

#### James Chau:

Dennis Wilder, I feel that this is a full-circle moment because you graduated from Georgetown, you teach at Georgetown and you're here in Hong Kong because Georgetown is leading this special multi-university initiative with the China-United States Exchange Foundation to bring students into the world. How important is that — student exchanges, but also people-to-people contacts?

#### Dennis Wilder:

I think in this era, when the tensions are so high between the United States and China, it has become absolutely critical. If you look, there are only about 700 American students today who study in China, and an equal number of American students actually study in Hong Kong today, which tells you something. But the number of contacts have just dropped dramatically, first with COVID and now in the post-COVID period.

So what we're doing is to try and get a new generation of Americans out into the world. To get them with Chinese students. We just had a session this afternoon where the Chinese students explained who they are, their issues; and the American students explained. We had a discussion of LGBTQ issues in the two cultures, how different their grandparents are from each other. ... This is the kind of thing you cannot do without a program like the one you're running here in Hong Kong. It gives people a feel for the other culture. You can do all the book reading, we can teach at Georgetown, we can have them read about China, but until you experience the other side, until you begin to have some empathy for the other people, it really doesn't take. And





■ Dennis Wilder is Senior Fellow for the Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues at Georgetown University, former CIA's deputy assistant director for East Asia and the Pacific, and former National Security Council's (NSC) director for China and NSC special assistant to the U.S. president.

that's what we're trying to do.

#### **James Chau:**

Do you think, though, in this tough environment, that the people-to-people connections you just spoke of are sustainable and will be allowed to flow freely once again?

#### **Dennis Wilder:**

I think that people are people. And once they connect, they don't want to disconnect. So, for example, in my own case, I came here to the Chinese University of Hong Kong when I

was 20 years old and went to the Yale and China program. That connected me forever to Hong Kong and to the people of Hong Kong. Once people get a taste of this, once Americans get out of the American cocoon, it can change lives. It changed my life.

#### **James Chau:**

You just spoke of the American cocoon, and people do talk about the world and America's image and how America and Americans can be America-centric.

#### **Dennis Wilder:**

It's very easy.

#### **James Chau:**

Is there a Chinese cocoon, equally? Is there a way that they're looking inward, not necessarily outward, when you look at them side by side?

*Once people get a taste of this, once Americans get out of the American cocoon, it can change lives. It changed my life.*

#### **Dennis Wilder:**

Yes, I think there are parallels. I think that for young Chinese today, their parents are worried about sending them to the United States. We hear from our Chinese students that their grandmothers cry when they leave for the United States because they think they'll get shot on the streets of Washington, or that there will be drugs. There's all kinds of things they think about the United States, and then they get there and they see it's quite different from the image that they are getting from the media. So I think that on both sides right now there is a very real danger that our propaganda machines, if you will, on both sides, are painting pictures of the other culture that are just horrible. It's fear mongering, it's scaring people about the other culture.

We've got to break through. And only by programs like

yours, and what we're trying to do at Georgetown, can we break through because the governments aren't going to do it right now. The Biden administration has not restored the Peace Corps in Hong Kong or in China. The Fulbright program does not include China anymore. The Boren Fellowship Program, which was to train people for foreign languages to come into the U.S. government, they all go to Taiwan now, not to the mainland. So the government programs, at least on the U.S. side, are definitely against this kind of connection. And so schools like us, organizations like yours, we have to take over.

**James Chau:**

You mentioned the fear that some Chinese families have when they send their children to the States. And we all know that some American families are very, very fearful for their young people, who are really just climbing out of childhood into adulthood at 18 years old, about coming to mainland China. I always tell people this — that I'll give them my frank opinion on something, or whether I agree or not. But I always say that we have to respect how you feel, and I'm going to try and understand what are the origins for your beliefs, right or wrong, accurate or not. What do you think is a good way for people like us working in the wider U.S.-China space to help moderate and broker that sense of emotion, because it moves beyond policy now?

**Dennis Wilder:**

It does. And the American polling data is shocking on China today. If you look, when I was in the White House, in the Bush administration, it was about 50-50. Fifty percent of the American people had a very positive image of China, 50 percent had a negative image. Today, only about 17 percent of the American people have a positive image of China and the rest have a negative image. We have to find a way to change that and turn that around. How do we do that? It's about education. It's about bringing people to see China. It's about bringing our students here and having them interact with Chinese students and realize that they're very much like them.

You know, we talked today about social media, for example. They all live on it. The Chinese students live on social media, and the American students share this new technology. It's their lives, and they understand each other on that level. So you find the places of commonality and you build on that. This is what you have to do.

*Today, only about 17 percent of the American people have a positive image of China and the rest have a negative image. We have to find a way to change that and turn that around.*

**James Chau:**

We feel it's really important to accelerate the number and pace, but also the depth, of programs for American students in China, and also Chinese students to the United States. There's so much they can learn once they hit the ground there. And wherever they are, when people get together, especially young people — in a respectful, protected environment with the intent and purpose set out already — they get together like you spoke of just now. They talk about their values, their ideas and their ideals, but in a way that is not necessarily threatening or that doesn't apportion blame. I wonder what Dennis Wilder tells a young person coming into your office at Georgetown, not only as a professor but as a teacher, as a mentor, as a trusted figure in their young lives. What's the advice that you're giving out these days?

**Dennis Wilder:**

Well, first of all, I do this an awful lot. Our students are constantly coming in asking about their futures. They're worried about their futures. They want to make the right decisions. They want to do the right internships. They want to have the right experiences. And the one thing I do tell them is follow your passions, figure out what it is that really excites you and follow it. But also get out of the cocoon,

the American cocoon. Go overseas, spend a semester abroad, travel. Because one of the problems of America is we are so big, you can travel a long way in America without ever leaving America. You don't have to learn a foreign language.

Americans, many of them, don't learn foreign languages. They don't need it to live in their culture. And with such a huge and pervasive American culture, it's very easy for them to just stay within that culture. You have to decide to get out of that culture. You have to make a mental decision that I'm going to break away. I'm going to do something different.

*And I think that the threat from China has been exaggerated quite markedly.*

**James Chau:**

But you can say the same for China. Bigger landmass; you don't need to travel out; lots to do, lots to see. You don't need to learn another language. That can very much create the same environment.

Dennis, speaking about China (and going now to your rich background in national security), do you think that the current U.S. national security threat claims related to China — issues like semiconductors, TikTok and others — are valid and real threats, or are they exaggerated? I don't want you to answer this politely because you're here in Hong Kong. Really, what do you think? Is this a growing movement to securitize almost all aspects of the bilateral relationship? Or are their real concerns? I mean, we do know there are valid concerns about social media as it is right now.

**Dennis Wilder:**

First of all, I have worked in national security for four decades of my life. I think I know what is a national security threat and what isn't. I edited the president's daily intelligence

briefing book for six years. I've got a pretty good sense on these things. And I think that the threat from China has been exaggerated quite markedly.

Let me give you an example. The director of the FBI recently said that the Chinese are now in a position to take over the entire American electrical grid whenever they want to bring it down, and Americans will die. Now, here's my problem with that. We heard before the Ukraine war that the Russians were going to take down the entire grid in Ukraine. What happened? Well, Google and Microsoft stopped them. We have the capability to stop these attacks. It isn't simple.

Frankly, I have a lake house in western New York. The company that does my electrical power, called National Grid, can't get me electricity to save its life. I'd like the Chinese to take over the grid in western New York. You know, this is silly. The idea that the Chinese are going to take over our electrical systems just makes no sense. The electrical systems are so diffused in the United States, you couldn't possibly do it.

Some areas? Yes. We know the Chinese hacking attacks against government computers, against sensitive defense industries. We've taken Chinese to court. We've caught MSS (Ministry of State Security) officers doing this. So there are certain areas where there's no question this has been happening. But you've got to separate out these sorts of free floating fears from actual attacks.

And one of the things that bothers me about TikTok — I've seen no evidence. Nobody has provided any evidence that TikTok has somehow been used in a nefarious fashion by the Chinese government against American citizens. I think the American government owes that to the American public, if it knows of something, to explain what it knows, rather than hiding behind secrecy. I think that's a very dangerous thing to do.

I'll give you another example: Chinese buying



land in the United States. Florida is now actually barring Chinese citizens from buying condominiums. Tell me how buying a Palm Beach condominium is a national security threat. No, we worried about this with the Japanese in the 1980s. They were going to buy all of Hawaii. They bought Rockefeller Center. Our world was going to collapse. Well, what happened? The Japanese bought at overpriced prices; they lost money, Americans gained, and there was no great takeover by the Japanese. So I think that we will come back to our senses at some point and get rational national security.

But this over-securitization is happening on the Chinese side too — the unleashing of the Chinese Ministry of State Security, this new WeChat site they have where they tell every Chinese citizen that there is a spy everywhere. Again, this kind of fear mongering on both sides really has to stop. My phrase for this is “get over it.” We can be adults.

**James Chau:**

But without speaking specifically to the Florida example, you do know why many Chinese, Japanese and others buy and invest in America, don't you?

**Dennis Wilder:**

I assume because they're good investments.

**James Chau:**

They love being in America. They love the culture. They love the entertainment. They're spellbound by the opportunity to thrive, to progress, to improve their lives, and their families as well — education, research, just going around and enjoying American life.

**Dennis Wilder:**

Do you know which foreigners own the most land in the United States?

**James Chau:**

Who?

**Dennis Wilder:**

Canadians. Are we scared that the Canadians are going to take over the United States because they own such a large swath of American territory? I don't think so.

**James Chau:**

Dennis, I've only really known you in this part of your life, meaning the academic, Georgetown part. And it must be so different from all the other chapters that came before that we've just spoken on. How different is life today for you, when you think about the White House, when you think about working for President Obama, when you think about being a senior editor for the daily presidential brief and all-around being a respected senior American intelligence figure for all those decades?

*Again, this kind of fear mongering on both sides really has to stop. My phrase for this is “get over it.” We can be adults.*

**Dennis Wilder:**

First of all, James, there is nothing like standing in the Oval Office, briefing the president. You feel like you are at the center of power in the world, no question about it. You realize that in that room, the kinds of decisions that are made affect millions of people all over the globe. Similarly, when you travel with the president on Air Force One, and you travel in what we call the bubble with the president of the United States, with all that security, all those armored vehicles — we call it the beast, the American limousine

## CUSEF x Baucus Institute Initiative, June 2024



▲ The students learn traditional Chinese paper fan painting at China Soong Ching Ling Science & Culture Center for Young People in Beijing.





- ◀ Former U.S. Ambassador to China Max Baucus and the Montana university students visit the Starbucks Reserve Roastery in Shanghai.

The Montana students watch a projection of Emperor Qianlong's poem Dream on the ceiling at the Hong Kong Palace Museum.



- ◀ The Montana students visit China's Instagram-like Xiaohongshu in Shanghai, learning about its business model and social good practices.

that the president rides in. The power, the sheer raw power of America is very evident to you.

I'll give you just one example of this. I don't know if you remember the Indonesian tsunami in 2004. I was on Christmas leave in Cleveland, Ohio, at my sister's home, and I got a call. And I rushed back to Washington. The reports were that 100,000 people had died. I went into the situation room and I called a meeting, and Pacific Command comes on, A.I.D. comes on, the State Department comes on, the ambassador in Indonesia. All the players come on. And we're looking at each other and we say, "What do we do?" And on comes the chief of naval operations. He says, "I have a carrier battle group in this harbor, Hong Kong harbor. They're on Christmas leave. Their families are with them. But we can send the families home and we can be at sea tomorrow." Now that carrier battle group, the Lincoln Carrier Battle Group, what did it have? Hospitals, helicopters, desalinization, body bags. They had everything that was needed by these people in Indonesia, and we sailed within two days. We had this huge machinery available for humanitarian operations with the Indonesians. It was utterly fantastic.

That's American power. That's the soft power side that you don't often hear about. But when you work in the White House, that's what you feel — that we can do almost anything if we put our minds to it, if we're creative enough and we're sensible enough. American power can be used in the world in all kinds of ways. And hopefully, for good.

### James Chau:

Now we've seen and spoken about the U.S. and China and their potential for global good when they come together, especially the way that they helped to ad-



dress the financial crisis in 2008, the Ebola outbreak in 2014, what they're doing now on fentanyl and climate action, all these examples. ... Is that overstated? And I want to take the assumption out of that. We always say that they can do good when they come together. But now, with so many years having passed and this relationship having declined, do they really still have that capacity to do that kind of good that you just referenced?

**Dennis Wilder:**

I think we do. Maybe I'm overly optimistic. But one thing, James, that we are doing with this group of students we have here in the next few days is discuss the responsibility that the United States and China have to the Global South. Let's just take one issue: African demographics. The population of Africa will explode in the next 20 to 30 years. And when I say explode, I mean the numbers are unbelievable.

This is going to cause all kinds of serious problems — health problems, food scarcity problems, civil unrest problems. The two greatest powers in the world had better figure out how we can work together to ameliorate that or else Africa blows up in a way we have never seen before. Terrorist problems will come out of that for Europe, for the United States, for the world. So I don't think we have a choice. I actually think we have to find a way to work together on some of these issues in the Global South, because if we don't, we're both in a world of hurt. We both now have to take responsibility as the two great economic engines of the world.

**James Chau:**

We spoke about this briefly, but for six years in Washington, in the White House, in that bubble, you edited a daily presidential brief, which is this daily, highly classified document that's only written for and presented to the president in the morning and for a small number of individuals that he chooses. Tell me about what you can take from that, and

what we can do now in terms of communication — to inform publicly, but also communications to avert actions that are based on the wrong information and therefore lead to the wrong decision.

**Dennis Wilder:**

First of all, we often jokingly call this the most expensive niche publication in the world. If you think about it, the intelligence machinery of the United States costs \$80 billion a year, and 20,000 analysts write for the president's daily brief. It better be good every morning. And that was my job, to make it absolutely the gold standard.

How did we make it the gold standard? Number one was rigor, rigor of tradecraft. We called it analytic tradecraft. Analytic tradecraft is hugely important — precision of language, concise language, being able to separate fact from analytic judgment, from speculation.

We spend a huge amount of time ... in fact, I teach this. I teach it to groups like Eurasia Group, actually. But I teach this technique because the world is short on this technique these days. People do not understand how to separate these things out. People get stuck in conspiracy theories and in speculative arguments when what is needed — and what we put in front of the president every day, believe me — is very clear. Here's what we know, Mr. President, here are the facts. Here is what we think is going on. And by the way, Mr. President, here's what we don't know, and we'll try and go get more information. We'll get our sources of information out there trying to find it out. But you need to know, Mr. President, that we don't have the answer on this one.

So we're very blunt in the president's daily brief. We tell him what we know. We tell him what we think it means. We also tell him what the gaps are in our ability to make analytic judgments. We are humble in the book — we have to be. The president has to know

what he's working with, and where we can be certain and when we're uncertain. And then he has to make judgments about what he's going to do based on understanding, clearly, the picture that we have for him.

**James Chau:**

So the picture constantly changes.

**Dennis Wilder:**

Absolutely. And you have to change it.

**James Chau:**

You have to change it, and you only have a so-called full set of information at a given time. It's a snapshot. What do you do when there is a mistake with a snapshot you've provided to the most powerful person in the world?

**Dennis Wilder:**

You admit it. Absolutely as fast as you can.

**James Chau:**

And that's a trust builder in itself, isn't it?

**Dennis Wilder:**

Absolutely. We are, again, brutally candid with ourselves. After 9/11, we spent months on lessons learned. How did we miss this? What did we have that we could have analyzed that we didn't analyze? Who didn't work with whom? And what we found was there were gaps. The FBI knew of pilots, Arabic pilots, training in Arizona to fly commercial aircraft, and these were rather strange Saudi individuals. We had intelligence that somebody was going to try and use an aircraft for something. But the FBI and the CIA didn't talk to each other. We didn't connect the dots. We didn't creatively look at the information we had. And so you go back every time you fail. We failed on Iraq WMD. We've

gone back and we've said, what was wrong? Sometimes you ask the wrong question. If you ask the wrong question, you'll get the wrong answer, and you won't help the president of the United States.

So you're constantly learning lessons. You have to learn lessons; otherwise, you're not doing what you are called upon to do. And what you have to understand is that people's lives are at stake. The president has to make decisions. For example, let's just take a very simple one: We get information that the embassy in some country is about to be attacked by a terrorist group. We bring that into the Oval Office. The national security adviser has to make a decision whether to pull the ambassador out. Do you close that embassy for a while? Or do you rely on the local service to help you and find these guys and stop the attack?

I can't tell you how many attacks we've stopped around the world, terrorist attacks, because we had warning and we acted on the warning. We worked with foreign governments and we kept ugly things from happening. One of the things about my work in those days was you never talked about your successes. The successes are always very quiet. Your failures are very public. So the public gets an unfair picture, because they never know what you stopped from happening. And believe me, we spend a whole lot of time stopping things around the world, working with others, working with the Hong Kong Police, working with the Hong Kong Port Authority, working with the Hong Kong Airport Authority. We work all over the world to protect not only American citizens but other citizens. It is incredibly important.

**James Chau:**

Sometimes the very first signal was in those briefs that you edited, the vocabulary that you chose, the narrative that you established, the language, the positioning, the questions you ask, and the way you ask them. It

was also so very, very important what you did all those years.

**Dennis Wilder:**

Right. One example of this before 9/11, we did write a PDB that sounded like a warning. But frankly, if you look at that — and it's unclassified now, by the way — it's the only PDB ever unclassified, it was poorly written. And the president was on vacation at his ranch. Secretary Rice was on vacation, the national security adviser was on vacation. Sometimes you can try to warn, and circumstances work against you. Then you really have to think, did I really warn? And how do I make sure I warn the next time.

**James Chau:**

I want to finish off on a lighter note, maybe, but also a substantive one, because you talked about the bubble and being in the heart of what maybe a handful of individuals in a lifetime ever get to experience — what you call the raw power of the United States at its best, and in other ways as well. In a very wonderful way, I remember 2008, during the Beijing Olympics. At that time I was anchoring the Olympic morning show. But you had a very, very different experience because you went with the part of the presidential delegation that went to Beijing — a city that you know well, a language that you can speak — and you went to see the greatest show on Earth, which is the Olympics, which that year was held in the Chinese capital.

**Dennis Wilder:**

And we had the great swimmer Michael Phelps. We had the dream team basketball team, which I watched play at the Olympics. I mean, we had some superstar American athletes at that Olympics.

**James Chau:**

With Paris just a few weeks away now, per-

haps you could finish by giving us an inside look at what it was like to be part of that machinery, but also the family that represented a nation at a time of global humanity at the greatest show on Earth.

**Dennis Wilder:**

You know, this is actually a fascinating story, because what people forget about the 2008 Olympics is that there was a lot of opposition to President Bush actually going. Steven Spielberg had refused the offer the Chinese made to help with the show. The Prince of Wales said he would not come. Angela Merkel said she wouldn't come. A hundred and ten members of Congress wrote a letter to the president saying he shouldn't go. Every political adviser in the White House said he shouldn't go.

When I got on Air Force One with the president, there was me, the president and his father, who believed we should be going, and the rest of the plane was full of people who felt this was the wrong thing. Why did Bush do it? Legacy. His father and he had a legacy with China that was extraordinary — both of them. They both created relationships with Chinese leaders. Bush Sr. with Deng Xiaoping, Bush Jr. with Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. They felt that they had done something very important in the world, and this was the crowning achievement. They opened the new American embassy in Beijing. Kissinger came — I sat with Kissinger at the ceremony. You know, President Bush Sr. came to Diao-yutai. They had a grand meal there. This was a crowning achievement for the Bush family.

**James Chau:**

Wasn't President Clinton there as well?

**Dennis Wilder:**

He was.



**James Chau:**

The three of them opened the embassy, didn't they?

**Dennis Wilder:**

Right, they all went. So it was this very real high point in U.S.-China relations, and it was because of the belief that these two men had — and I can't stress this enough, I knew them both well. I spent a great deal of time with Bush 41 talking about China while he was in the White House, and after retirement I spent a great deal of time with Bush 43. They believed in personal diplomacy in a way that was almost religious, that you build relationships, and you keep those relationships.

So after Tiananmen, you will remember that Bush 41 knew he had to do some things, so he put some sanctions on China, but he sent [then-National Security Advisor] Brent Scowcroft secretly to Beijing to tell Deng Xiaoping this relationship is too important to allow one event to derail it. And consequently, he was able to keep the relationship going in a positive direction.

**James Chau:**

We're very, very proud here at CUSEF that we have a special relationship with the year 2008. I happened to be with Mr. Tung when the Olympics were announced in 2001, seven years ahead. ... We were founded in 2008, CUSEF, with the support of our honorary adviser, Dr. Kissinger, who served until his passing. And of course, there's been a special relationship between our founder and Bush 41, who had deep care and concern for what happened here in China and the outcomes for ordinary Chinese people ... that picture of him waving from the car with Mrs. Bush, and being the bicycling ambassador here as well.

**Dennis Wilder:**

I'll tell you one more story. The first time I

met Governor Bush — when I was to do his first China intelligence briefing — I went to the ranch in Texas. I went into the ranch house, and on the wall were two cultural revolution posters. I said Governor Bush, this doesn't fit with your image. And he said, "The world doesn't understand me on China. I have been fascinated with China ever since I went to Beijing when my father was head of the Liaison Office. This is a country I will focus on." And I knew at that moment that I was going to work for him, because he had his father's instincts on China. He had learned at the knee of his father how important China was.

**James Chau:**

Dennis Wilder, I think we're in the same space. We understand how important the U.S. and China together are — really important. I want to thank you for the trust and time that you've given having this exchange today.

**Dennis Wilder:**

Well, we are just extraordinarily glad to be working with CUSEF. We are extraordinarily glad to be working with C.H. Tung and his family. It's important work. It's work that must continue, whatever obstacles may be placed in our way.

*They believed in personal diplomacy in a way that was almost religious, that you build relationships, and you keep those relationships.*



## China's "Black Myth: Wukong" Looks Like a Hit

"Black Myth: Wukong," China's first blockbuster game, has captured global attention with its blend of ancient mythology and advanced technology as it sets a new standard in gaming. Beyond its impressive gameplay and visuals, it has sparked global intrigue, highlighting the potential for a cultural export that can bridge gaps and foster dialogue.





▲ Gamescom 2023, COLOGNE, GERMANY

Gaming enthusiasts waiting in front of the stand *Black Myth: Wukong* at the 2023 Gamescom gaming fair on August 23, 2023 in Cologne, Germany. Gamescom is the world's largest computer and video gaming fair.





**Philip Cunningham**  
*Independent Scholar and  
Film Critic*

China's first blockbuster game, "Black Myth: Wukong" is taking the gaming world by storm. While its stunning 10 million-plus sales in the opening days are mostly from China, it is piquing interest — and no small bit of envy, admiration and rage — in far corners of the global gaming community.

***Few observers would dispute that China is a superpower in economic and military terms, but it's generally felt the country punches below its weight in terms of cultural exports.***

Praises for the detailed graphics are near universal, and the gameplay is considered sufficiently challenging to elicit grudging praise from gamers outside of China who previously didn't think China had the right stuff to do it. "Black Myth" is touted as an action role-playing game characterized by high difficulty and emphasis on environmental storytelling in a dark fantasy setting. Because it draws heavily on classic myth and actual locations, the game is at once out of this world and very much grounded in it.

Few observers would dispute that China is a superpower in economic and military terms, but it's generally felt the country

punches below its weight in terms of cultural exports. Sure, the Chinese cinema boom has long held the respect of global film critics, but the international box office has not always been quick to follow. And, more generally, culture is perhaps China's most enduring and beloved export, going back to ancient times, as Chinese cuisine, textiles, fine arts and architecture have long captured the world's imagination.

At the same time it is easy for fans of global youth culture to note that Chinese exports enjoy only a fraction of the market share and consumer enthusiasm that characterizes Japan, which has swept the world with anime, manga, cute Hello Kitty memes, karate and video games. South Korea, punching above its weight for a country its size, has almost singlehandedly wowed the world's youth with K-Pop groups such as Blackpink and Stray Kids. In recent years, these creative assets have served as powerful tools of soft diplomacy and exchange, shaping global perceptions and extending influence far beyond their borders.

As for China, not so much.

Now along comes "Black Myth." The hints of a turning cultural tide can be discerned in the overwhelmingly positive early reviews. The product represents years of hard work, combining lovingly rendered scenes of traditional China with themes taken from "Journey to the West," one of China's most successful cultural exports of all time, albeit mostly limited to the East Asian sphere.

"Journey to the West" provides both a foundational narrative grounded in myth that locks the story into Chinese folk tradition and a range of crazy, colorful characters with impossible skill sets that

eerily anticipate and fit perfectly the idiosyncratic needs of video gamers born centuries later.

*A mischievous monkey who can fly? Check.*

*A magic cudgel? Check.*

*Dragons and other fantastic creatures? Check.*

*Unworldly characters who defy death? Check.*

*A likeable rogue who overcomes adversity after many ordeals? Check.*

The international reaction to the game's release on X (Twitter) has been overwhelmingly positive to date, as thousands of English-language posters who self-identify as gamers sing its praises, sometimes softly and with raised eyebrows but praise nonetheless.

***Yet early returns suggest that dedicated gamers are not going to let politics, or China's iffy image in the West, come between them and some good gameplay.***

What? A decent game, maybe good, maybe even great — from China?

Hardcore gamers, however aloof they may be to politics, are not unaware of the current tensions between the United States and China, yet early returns suggest that dedicated gamers are not going to let politics, or China's iffy image in the West, come between them and some good gameplay. As "nib95" an enthusiastic poster on X writes:

*"Woah, super strong intro for 'Black Myth: Wukong'! Epic God of War takes on the Titans fantasy vibes. Incredible physics-based volumetric effects in first boss, plus cool magic abilities.*

*Graphics are superb, almost tech demo-like at times."*

According "DudeLore," another poster on X:

*"'Black Myth: Wukong' is absolutely Incredible! I'm about an hour in, and the entire game feels like a cinematic trailer for another game. No Pre Render BS. I'm getting well into 150 fps range at all times. 1440p maxed graphics. So far, the story is starting off very well, ... game of the year if this continues. Highly recommended. Everyone deserves to play this."*

There is a touching response to this post, in what may be the beginnings of a friendly grassroots diplomacy between Chinese and non-Chinese players, as "DotDotLyu" responds:

*"Have fun! If u got any trouble understanding the background story, I can help with that."*

Chinese gamers can rightfully lay claim to greater familiarity with the source material, which may be overwhelming to gamers unfamiliar with "Journey to the West." But the story, based on Sun Wukong, the monkey king, is so well known in East Asia, from Japan to Singapore to Korea to Thailand, that it will likely make a soft landing in these markets.

Posters seem uniformly knocked out by the quality graphics, although the lifelike renderings and carefully calibrated motions designed to reflect the physics of the real world take their due in terms of massive data demands on the player's end. And there are some complaints about frame drops and stutters, the imperfect state of play on PlayStation and the frustratingly delayed Xbox release.

"RinoTheBouncer," who self-identifies as a visual artist and content creator, wrote to his 60,000 followers on Aug 27 that "Black Myth: Wukong" is a contender for GOTY— game of the year:

*"Has such wonderfully designed strong female*



▲ *Black Myth: Wukong* is an action RPG rooted in Chinese mythology. The story is based on *Journey to the West*, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

*characters. Normally, I tend to avoid these charged topics, but it's weird to me that the game was criticized for lack of diversity when it has seven major female characters who stand out with such unique designs. It's a Chinese game based on a classic literary work with great diversity, gameplay and presentation."*

Lifestyle guru "Nib95" adds:

*"More I play 'Black Myth: Wukong,' the more it's a top GOTY contender. Saw this insanely ornate and detailed design in a shrine, only to later be miniaturized INTO IT for a boss + trapped in a magic bag! Attention to art detail and creativity is incredible!"*

When another poster points out that the settings are based on real locations, he adds: "Oh

wow. I did not know this. Now I have to see this in real life. Thank you for the link! top tier! hella cool."

The interactive video game market is incredibly competitive, and gamer tastes can be fickle, so it is no sure thing to say "Black Myth" is game of the year. But within days of its launch, it has left its mark in the field and represents a sure soft power success for its producers. If nothing else, it will enjoy ancillary benefits not available to players of "Star Wars" and other unearthly fantasy realms, because immersion in the game is bound to pique interest in visiting some of the real-world locations depicted within.

After becoming acquainted with the lavish and elaborate sets for uncanny action, the ga-



mer can actually step inside the historic locations for a truly interactive visit with the sites that inspired the fantasy setting. Locations include Xiaoxitian Temple, the Yungang grottoes, Yuhuang Temple, Tiefo Temple, the Yingxian wood pagoda and Guanque Tower.

Most of the temples depicted within are located in Shanxi province, rather than the far western and Indic locations of the source material, but the game speaks to the primacy of an ancient heartland and the importance of Buddhism in cultural life. The graphically rendered sites range from Shanxi province to the municipalities of Tianjin and Chongqing and on to Dali, Yunnan province, offering the obsessive gamer an opportunity to visit each site — perhaps the closest some may ever get to the real thing — and embark on a truly impressive China odyssey.

What's more, as a beloved myth throughout Asia that transcends national boundaries, it will find a considerable non-Chinese audience that is primed and ready to go with the fun. In what may also augur well for the Western market reach of "Black Myth," the 16-century source material in "Journey to the West" was designed to be playful from the outset. It is considered by some scholars to have been a kind of game at the time, a writing game. Based on old stories, myths, Buddhism and the historical transmission of ideas between India, China and lands between, it represents a kind of borderless source material that is rich, colorful and eclectic enough to have broad appeal, emphasizing the role of cultural exports and entertainment in fostering cross-cultural curiosity and dialogue. National media is sure to weigh in, as in the case of Japan, where a somewhat tone-deaf "cool Japan" movement was given bureaucratic heft. But these things are best left at the grassroots, where real success is measured.

Perhaps it might even inspire a new wave of curiosity, encouraging players to explore the real-world locations that have shaped the game's captivating narrative.

*It represents a kind of borderless source material that is rich, colorful and eclectic enough to have broad appeal, emphasizing the role of cultural exports and entertainment in fostering cross-cultural curiosity and dialogue.*



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*Our hosts Kyle Obermann, James Chau, and Tasmin Little tell stories that bring you closer to those shaping our global future.*

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▲ Clarissa von Spee brings more than a decade of museum experience to the Cleveland Museum of Art. She served as curator of the Chinese and Central Asian Collections, Department of Asia, at the British Museum in London from 2008 until 2016.

## A Century of Art Exchanges Between Cleveland and China

■ **Clarissa von Spee**

*James and Donna Reid Curator of Chinese Art and Interim Curator of Islamic Art, Chair of Asian Art, The Cleveland Museum of Art*

The Cleveland Museum of Art's century of exchanges with China serves as a testament to the power that art and culture have to transcend geopolitical boundaries and foster mutual understanding between nations.



This year, the Cleveland Museum of Art in Cleveland, Ohio, celebrated a century of cultural exchanges with China, highlighted by the exhibition “China’s Southern Paradise: Treasure from the Lower Yangzi Delta” from September 2023 to January 2024, a testament to the enduring power of art and culture to transcend geopolitical boundaries and foster mutual understanding between nations.

In 2019, Japan’s former Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi was asked where she sees China in 2040. She responded: “Asia in 2040 will be multipolar. India will emerge as a leader alongside China and the U.S., which will remain an imperative economic partner to the region. Japan will also remain a leader....” Whether the prognosis remains valid or not, it indicates that we should be prepared for an evolving global landscape in which multiple powers exist, each contributing to a diverse tapestry of diplomatic interactions.

In such a multipolar world, the role of cultural institutions such as the Cleveland Museum of Art becomes even more critical. These institutions not only foster bilateral understanding but also facilitate broader dialogues that transcend traditional power dynamics and help to build a more interconnected global community.

Through our exhibitions, collaborations, and acquisitions, the museum has not only showcased the richness of Chinese artistic traditions but also nurtured a dialogue that enriches both American and Chinese societies. This century milestone illustrates how museums and cultural institutions worldwide can play a significant, if not pivotal, role in diplomacy and peace-building efforts, bridging gaps and forging connections that governments cannot always achieve alone.

The impact of art and culture in the field of international diplomacy — in particular during times of political tension and economic crisis — is widely acknowledged. However, it is rarely emphasized that diplomacy’s success is highly dependent on the long-term

relationship between two respective countries or partnering institutions. These relationships, built on trust and mutual respect, enable cultural exchanges to flourish even amid geopolitical challenges. The more interaction and collective memory both parties share, the greater the chance of navigating difficult conversations in times of tension. This is important to note as the successful outcome of collaborative efforts, such as international loan exhibitions, will ultimately benefit the greater public and could lead to better long-term relations and foster world peace and understanding.

*Through our exhibitions, collaborations, and acquisitions, the museum has not only showcased the richness of Chinese artistic traditions but also nurtured a dialogue that enriches both American and Chinese societies.*

As the curator of Chinese art and chair of Asian art at the CMA, and with many years of experience and travels to China, I’ve had the opportunity to witness the impact of art and culture on the broader China-U.S. relationship firsthand. As governments have struggled over the last few years to find ways to decrease tensions and increase positive exchanges, museums like the CMA have been actively seeking to both maintain and build upon our long-standing relationships with China to transcend these tensions.

The museum’s most recent exhibition, “China’s Southern Paradise. Treasures from the Lower Yangzi Delta,” is evidence that trust and relationships built over decades between the museum and its Chinese partners have helped the institution through challenging moments in achieving collaboration. As the largest China-related show in the museum’s history, it was the only post-pandemic exhibition worldwide to receive loans from numerous institutions in China. This achie-

vement was highlighted in an article by Enid Tsui in the South China Morning Post, that read, “China shows at U.S. museum ‘built on decades of trust’ — Treasures on loan to the Cleveland Museum of Art reveal how cultural exchanges continue even amid times of tension.”

By the end of the exhibition, hundreds of local schoolchildren had visited the show. University students throughout the U.S. traveled to Cleveland, a Midwestern industrial city on the shores of Lake Erie, and many stayed for as long as a week to view this treasure trove. Local visitors came repeatedly and left enthusiastic comments. A local Chinese person who was teaching classes in Mandarin wrote: “[M]y sincere gratitude... for the captivating exhibition. The experience proved to be truly inspiring for all my students, who thoroughly enjoyed the visit. We consider ourselves fortunate to have had the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the authentic culture showcased.”

An American couple wrote: “We viewed the exhibition and were blown away by the exceptional and extensive content. ... [My wife] has Alzheimer’s and it has been years since I have seen her more engaged than she was going through the exhibition.”

Throughout the CMA’s history, curators of Chinese art have considered it their mission to inspire curiosity, knowledge and respect for China, its people and history — all through the arts. It is noteworthy that the museum’s first curator in 1914, Arthur MacLean, was a specialist in Asian art. He said about his role: “China in my estimation is a wonderful nation. ... It seems to me that it is the duty of those who have been to that land, or of those who have given it study, to make us realize how important the Chinese nation is.”

At present, as geopolitical tensions between China and the United States exist and mainstream media convey an often-biased picture of China, the role of museums in

addressing this imbalance through the presentation of art and culture becomes more pertinent. Today, the Cleveland Museum holds one of the most important collections of Chinese art outside of Asia and is known for exhibitions that have enhanced our understanding of its culture. The CMA’s national reputation for Chinese Art was firmly established under the directorship of Sherman Lee (1918-2008). For over two generations his books illustrating the Cleveland collection were used by university students around the country. From the 1950s through the 1970s, when China was mostly closed to foreigners, the museum’s collection was an important resource for research and teaching in the U.S., and CMA’s artworks became quasi-ambassadors of Chinese culture in America. In addition, Sherman Lee’s legendary exhibitions, “Chinese Art under the Mongols” in 1968 and “Eight Dynasties of Chinese Paintings” in 1980 motivated American audiences to learn more about China.

***“China in my estimation is a wonderful nation. ... It seems to me that it is the duty of those who have been to that land, or of those who have given it study, to make us realize how important the Chinese nation is.”***

In 1972, President Richard Nixon’s trip to China marked the start of a gradual opening of the country that eventually resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two nations. Following this, as early as 1973, 12 North American art historians and archeologists traveled to China, led by Sherman Lee, then-director of the CMA. The group visited museums, met with colleagues, studied artworks and archeological sites and enjoyed each other’s company at banquets and ping pong games. Lee’s tenure at the CMA ended with an international conference in celebration of the “Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting” exhibition. Apart from



seminal scholarship and most important, this unprecedented gathering of art and people brought scholars together from Taiwan, mainland China, Japan, Europe and the United States. In the larger political context, the gathering took place after Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy initiative in the late 1970s, allowing Chinese and Western scholars to travel more frequently between China, Europe and the United States.

At the turn of the millennium, China's economy boomed. A high point in the history of U.S.-China cultural relations was reached with the exhibition "Masterpieces of Early Chinese Paintings and Calligraphy in American Collections," which was shown for the 60th anniversary of the Shanghai Museum in 2012. Sixty calligraphy and painting works from the 12th to 14th century Song and Yuan dynasties were displayed, all of them borrowed by the Shanghai Museum from four American museum collections: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the MFA Boston and the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art (NAMA).

This exhibition was seen not only by some 8,000 visitors per day but also had a far-reaching impact on U.S.-China relations. In an interview, Colin Mackenzie, former curator of Chinese Art at NAMA, said: "The importance of this exhibition is unprecedented. ... The fact that four great American museums were willing to lend Chinese masterworks back to China is a tribute to the excellent relations enjoyed between them and the Shanghai Museum. I am also certain that the Chinese visitors hugely appreciate the opportunity they have been given to see these paintings and that they will hope for more cultural exchanges between China and America."

Just six years later, in 2018, the year the previous U.S. administration began its trade war with Beijing, the Cleveland Museum sent its famous scroll "Qingbian Mountains" by Dong Qichang (1555-1636) to China, where it was enthusiastically received by Shanghai Museum visitors. The CMA's most recent exhibition, "China's Southern Paradise" (2023-24), was realized under more chal-









Literati Pursuits-Guqin, 1700s  
China, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).



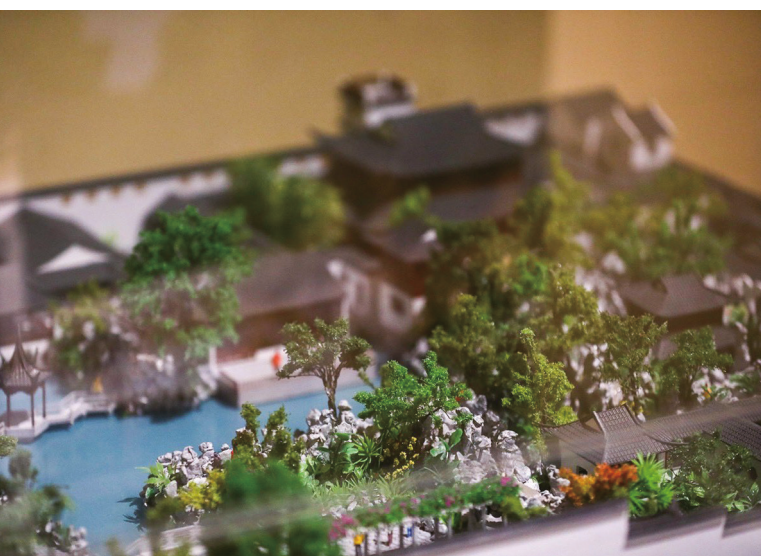
Raft Cup, 1300s–1400s  
Attributed to Zhu Bishan (Chinese, c. 1300–after 1362).  
Hammered silver soldered together, with chased decoration;  
overall: 16 cm.



The Thousand Buddha Hall and the Pagoda of the “Cloudy Cliff” Monastery, from Twelve Views of Tiger Hill, Suzhou after 1490. Image: 31.1 x 41 cm; overall: 36.5 x 49.9 cm.  
Shen Zhou (Chinese, 1427–1509)  
China, Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)



*Various collaborative initiatives between the CMA and its Chinese partners, including exhibitions, professional staff exchanges and conservation projects, have helped build trust and confidence over the years that continue to benefit the American and Chinese public through times of geopolitical tension.*



China's Southern Paradise offers a rare glimpse into the rich cultural heritage of Jiangnan, or the region south of the Yangtze River, which has always been a land of abundance and romance in China's history.

lenging circumstances. The pandemic had upended travel and exchanges, and political tension between China and the U.S. was high. Almost all larger exhibition projects planned in the U.S. and Europe in collaboration with Chinese institutions were cancelled or postponed.

Fortunately, when the CMA reached out to its Chinese exhibition partners, the initial response was overwhelmingly positive. All museum directors confirmed their support and saw the exhibition — as did their colleagues in the U.S. — as a way to transcend tensions and to continue long-standing relationships.

Looking back, the Cleveland Museum of Art has enjoyed a full century of successful U.S.-China relations. Various collaborative initiatives between the CMA and its Chinese partners, including exhibitions, professional staff exchanges and conservation projects, have helped build trust and confidence over the years that continue to benefit the American and Chinese public through times of geopolitical tension. And as we look to the future, the continued commitment of museums and cultural institutions to international collaboration will be crucial in navigating the complexities of a multipolar world, and cultural exchanges will remain a vital component of diplomacy and human connection.





▲ James Chau, President of CUSEF, interviews Vuk Jeremic in Beijing, June 2024.

INTERVIEW: **VUK JEREMIC**

## Diplomacy in Motion

*In this discussion with CUSEF President James Chau in June, Serbian politician and diplomat Vuk Jeremic analyzes China's relationship with Europe, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and his tenure as president of the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly. He also explores the relationship between sports and international exchanges.*





■ **Vuk Jeremic**

President of the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), Editor-in-Chief of Horizons



*Scan the QR code and watch the interview.*

**James Chau:**

Vuk Jeremic, thank you so much for this time here in Beijing. Throughout your career, you've worn so many hats, in sports, in politics and of course in the international community. But let's start off with you as a European. When you look at China and its place in the world and the reaction from Europeans like yourself, what does Europe think of China today?

**Vuk Jeremic:**

First of all, thank you very much for having me on the show. And I come from Serbia. So Serbia's relationship with China is not the usual relationship that China has with a European country. I'm very proud to say that Serbia's relationship with China is possibly the strongest friendship and alliance that China has in Europe. This is our perhaps subjective view, but we certainly view China as a very, very close friend of Serbia. But when you talk about Europe at large, Europe is a more complicated place, and especially these days. Because of the geopolitical recession in which we live, in which great power relations become worse by the day, there are considerations to be made when it comes to projecting the future relationship. I think there is going to be great pressure on European countries and the European Union as a whole to take a far more cautious view on Chinese relations. I say this doesn't apply to Serbia, because Serbia is an outlier. We're friends, and that's not going to change. We have an ironclad friendship confirmed by our two presidents and President Xi's recent visit in Belgrade. But I'm talking about other European countries.

There'll be pressure by external actors to relativize or to curb relations between European countries and China. And I very much hope that Europe is not going to fall into the same trap in this challenge in the same way that it fell into the trap of deteriorating relations with Russia, because deteriorating relations with Russia cost Europe dearly — especially in economic terms, but also in security terms and in other terms. If they repeat the mistake and do another self-inflicted wound

*If they repeat the mistake and do another self-inflicted wound in terms of curbing the relationship, the economic relationship with China, in particular, and the technology relationship with China, I think is going to reflect very negatively on the future growth of Europe.*

in terms of curbing the relationship, the economic relationship with China, in particular, and the technology relationship with China, I think is going to reflect very negatively on the future growth of Europe. So I hope that there'll be more reason and more sanity than there was in European quarters when it came a few years ago to cutting off relations with the Russian Federation.

**James Chau:**

The relationship between China and France is relatively good. And as you said, on that recent trip to Europe, the Chinese leader also went to Paris, marking sixty years of that diplomatic relationship. But France, Germany and Serbia aside, there are more than a few European states that seem to have a problem with China. And I just wonder, what should China be doing to reach out to them or to perhaps communicate its message more accurately?

**Vuk Jeremic:**

Well, we phrase the question this way, like there are some European countries that have a problem with China. What kind of problem do you have? If you leave aside that a big brother comes from somewhere and tells you, you should be careful about our relationship. ... Why would you have a problem with China? China is very far away. I mean, I can understand that some countries view Russia in a very suspicious way, because of history, be-

cause of size, because of proximity, right? But China is really far away and China has been exceptionally benign when it comes to its relations with European countries. We don't live in Southeast Asia or in the South China Sea. I could understand people there having slightly different views than us. We are in Europe. We have done exceptionally well by trading with China.

Now the world is undergoing a technological revolution, another technological revolution. China is definitely leading this technological revolution in so many fields. Why would we as Europe cut ourselves off from that? So I think China should be preserving its patience, which China is traditionally very good at, at least the China that I know. So preserving strategic patience, continuing to reach out, ignoring provocations — and there are going to be a number of provocations. There are going to be people willing to pick a fight. Pass it on. So I think if one preserves calm, if one continues to solidify existing friendships, it's going to become obvious sooner rather than later that deteriorating relations with China you can do only at your peril. I mean, at your cost, at the cost of your economy, at the cost of the well-being of your people. So in that sense, I hope that Europe, or most European countries are going to do the right thing.

***So I think China should be preserving its patience, which China is traditionally very good at, at least the China that I know.***

**James Chau:**

It's fascinating sitting here and listening not just to your insights, but to the practical advice that you offered just there. Let's look at China and Europe, in the context of U.S.-China relations. That relationship has really declined as of late, 45 years exactly after normalization by those co-architects, Mr. Deng Xiaoping, and of course the great President Jimmy Carter. We



at the Foundation believe that Europe, among other regions, but Europe in particular, has a very valuable role to play in this relationship. As a region, it is, by and large, a trusted ally of the United States. It's a region with countries like Serbia and others also trusted by China, and Europe is incredibly important, culturally, economically, socially, politically. What could that role look like? How best could that role be encouraged and empowered for Europeans to play between the U.S. and China to make that better for everyone?

**Vuk Jeremic:**

Of course, there are so many ways in which one can try and answer this question. And cultural exchanges and strengthening people-to-people ties is obviously part of the answer. But I propose that an answer, perhaps a strategic one, lies in what will be the shared future of technological development between Europe and China? Because this is where China is undisputedly leading Europe — in the field of sustainable technologies, electric vehicles, batteries, solar panels — which is going to be very, very important for future sustainability plans that, again, China has and Europe has. And they kind of converge when it comes to what Europe and China are trying to achieve.

I think it would be exceptionally important that China offers these technologies and that some of it or perhaps a majority of it becomes something that is produced in Europe. So not just exports. You're exporting an electric vehicle or exporting a battery, but actually building this in Europe. Employing European workers. Making what Chinese call a win-win, like a true win-win. And the beginning of that I noticed in President Xi's visit to Hungary — for instance, when they declared the opening of several factories, some of them for electric vehicles, and some of them for batteries for electric vehicles with Chinese technology, but produced in the EU.

Hungary is a member of the European Union. I think it's a very interesting pilot project that could be replicated in the future in several Eu-

ropean states. And if this takes off, if this goes ahead, of course, it's going to be difficult to negotiate all aspects of it. But if this is a success, I think that we will have a century of Sino-European cooperation and friendship, and we should be working hard to try to achieve it.

**James Chau:**

It's also interesting in the way that you engage these ideas. You mentioned people contacts, people diplomacy earlier. And of course, not forgetting that for four years you led your country's tennis federation. So we often hear of you as the secretary-general candidate, and you served as foreign minister and of course, for a period of 12 months as the General Assembly president at the United Nations. But people forget that you were leading and steering that vision of sports in your country and making its mark in the world. And of course, I heard you've got a very famous Serbian tennis player. So you have seen the way people interact and the way they connect. Whether it be sports or in other fields, what would your advice be on how you bring people together in a way that is meaningful, in a way that's memorable and in a way that's lasting?

**Vuk Jeremic:**

Definitely sports is a very, very powerful field. Sports is something that I championed when I was president of the UN General Assembly, and I'm very proud of my legacy in that sense by working closely together with the IOC. At that time, the president of the IOC was Jacques Rogge. So Jacques Rogge and I worked on establishing an international day of sports for peace and development. And it was adopted in the General Assembly. On April 6, it was adopted as an international day. And then every year it repeats and Novak Djokovic, our most famous tennis player, was indeed representing all the athletes of the world in that session of the General Assembly in my year, so I was chairing it.

At the head of the General Assembly, usually we have the president sitting next to the secretary-general of the UN, and the chief of the UN

bureaucracy, the chief administrator. Well on that occasion, I was seated next to Jacques Rogge, president of the International Olympic Committee and Novak Djokovic, on behalf of all world athletes. It's one of my most memorable days at the UN.

And I thought at that time that sports can only be a force for good. But unfortunately, like everything else deteriorating these years, sports is also misused today to advance political or geopolitical agendas. And consider, for instance, the exclusion of Russian athletes from the Olympic Games. I believe that's outrageous. I believe that those things ought to be left away, not to allow politics and geopolitics to get involved in things like sports, especially when it comes to the Olympics. The Olympic spirit, I mean, the idea of the Olympic Games from ancient Greece was that the moment when the Games are held, this is the moment when all wars stop and

***It worries me that we seem to be regressing as humanity on a number of fronts, as opposed to being able to continue working together for common peace and prosperity.***

everybody participates in the games. And unfortunately today, in today's world, one would expect us to be at a more advanced stage in this regard than the ancient Greeks, but unfortunately, we're not. And that worries me. It worries me that we seem to be regressing as humanity on a number of fronts, as opposed to being able to continue working together for common peace and prosperity.

**James Chau:**

On that note of common prosperity, you have also been a key figure in formulating the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. And we used to call this the 15-year



▲ Chinese President Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan, are welcomed on May 7, 2024 by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic (front, second from right) and his wife, Tamara Vucic (front, right), upon their arrival at Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade, capital of Serbia.

journey but in fact, those 15 years are pretty much almost up. We are not on target to meet the SDGs. A lot of this has been slowed by the vacuum that was created by a three-year pandemic. When you look at what you had in mind for the SDGs, and where we are now, and where we hope still to be, is there a unique role where national governments, international organizations and business communities can overcome competing interests to keep the SDGs on track and on target?

**Vuk Jeremic:**



To be very honest, I think there's very little hope that we are going to fulfill the SDGs by 2030. I think that right now, if I'm not mistaken, not a single country in the world, not even the richest countries in the world, are on track to fulfill all the SDGs by 2030. And you mentioned the pandemic was obviously very unfortunate. There are other issues that I would say are dragging it even more.

First and foremost is the fact that we have fallen into a geopolitical recession. At the time of formulating these goals, we were not in geopolitical recession. By the way, I believe that geopolitics, just like the economy, is cyclical. So cycles follow one another, cycles of boom and cycles of bust. The difference between geopolitics in the economy is that cycles and geopolitics tend to be longer, they tend to last for decades. In the economy, it's a couple of years of bad economy, couple of years of good economy, and so on. Here,

we're talking about decades. So we will have to adapt to this reality. We must not give up the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Sustainable Development Goals, in my opinion, had the optics of multilateral diplomacy in our times. I don't think that we can do better in diplomatic terms than when we formulated the SDGs. But we need to be more realistic with regard to the timeline in which they are going to be fulfilled. We also need to be more realistic in terms of how we can multilaterally work to support each other's fulfillment of the goals. I think that more emphasis ought to be given to regional cooperation than to insist on everything continuing to play in a plenary, multilateral context.

Because the geopolitical problems that we face are not going away easily, we're probably going to live with them for the next 10 to 20 years. And hopefully, they're not going to get worse than where we are right now. But you know, just sitting back and feeling desperate or moaning about the fact that things are bad is not going to help anybody. Governments need to do their part. If they can't work on the global stage together because there's misunderstandings and opposing interests, then let them work regionally. And then let regions talk to regions. Let us adopt the national legislation that directs businesses and the private sector in the right direction. I think these are things that are quite possible, despite all the complexities that the contemporary world is bringing upon us.

#### **James Chau:**

Quick thoughts over here, and I appreciate your frankness and saying that it's highly unlikely that the goals will be achieved on the original timeline. As an alternative to that, should the UN and the member states with it consider extending that timeline, be it three years or five years for example? Or would that create a precedent where the world feels that deadlines are extendable?



**Vuk Jeremic:**

There is no good answer to this question because setting a precedent would be difficult. Personally — I speak now on behalf of only myself, not on behalf of my government or on behalf of the UN — I think we should not be extending this but just be prepared at Europe 2030 to declare it a failure. Now what to do? Do we then agree to an extension of five years? That could be an option. But before that time comes, I don't think we should be changing the goals. I think we need to go as humanity for the collective shaming of not reaching the goals by 2030.

*The Sustainable Development Goals, in my opinion, had the optics of multilateral diplomacy in our times.*

**James Chau:**

So acknowledge that problem.

**Vuk Jeremic:**

Acknowledge the problem.

**James Chau:**

Let that set in.

**Vuk Jeremic:**

Let that set in.

**James Chau:**

Learn that lesson.

**Vuk Jeremic:**

Learn that lesson, and then hopefully fulfill the extended target that we give to ourselves.

**James Chau:**

I'd like to finish off with this thought: You mentioned sitting there next to Novak Djokovic on one side and Jacques Rogge on the other. But you know, during your year as UN General Assembly president in the more traditional formation, sitting up there with the secretary-general and with the chief of administration, inviting representatives of each member state to come to the podium to speak and present to the world — when you're sitting up there, bang in the middle looking out, you have an incredible vantage point that only two other people on either side of you have. And even their vantage point is not the same as yours. Yours is right down the middle of that hole. And you can see beyond that hole and up into the gallery. And then there's a bowl of humanity that stretches onto either side in a curve. What do you see? What would you want based on what you saw?

**Vuk Jeremic:**

You see different pictures to be honest, depending on the topic of the conversation, and you can sense different sentiments. And sometimes it's anger, and sometimes it's division, sometimes it's frustration. Sometimes it's positive. But what's always there is this enormous diversity. You really do have a feeling that you are presiding over the world at large, of the world community. And sometimes it's really not the best format. And sometimes it's dysfunctional, and agreeing on things, especially when consensus is necessary, is sometimes next to impossible, and sometimes completely impossible. But I think it would be a great pity if we gave up this organization, that is the United Nations.

Admittedly, it has not delivered the hopes and dreams — not of our generation, for instance — not given everything that you and I discussed. And given that the geopolitical recession is going to last, I don't expect spectacular deliverables from the United Nations. But still, this is the only place, the only one place, that we have where everybody sits down and when you can



▲ Chinese President Xi Jinping (1st L), French President Emmanuel Macron (2nd R) and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (R) hold a trilateral meeting at the Elysee Palace in Paris, France, May 6, 2024.

see, at least from this chair, you can see the whole world sitting in the same place. And I hope that the times will be better and that we're going to come to our senses.

We're going to be working more closely together, and we are going to have in the future something close to ... I don't know if you watch the Netflix series "3 Body Problem," where there is this UN secretary-general and everybody in the UN sits down and endorses the people who are going to be working to save the planet, and there is a sense of unity in this diversity. Well, that's probably the most science-fiction part of the series if one wants to compare it with reality. But I hope that in the future we're going to have something similar to that. Not exactly complete unity, because it's impossible, but something similar to that. I would hope to see that in the future. I didn't see it when I ran it, the presidency of the General

Assembly, but I hope that I'll be able to see it in the future.

**James Chau:**

Well, we began this time together by referencing the different and varied roles that you've had at national, international and cultural levels, just to say how important it has been to converse with you today as someone who has ultimately been a people diplomat.

**Vuk Jeremic:**

Thank you for very much. It was a great pleasure and a great honor for me to talk to you.



# Proposals for an Innovative EU Strategy on Chinese EVs



**Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa**

*Geopolitics Analyst in EU-Asia Relations and AsiaGlobal Fellow, The University of Hong Kong*

By imposing provisional duties on Chinese EV imports, the European Union seeks to protect its automotive industry while navigating complex internal and external pressures. There is potential for significant economic and geopolitical fallout if a full-scale trade war ensues.



The European Commission is betting its political capital on a confrontation with Chinese electric vehicles, a high-stakes gamble where any misstep could spell dire consequences for Europe.

### ***How can EU cars succeed globally if they avoid competition?***

Ursula von der Leyen and her team initiated this skirmish, potentially igniting a trade war that will reveal both sides' strengths and weaknesses. The European Union's geopolitical test revolves around the outcome of the anti-subsidy probe into Chinese EVs. Could Beijing be more fragile than perceived? Might Brussels be stronger than it appears? Or is Europe playing a game it cannot afford to lose?

The bloc stands at a critical juncture after responding to extraordinary crises. Pandemic recovery programs, costly energy decoupling from Russia over the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Vladimir Putin's regime have tested its resilience. Critics argue that the sanctions have faltered after being deemed initially as the sole viable response. Russia has skillfully circumvented them with substantial — and unexpected — economic support from China and India.

This exemplifies how measures intended to have one outcome can backfire and produce the opposite effect. Another economic restriction — provisional duties on EV imports from China up to 47.6 percent — raises provocative questions: What benefits will this bring to the European automotive industry, which has traditionally focused on exports? How can EU cars succeed globally if they avoid competition? What strategies will Europe adopt to innovate and offer affordable pricing?

Internally, the EU is grappling with the conflicting interests of member states regarding the protection of the single market through economic security measures and de-risking. Even Germany, with its divided coalition government, lacks domestic unanimity. Automotive companies are similarly split: Some advocate for penalties, while others, particularly those with production bases in China, see such measures as counterproductive.

Certainly, increasing tariffs on Chinese EVs is no small political maneuver. It's a risky gamble. Beyond economic implications, it would have significant geopolitical and climate ramifications. The EU aims to phase out internal combustion vehicles by 2035, but higher levies raise concerns about accessibility at a time when EV demand in Europe is weak. Will European consumers buy vehicles priced significantly higher? Which demographics can afford such increases, and how will EV expansion proceed on European roads?

***The European Commission is betting its political capital on a confrontation with Chinese electric vehicles, a high-stakes gamble where any misstep could spell dire consequences for Europe.***

### **China's reaction**

Although overall EU restrictions on Chinese products currently impact slightly over 1 percent of total trade, China perceives the EVs countervailing duties as significant (Chinese businesses in Europe call it a "witch hunt") but less severe than the 100 percent imposed by the United States. President Xi Jinping faces a dual contest: having identified EVs as one of China's "new three" critical sectors for the future of industry, trade and the environment, other

## Chinese Electric-car Sales in Europe Grow From Low Base

European EV market share of chinese brands



Source: Jato Dynamics

Note: Data excludes EV imports from China by Western brands.

middle powers are also raising tariffs on Chinese EVs — Brazil (35 percent), Turkey (50 percent) and India.

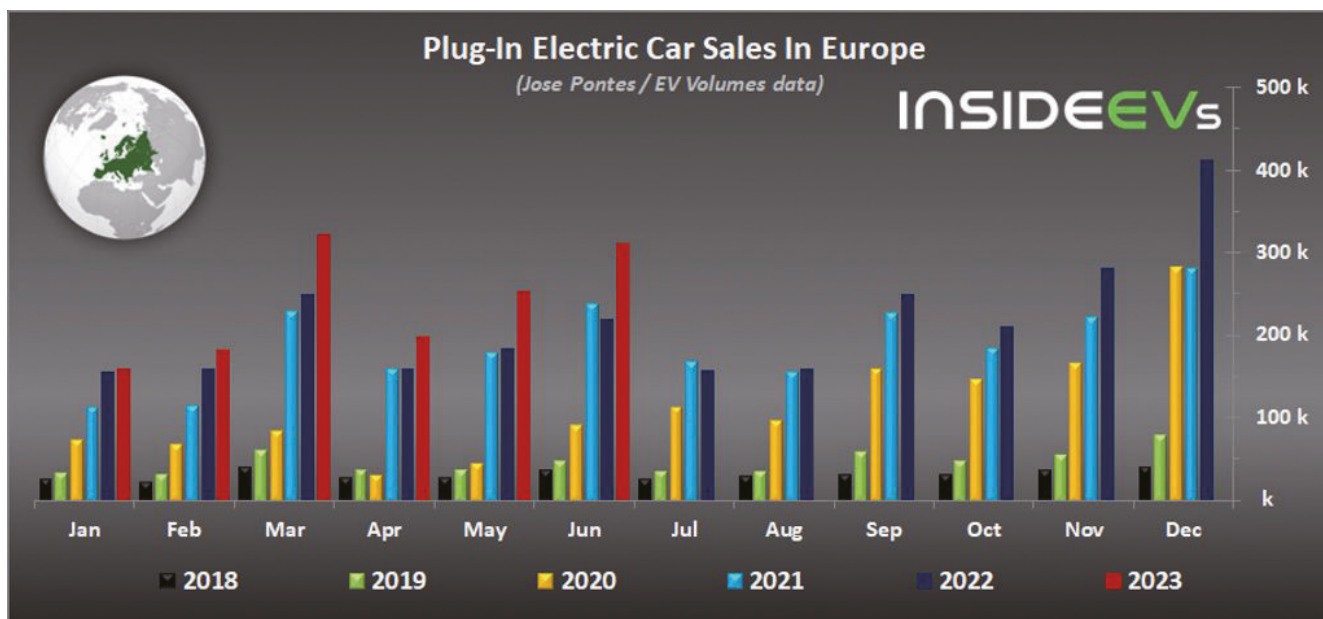
The dilemma for China lies in the EU's inability to back down at the moment. The stakes are immense, and there's no room for reversal without losing geopolitical credibility or appearing weak. China's response will be multifaceted, with retaliation seen as inevitable. Indeed, China has recently taken measures targeting EU exports or restricting its own exports of critical raw materials such as gallium, germanium, graphite and key rare-earth technologies — all crucial for advancing the green agenda. Should tariffs be imposed, China might escalate from threats and restrictions to direct retaliatory measures such as tariffs or quotas on key European exports of high-value, or symbolic sectors such as luxury goods or automobiles. These include internal combustion cars, aerospace products (notably Airbus), agriculture (brandy, dairy, pork) and industrial machinery.

However, targeting these sensitive sectors risks self-inflicted damage if a full-fled-

ged trade war ensues, which might not be in China's best interest. Despite the interconnectedness of both markets acting as a natural deterrent, such actions could still exert significant pressure on major EU economies including Germany, France, Italy and Spain, where these industries play a crucial role.

If this scenario unfolds, the EU would need to rally member states to present a united front, potentially offering subsidies to affected industries — a task undoubtedly fraught with difficulty — or seek alternative markets. The EU would need to expedite its strategic autonomy initiatives, diversify partnerships, accelerate the signing of pending FTAs, pursue nearshoring and friendshoring, invest in domestic production and secure alternative suppliers.

While Eurocrats reassure their people that there is nothing to fear from China's retaliation — framing it as the cost of asserting their geopolitical agency — they should explain this stance to the sectors that will bear the brunt of the consequences. This becomes especially pertinent as European



institutions themselves have made decisions that appear advantageous for China.

For instance, Northvolt's recent struggle to meet demand despite receiving nearly 1 billion euros in state aid from Germany, vividly illustrates the challenges the EU faces in competing with China in the EV supply chain. The auto industry alone contributes up to 10 percent of GDP in countries such as Germany and Spain, highlighting that its critical role in export markets will be significantly impacted.

Beijing is expected to escalate its diplomatic pressure in key capitals with the classic "divide et impera" tactic, aiming to sway their positions across two critical stages: first, a non-binding vote of the 27 member states by the end of July; second, a decisive vote on Nov. 4 to establish tariffs for a five-year period. Securing votes from the largest and most influential countries will be pivotal as the agreement requires a "qualified majority." China's goal is to thwart the final approval of tariffs. What implications would this scenario hold for Europe's geopolitical position?

Simultaneously, Beijing is expanding its EV strategy through multiple FDI projects. Beyond Hun-

*While Eurocrats reassure their people that there is nothing to fear from China's retaliation — framing it as the cost of asserting their geopolitical agency — they should explain this stance to the sectors that will bear the brunt of the consequences.*



gary — which has substantial Chinese investments — countries such as France, Spain and Slovakia are embracing electric battery and vehicle factories. This enhances China's economic influence and could disrupt EU unity. To counter this, Europe must strengthen its economic presence and offer competitive investment alternatives within the constraints of EU single market regulations — an arduous task.

***Emphasizing practical Chinese EV trade solutions over confrontational approaches could bolster Europe's resilience.***

**Alternatives with China, ASEAN?**

Considering the uncertainties mentioned

above, the new commission could reassess the effectiveness of intertwining geopolitics with trade, with the aim of minimizing self-inflicted economic harm. While aggressive trade wars and strict policies may appease certain allies, they often highlight political discrepancies without clear discernible objectives.

Emphasizing practical Chinese EV trade solutions over confrontational approaches could bolster Europe's resilience. Both parties should negotiate three key points: supervision of factories opening in member states to prevent over-expansion; licensing of European car manufacturers to produce for their Chinese counterparts; and monitoring the number of vehicles produced in China that could be sold in the single market, subject to annual review. This would help prevent disruptions of European industry.



- ▲ The European Commission has announced plans to slap tariffs of up to 36.3 percent on Chinese-made electric cars in August. Market leader BYD will face a 17 percent tariff (down from 17.4 percent), Geely will pay 19.3 percent (previously 19.9 percent), and SAIC the maximum 36.3 percent tariff (down from 37.6 percent).

While China may perceive the EU's policies as antagonistic and aimed at addressing subsidies and industrial overcapacity, these actions also highlight broader concerns about maintaining a level playing field — an undertaking Beijing has struggled to address adequately. The objective of Brussels is to safeguard economic interests and ensure fair competition across industries. Given that China's whole supply chain is subsidized, accepting these terms is crucial. Other global powers are implementing similar duties and measures that impact this strategic industry, encouraging China to seek an agreement with the EU to explore innovative solutions.

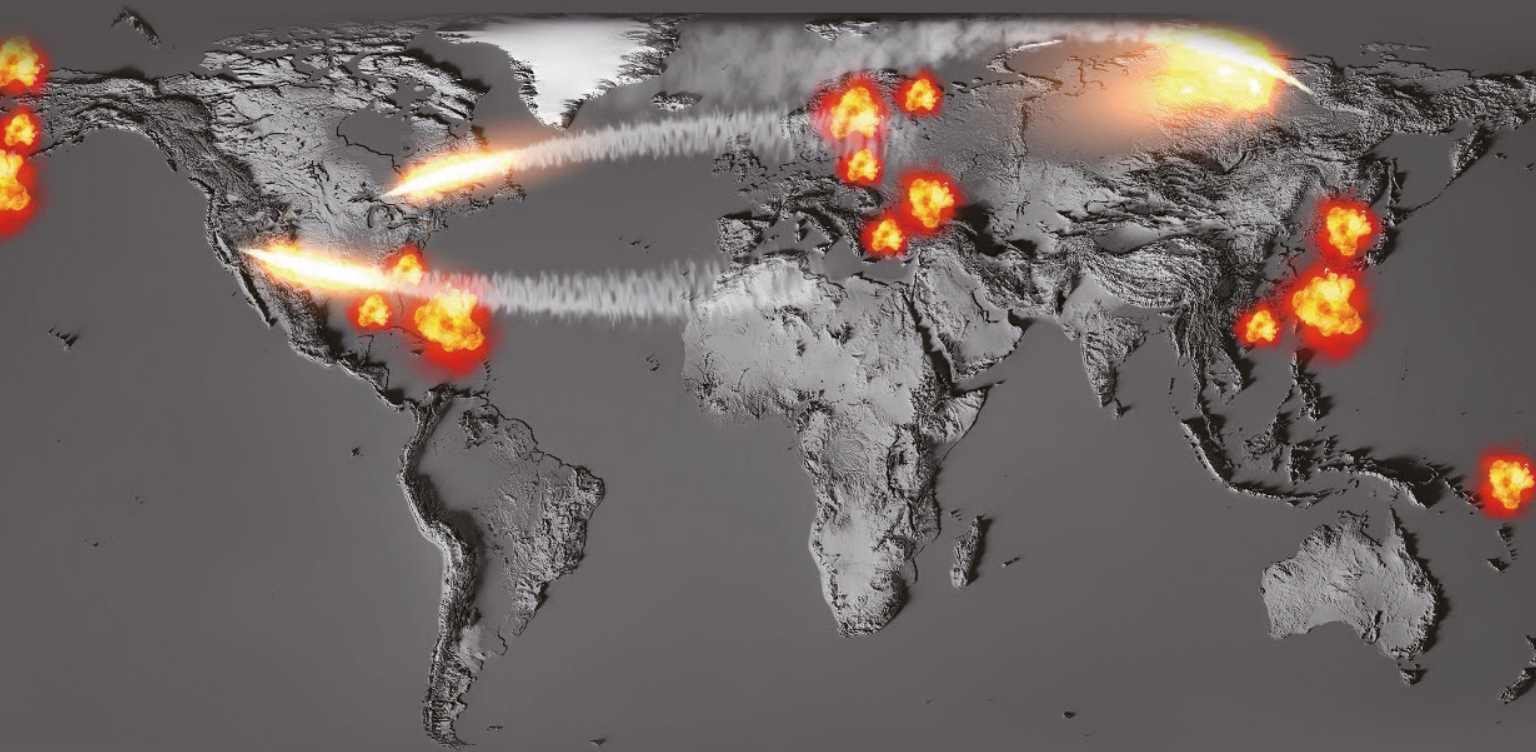
Further, China, which is a significant EU trading partner, has two more strategic interests in maintaining positive relations: first, to prevent the EU from aligning closely with the confrontational stance of the United States and jointly imposing further comprehensive economic sanctions and trade barriers; second, to avoid retaliatory measures that could erode Beijing's soft power and potentially fuel increased anti-China sentiments worldwide. This approach guarantees that the Chinese mainland can sell strategic products in Europe under clear and well-defined regulations.

Additionally, Europe should continue to prioritize de-risking, while leveraging ASEAN's potential in the automotive semiconductor supply chain. As highlighted by Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit of Nanyang Technological University, ASEAN's EV market was valued at \$500 million in 2021 and is projected to reach \$2 billion by 2027. This growth offers Europe substantial opportunities to secure competitive pricing and penetrate new markets, enable partnerships or procure a set number of vehicles to support the green transition at competitive prices.

In essence, the path forward requires wisdom and balance, steering clear of aggressive trade conflicts to decisively foster robust and prosperous economic and alternative partnerships.

*In essence, the path forward requires wisdom and balance, steering clear of aggressive trade conflicts to decisively foster robust and prosperous economic and alternative partnerships.*

# Are We Heading into World War III?



**An Gang**

*Non-Resident Fellow, Center for International Security  
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A growing number of voices warn of a coming global conflict of catastrophic proportions. Such messages must be interrupted. The world must not sleepwalk into war. As it moves to the center of the world stage, China not only calls for peace but actively plans it.



Around the end of last year, when Ukrainian resistance on the battlefield was in the doldrums, the German defense minister urged his countrymen and his European colleagues to get ready for war “within five years”. He warned that Russian troops could attack NATO between 2029 and 2032.

The annual Munich Security Conference took place after this warning, and Ukraine was the absolutely dominant topic. Tensions and anxieties pervaded the meetings. In impassioned speeches about aiding Ukraine, European politicians talked about “the danger of war in Europe” and proposed an unprecedented level of awareness about the need for independent defense capabilities. They all supported more military spending.

Four months later, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, during his farewell trip to the United States, reported to President Joe Biden that 23 of NATO’s 32 member countries had raised annual military spending to 2 percent of their respective GDP totals, and NATO’s military spending in 2024 would be 18 percent higher than it was the previous year.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has been appointed to succeed Stoltenberg as NATO secretary-general. With the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war and increased spillover risks, it is reasonable to ask whether Rutte will become the first NATO secretary-general to be forced to coordinate America’s European allies in direct engagement in large-scale regional operations.

Despite any dark background about the outbreak and spillover effects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it’s clear that it has disrupted the strategic expectations and planning of the United States and NATO, which initially thought support for Ukraine would lead to the defeat of Russia in a short time.

Meanwhile, Iran, Lebanon, Syria and other anti-American and anti-Israeli forces have been involved in the conflict in a superficial way, and most Arab countries have made their moral support for Palestine clear in statements. These may suggest that the war in the Middle East remains controllable. However, as the parties involved are diverse and “three-dimensional”, people can’t help but think that a world war may be approaching.

At the sixth International Forum on Security and Strategy held by the Center for International Security and Strategy (CISS) at Tsinghua University in late March, Russian scholar Lukjanov declared the “collapse” of the post-World War II international order, arguing that with the spillover of regional conflicts, “World War III is on its way”. As the moderator of that session, I asked: “If World War III occurs, who will be involved?” He replied that it would be between the hegemon and the rising states.

As a matter of fact, the World War III script has long been part of the Russian official narrative about its military operations in Ukraine. Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chairman of Russia’s Security Council, has repeatedly warned in public that the situation has reached the “final brink” and that the world will continue to “balance on the edge of World War III and a nuclear disaster”.

Global armed conflicts may well occur. With the delivery of long-delayed U.S. and European military aid to Ukraine and renewed escalation on the battlefield, Russian President Vladimir Putin has also changed his tone. He said that a direct conflict between Russia and NATO would put the planet “only one step away” from World War III. He added that the U.S. and the West want to see Russia fail and put an end to its thousand-year history, but Russia’s defeat was impossible.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who

has been struggling to balance Europe and Russia, warned in June that European leaders had underestimated Putin's resolve and overlooked the huge price of war. He warned that World War III may break out within the next three months.

### ***Talk of a third world war has also emerged in Asia.***

The American presidential election is picking up steam. No matter what the outcome is, the United States will enter into a very special stage in its history of domestic politics and foreign strategies. The world is anxiously waiting for one of two different possibilities to emerge, while secretly preparing for Donald Trump's return to power and the accelerated decline of American hegemonic control.

Among the promises listed in Trump's Agenda 47 (a reference to his being the 47th president), which was posted on his campaign website, is an impressive item titled "prevent World War III". Trump accused President Joe Biden of leading the United States to "the brink of World War III" and vowed to reverse every "disaster", such as "the Ukrainian proxy war", if he, Trump, is re-elected to the White House.

Trump has always opposed U.S. involvement in unnecessary wars, and he did lead America away from conflicts during his first term. This time, preventing World War III is truly a serious item on his policy agenda, not just a campaign gimmick. The Biden administration is sure that Putin does not dare to use nuclear weapons to avoid defeat. Trump totally disagrees. In fact, Russia's nuclear strategic thinking is shifting from balance of power to balance of terror. And so is the American doctrine.

Talk of a third world war has also emerged in Asia. The "Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow" viewpoint, which originated in Europe and Japan, has been constantly stirred up in this part of the world. The 2027 scare, which presupposes China unifying Taiwan by force, has triggered a strategic and tactical discussion in the United States. Europe sees potential conflict across the Taiwan Strait as a major reason to "de-risk" from China. Such an event could trigger direct American intervention, but the war would not be confined to China and the United States. It would inevitably escalate to World War III proportions.

Then, if the China-India border disputes somehow intensify, China will be caught between Scylla and Charybdis. Matthew Pottinger, an American anti-China activist and a member of Trump's team, is leading Trump's Taiwan-related policy-making. Calling China the provocateur of World War III, he champions a more radical policy of strengthening military deterrence and preparing for frontal combat.

The Korean Peninsula has been full of hustle and bustle for some time. North Korea has abandoned its peaceful unification goal and continued to arm itself against the South. It is also supporting Russia's war against Ukraine in exchange for military-industrial breakthroughs, especially with regard to missile technology. The Russia-DPRK alliance and the U.S.-Japan-ROK alliance have thus been strengthening in parallel, leading to more visible bloc opposition in Northeast Asia. American strategic circles do not deny that World War III will break out if the North attacks the South on the peninsula.

Elsewhere in the region, the Philippines is in a dogfight with China over Ren'ai Reef (Second Thomas Shoal) in the Nansha Islands (Spratly Islands). Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro defended the

country's "transparent" move to publicize the maritime confrontation so the world would see a big country bullying a small one, thus avoiding a third world war in its own way. Former President Rodrigo Duterte, who opposes the current administration's excessively pro-American policy, warned the Philippines not to play too big but to be wary of being dragged into a world war by its mutual defense treaty with the United States. The U.S. embassy in the Philippines and right-wing American media, such as Fox News, fanned the flames of President Bongbong Marcos's adventurism and spread tales of World War III starting in the South China Sea.

The West is cultivating a world war panic in international discourse. The reality is that people generally realize that the peace dividend after World War II, especially after the end of the Cold War, is diminishing fast, and another all-out war is not far away.

As an extension of the "free world versus authoritarian regimes" narrative, The U.S., the Western establishment and verbal provocateurs rush to pass the buck in global security governance and conflict management to speak more loudly on the issues of war and peace.

***The reality is that people generally realize that the peace dividend after World War II, especially after the end of the Cold War, is diminishing fast, and another all-out war is not far away.***

Poland, the Baltic countries and some former Soviet bloc countries believe that if the Ukraine war spills over, they will bear the brunt and potentially face national subjugation.



▲ G7 leaders chat before the start of 50th G7 Summit at the Borgo Egnazia resort in Savelletri di Fasano, Italy, June 13, 2024.



tion and extinction. They have thus been warning European partners not to repeat the historical mistake of the Munich Agreement by taking the Ukraine war lightly or trying to appease Russia. France, Germany and Poland may — either primarily or partly — wish to awaken Europe with early warnings of a huge storm as they jostle to achieve their dream of leadership in Europe. With limited territorial depth and national strength, they can only build this influence through interactions. A new European Triangle is in the making.

To maintain its hegemonic dominance, the United States is struggling to advance its positions in two strategic competitions — to contain China and weaken Russia in parallel, while responding to two geopolitical crises at the same time. The world's superpower does not need a new world war, which would not serve fundamental American interests. Otherwise, the Biden administration would not have done its utmost to avoid direct intervention in Ukraine or set up guardrails for China-U.S. relations; and Trump, whose policies are extremely right-wing, would not have made the prevention of World War III an issue for his campaign.

What the U.S. has done is label China and Russia as “sources of global chaos” and “revisionists in the international order” so it can support a narrative in which alliances in the “free world” must stand against authoritarians. It needs to hype the reductive notions of de-risking and dependence to consolidate Western perceptions and more effectively suppress the development space of rivals and adversaries.

Russia is also a champion of the World War III panic, ultimately to intimidate the forces working for its defeat. The root of its current strategic dilemma lies in its attempt to solve a problem of the 21st century

by means of war. The self-proclaimed purpose of overthrowing the old international order serves more as a banner under which to rebuild its empire.

***And the deterioration of major power relations always precedes the escalation of global crises and the failure of international governance.***

If I remember correctly, the last anxiety about a new world war in international public opinion appeared during the Cold War in the 1960s and 1970s. The U.S.-Soviet confrontation cast a nuclear shadow, and proxy wars were incessant. War preparations and competition were the dominant mindset among socialist bloc countries in their internal and external decision-making, leading to serious ignorance of people's development needs and livelihoods, which also had a great impact on the end game of the Cold War. Later, more countries, China included, came to take the situation in, reject war mongering and focus on economic development. As a result, their economies have taken off, and developing countries as a group have risen to an extent that could shift the world landscape. Economic globalization also flourished.

It is both thought-provoking and alarming that talk of world war has become heated and part of official discourse once again after half a century. Looking around, however, it seems that no one is really making plans to start a such a war. In the face of complicated and fragmented security challenges, however, the international community seems to muddle along in ignorance. Some countries are

stuck in the narrow thinking of domestic politics, geopolitics and major power competition. Being short-sighted, they constantly make bets, eager for immediate wins, and demonstrate sheer indifference to the sustainability of peace or security. This will not help solve urgent problems. Rather, it will only trigger new chain reactions and maximize the risk of escalation and spillover.

Although times have changed and countries' interests are intertwined, there is still a hegemon in the world. As its old defeated rival may revive and a new rising power is poised to catch up, the hegemon, finding it impossible to outcompete others on its own, moves to copy the old Cold War strategies of isolation and bloc confrontation to stop the rising states. A hot war is always preceded by a cold one. And the deterioration of major power relations always precedes the escalation of global crises and the failure of international governance. While this does not necessarily lead to a hot war, it certainly does provide sufficient conditions for one.

“The world is once again emerging an era of great power rivalry between the U.S. and China, and the current balance of power looks something like it did prior to World War I, where neither side has much room for political concessions and any imbalance could spell disaster.”

These remarks were made to *The Economist* by Dr. Henry Kissinger during an eight-hour interview before his 100th birthday. Published on the magazine's website on May 17 last year, they were among his last words about politics. The “something” before World War I probably refers to the state of group sleepwalking by European and American politicians. In the 1910s, Europe was beset with crises, from Austria-Hungary to Serbia, from Germany to France. No one planned an epic disaster, but all wanted to seize upon the immediate crisis for selfish interests and finally

staged a worldwide tragedy together.

There is a view that if World War III really happens, it will be mankind's final war. First of all, it won't be a war between major powers for land and hegemony but rather one for the survival of different civilizations. The result of that will not be available soon.

Second, it will take place on a new technological level, with fundamentally changed modes of operation and expanded battlefields. It will involve not only the most advanced nuclear, missile, aerospace and network technologies but also extensive use of artificial intelligence. With unmanned warfare becoming a reality, the moral necessity to seek a peaceful solution ending hostilities will be greatly weakened.

Third, with unmanned aerial and surface vehicles, integrated operations, missile technologies and even nuclear technologies increasingly mastered by non-state actors — not to mention the live broadcast of war scenes — major powers are losing their absolute control over battlefield situations and their exclusive say with regard to the justice of war.

All this means that in a future world war, no one will be assured of victory, and there will be abundant cases of combatants punching above their weight, or the weak defeating the strong. Any state actor may hold keys to the battlefield but not the button to end the conflict. Once the meat grinder of a global war is on, it will turn endlessly until everyone is dragged into the darkness.

If the international community allows unsafe, unjust factors to thrive in the current international situation, sits by idly as blocs form and ignores the research, development and application of technology — either in disorder or for evil purposes instead of orderly development for the public benefit — then

mankind's final war will be neither bluffing nor sensational.

Also, the harm of trade protectionism and vicious technology competition must not be ignored. Those factors have been the economic motivating force behind world wars and are mutually causal of global economic recession, intensified international contradictions and prevalent populism.

Now the world once again is seeing rampant trade protectionism and high technological barriers. Even though Trump talks about preventing World War III, if he returns to power, he will establish a “universal baseline tariff” on all imports, launch a new trade war targeting China and continue Biden's tech encirclement strategy. The radical conservative and isolationist trend championed by Trump not only challenges the normal development order of economic globalization but also threatens the peace and security of mankind. It will be impossible to open up new strategic opportunities for any country, and rational people should never cheer for its return.

More than 30 years ago, Chinese leaders shook off the old line of thinking that wars were inevitable and that China must be prepared to fight a major war soon. It came to see peace and development as two major problems for the world, and then made the judgment that peace and development were the theme of the times. The focus thus shifted to economic development, reform, opening-up and integration into the world. Based on the international situation, domestic circumstances and national strength of the time, this judgment steered the Chinese world view in a different direction and represented a proactive choice.

Now that the world has enjoyed peace and development for 70-plus years, its fragility, fragmentation, unfairness and uncertainties are increasing. The issue of war and peace

must come back into China's strategic field of view. Our judgment must be down-to-earth, neither drifting with American and Western rhetoric nor overlooking factors that may reverse the trend.

***The issue of war and peace must come back into China's strategic field of view.***

Today, China has sufficient capacity to unite like-minded countries, influence the global situation and agenda and remove the sources of World War III that are being trumpeted. How to apply wisdom and make good use of such capacity has increasingly become a high diplomatic priority. It is an objective reality that the overwhelming majority of countries support peace, oppose war and demand focus on a development agenda. Even America's allies do not support excessive securitization of their national and global agendas.

As it moves to the center of the world stage, China not only calls for peace but actively plans it. Only by so doing can it continue to focus on economic development, achieve peaceful development step by step and realize its own modernization. In this regard, it is more important — or even most important — to avoid making misjudgments or get carried away in the misjudgments of others.





- ▲ November 20, 2023. A view of Islamic art museum in Jerusalem with a wall covered with a poster devoted to the kidnapped by Hamas to Gaza Israeli citizens.

## Beijing Declaration: Step 2 Toward Middle East Peace



**Dan Steinbock**  
*Founder, Difference Group*

In just two years, China has facilitated cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and now between Fatah and Hamas. Over time, that could pave the way to peace in the Middle East, after eight decades of unwarranted violence.

*The July meeting in Beijing took place in tandem with efforts by international mediators to achieve a cease-fire deal in Israel's Gaza war, in which 38,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 2 million people displaced*

On July 23, 14 Palestinian factions including rivals Hamas and Fatah agreed to end their divisions and form an interim national unity government, thanks to Beijing's work as an intermediary. After the breakthrough deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is China's second major contribution to peace in the Middle East. In the past, Egypt and other Arab countries have tried but failed to reconcile the two leading factions.

The July meeting in Beijing took place in tandem with efforts by international mediators to achieve a cease-fire deal in Israel's Gaza war, in which 38,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 2 million people displaced, and the International Criminal Court charging Israel with genocide. Thanks to the Beijing Declaration, Palestinians are now in a position to heal and unify their ranks, if the national unity government prevails.

### **Fatah and Hamas**

The 1993-95 Oslo Accords detached the Palestinians in the occupied territories from the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which is seen as the true representative of Palestinian people and those in exile by creating the Palestinian Authority for the territories. As the PA replaced the PLO as the prime Palestinian political institution, PLO factions that opposed the Oslo process were marginalized.

In the following decade, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu used repression against

the PA, while allowing Hamas to operate and receive hundreds of millions of dollars, particularly via Qatar. His goal was, and remains, to rule-and-divide: Use Hamas to weaken the PA, then use the PA to weaken Hamas and then use the United States to weaken both.

The first broad Palestinian election took place in 2006, and the results reflected the new facts on the ground. Under the slogan of "Change and Reform," Hamas won the majority capturing more than 44 percent of the vote against 41 percent by the ruling Fatah. As expected, Hamas predominated in Gaza, except for Rafah. But now it also controlled much of the West Bank, except for Tulkarm, Jenin and Bethlehem. Beset with internal strife, the PLO was widely perceived as corrupt and compromised in the occupied territories, while its more popular figures, such as Marwan Barghouti, were jailed by the Israelis. Many leaders in the European Union, along with opposition figures and peace movement leaders — including my late friend Amos Oz — saw Barghouti as viable negotiating partner.

### **Palestinians and the West**

To undermine the outcome of the 2006 democratic election, the U.S. began plotting to overthrow Hamas after its victory, while Israel launched a series of raids into Gaza and the West Bank, hammering the civilian infrastructure and detaining dozens of high-level Hamas officials and supporters. Since then, no new elections have been held.

Following the crackdown on the leadership of Hamas, Israel and the Middle East Quartet — the U.S., Russia, UN and EU — introduced economic sanctions against the Palestinian Authority, Hamas parliamentarians and Palestinian territories. In Gaza, as the Haniyeh government was sworn in, both the U.S. and EU cut aid to the Palestinian Authority. Israel withheld \$475 million of Palestinian tax and customs revenue — half the PA's monthly income in 2005. Hence came falling incomes increased poverty, institutional collapse and economic decline.

Meanwhile, the friction between Fatah and Hamas burst into an open military conflict in June 2007. The mantra was that Hamas would never accept Israel's existence, but that was hogwash. As Efraim Halevy, the pragmatic ex-head of Mossad, argued, those who were seeking peace in the Middle East should seize "the opportunity of a seriously weakened Hamas to reflect on how we might bring it into the political process instead of just confronting it with tanks in the back alleys of Gaza."

The stage for tragedies was set when Israel and the U.S. imposed a ground, air and maritime blockade, basically to strangle Gaza.

*As with Southeast Asia and again two decades ago with Iraq, the White House sees every region as a pack of dominoes.*

#### New "grand bargain", old dominoes

For two years, America's Biden administration has been in talks with Saudi leaders urging Riyadh to establish diplomatic ties with Israel. Saudi Arabia has joined the BRICS alliance, is one of China's largest oil suppliers and is selling oil in multiple currencies. But it is also the world's second-largest arms importer, and 75 percent of those weapons come from the United States.

Riyadh has been negotiating a security pact with the U.S., modeled loosely on the U.S.-Japan mutual defense pact, while seeking cooperation in a civilian nuclear program. Preceded by Israel's peace treaties with Egypt (1979), Jordan (1994) and the Oslo Accords with the PA (1993-95), the grand bargain is predicated on the Abraham Accords (2020-21) between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, and subsequently with Morocco and Sudan.

After Oct. 7, the Palestinians can no longer be sidelined in the name of "normalization," which is what the Netanyahu cabinet would prefer. To the U.S., the Gaza genocide is a distraction. The real goal of the grand bargain is to sideline China in the Middle East. As with Southeast Asia and again two decades ago with Iraq, the White House sees every region as a pack of dominoes. Take over the biggest and the rest will fall in line.

The U.S. administration wants to exploit the Saudi deal to limit Riyadh's cooperation with Beijing on trade, technology and military matters, insisting that the Saudis would trade oil in dollars rather than in local currencies, including the Chinese yuan. It also wants to disrupt Israel's technology trade with Beijing and Chinese investment in Israel.

#### Palestinian unity in West's shadow

Despite calls by Israel and the West for a "reformed PLO leadership," most Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank continue to support the Hamas offensive, even at the risk of their lives. Make no mistake: Their first choice is peace. But in light of Israel's obliteration war in Gaza and its de facto effort to annex the West Bank, they believe that only armed struggle can save them from ethnic expulsions, which the members of the Netanyahu war cabinet and its messianic far-right pledge almost daily.

In a hypothetical presidential competition between Barghouti and Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah, and a representative from Hamas's leadership, recent Palestinian polls suggested strong support for the jailed Barghouti (40 percent) with a wide margin against Hamas's candidates (previously represented by the late Ismail Haniyeh at 23 percent). Fatah's ailing 90-year-old Abbas (8 percent) is seen as compromised. [Editor's note: The recent assassination of Haniyeh has introduced new uncertainty, potentially impacting these poll numbers.] By contrast, the U.S. administration and the Netanyahu cabinet





▲ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi attends the closing ceremony of a reconciliation dialogue among Palestinian factions and witnesses the signing of a declaration on ending division and strengthening unity by 14 Palestinian factions, in Beijing, capital of China, July 23, 2024.

prefer less independent, pro-West PA leaders who are more “malleable”, sort of Juan Guaidos with Palestinian characteristics.

In the foreseeable future, a Palestinian national unity government is critical. After the obliteration of Gaza, it must pick up the pieces from the rubble and ruin, manage the affairs of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, oversee reconstruction and prepare conditions for new elections. But can the Fatah-Hamas deal prevail? Skeptics expect the West to kill any effort at a national unity government, as it has done since the onset of the peace process in the 1990s.

### From violence to peace

Since 1945, Washington has relied on its dark record of regime change and destabilization in the Middle East. Its external interventions cover each and every country in the region. The results have been disastrous, from the post-9/11 wars that cost more than \$8 trillion and the lives of more than 1 million people, all the way to the Gaza war, in which the U.S. has been complicit in Israel’s genocidal atrocities.

By contrast, China’s approach builds on peace, stability and development, as reflected by the breakthrough peace deal it brokered last year between long-standing regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran. The successful intermediation between Fatah and Hamas is another example of the Chinese approach.

In recent months Chinese officials have ramped up advocacy for the Palestinians in international forums, calling for a larger-scale Israeli-Palestinian peace conference and a timetable to implement a two-state solution. The alternative is lethal: regional escalation of Israel’s war of obliteration of Gaza and in the West Bank to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, or even a fatal confrontation with Iran.

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## About China-US Focus

China-US Focus is a platform where Chinese and American thought leaders can openly express their views on the myriad issues that face the two nations.

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