

Great Power Competition: Certainties and Uncertainties in U.S.-China Relations

Suisheng Zhao and Derek Levine

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Derek Levine (D): We'll get started and thank you for meeting with me today. Congratulations on the new book. I read it. It was a great read. But I do have a couple of questions on China's foreign and domestic policy along with prospects for democratization. The first question I wanted to ask you is, could you elaborate on the potential risk of an engagement-focused strategy with China?

Suisheng Zhao (Z): I think engagement itself is a good strategy, and we should engage China to help it integrate into the international system of rules based on order to make the country comply with all those rules in the international system. The problem is that China has not become either more liberal or democratic, and it hasn't followed the rules since it was engaged by the U.S. and western countries. In fact, during the last decade, China has become more authoritarian, and the oppression, indoctrination, control ideology—everything has intensified. That's the problem with engagement, but that does not mean the U.S. should not engage with China. What's in my mind is that the U.S. should not and cannot change China, and no outside forces can change its political system, value system, everything. Only those inside China, the Chinese people, can make those changes. So, the U.S. should work with the Chinese people, and for its own economic and strategic interests, the U.S. should continue to engage with China because these two economies are intertwined. Interdependency has developed. If the U.S. disengages with China, it would damage not only the Chinese economy, but the American and global economies. Regarding global strategic politics—we have to make sure to avoid escalation into war in this big power competition that the U.S. is talking about, which is not in the interest of the U.S.. So, we have to work with China on the issues we share interests, such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, transnational crimes, and pandemic, just like the Biden Administration did, to keep the lines of communication open. In the meantime, we should try to compete on economic and other fronts, and try to confront China on those issues that damage American interests—South China Sea, Taiwan—all those issues. I think that's why when we talk about engagement, it is not white or black, either to engage with China or disengage with China. That's not the right way to talk about that issue.

D: But isn't it tough to work with the Chinese people? Now considering the control that Xi Jinping has over the populace, especially with cameras on every street corner, the social credits score?

Z: I think we should welcome the Chinese people to come to the U.S.. And now the U.S. government, those politicians in Congress, trying to restore the China initiative, it is ridiculous, I think. Trying to target profile people like me, and prevent exchanges like economics science, and technology is wrong. These kinds of demonizations of the Chinese people, saying all of them are spies. This is a horrible situation. You should engage those people; welcome Chinese scholars, students, and tourists to come to the U.S. to learn about democracy, how democracy functions in the U.S., and how wrong Chinese government propaganda is about America. So, if you just try to close the U.S. to the Chinese people, how can you engage them? How can you help them understand the real America and real problems in China? I feel so uncomfortable with these types of policies.

D: Do you think the United States should take a strong stance on the issue of Taiwan, because Xi Jinping wants to reunite Taiwan with the mainland during his tenure, he said, as early as 2027.

Z: I don't think there is a timetable. When President Xi met with Joe Biden, he asked him about [a] 2027 [timetable]. He said he never heard of that. I don't know if that's true or not; nobody knows. The so-called 2027 timetable is the 100th anniversary of the PLA founding. He required the PLA to be ready to win all wars by that time to become a modern, modernized military force. So that's how people think. I don't think China is ready to take Taiwan if Xi Jinping decides to use force. That's the end of the Chinese Communist Regime, for sure. I don't think he is that stupid. Vladimir Putin already made a big mistake in Ukraine. If, without Ukraine, he might have thought he could do something quick. But now I don't think it's even a wild dream among Chinese leaders that they think they can take Taiwan by force at any time. But they will not give up use of force because that's the legitimacy of the regime. And they will not stop threatening force. The U.S. should, for sure, use deterrence to prevent it, and also, it's best to tell him that it is not possible for China to take Taiwan by force without an American intervention. America should be very clear on those issues. American policy has been One China, for sure, but only if both sides—people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait—say there is One China is there One China. The U.S. is gravely concerned about China using force to unilaterally change the status quo. That's American policy, and I think that such policies have been held successfully for the last half century. So, the U.S. should continue that policy.

D: Okay. All right. I know you may have covered some of what we just talked about, but what role does wolf warrior diplomacy play in China's foreign relations? And how should the US respond to this more sort of diplomatic approach?

Z: Wolf-warrior diplomacy basically started in 2019, and it is somehow diminishing now because it did not accomplish what they wanted it to accomplish; it only damaged China's image and escalated China's would-be friends, and it unified China's rivals and enemies. So, during the last several years, there have been quite a few very good articles that talk about the rise and fall of wolf-warrior diplomacy. Xi Jinping. I think he is not stupid. He tried to give up the so-called “韬光养晦”, confrontational policy. But China's economy is now in big trouble. China is more isolated. He cannot accomplish what he wants using confrontational war-warrior democracy. That is counterproductive, and not in China's interest. That's why during the last year or so, Xi Jinping not only somehow gave up wolf-warrior diplomacy, he tried to show a new face—charm. He came to San Francisco, met Joe Biden, agreed to military-to-military exchanges and agreed to control fentanyl. He invited 50,000 American students to China and, China sent pandas back to

the U.S., you name it. He even wrote to the National Committee on US-China relationship, saying that China wants to be a partner and friend of the United States. So, that shows that wolf-warrior diplomacy did not work. He has to work with the United States. The U.S. is a very difficult issue for China to confront; it's so important for China. They cannot afford to alienate America. The problem here is that the Joe Biden Administration has not backed off, has been continually taking a tough position on China because the Joe Biden Administration's assessment is that China's adjustment is not strategic, but a tactic. So, what would the U.S. compromise in that case? So, we'll see what happens next.

D: Another question has to do with civil society. How could a successful civil society within China impact the Chinese government's approach to governments and domestic policy. Could it lead to more accountability or democratization?

Z: No, I don't think so. As you said, China's Xi Jinping Regime has intensified surveillance, including using technology—all advanced technology—and digital instruments to make sure any resistance or anti-government activities can be detected early and suppressed decisively. They have been successful at this. Civil society is not really developed to a sufficient level to confront the oppressive government at this time. The price, for example, for the white paper movement—the price is so high. All of these people are put in jail, we don't know where they are or when they will come out. And in the Chinese case, I wrote on this, the authoritarian resilience is so strong. And although there are civil society and popular movements against the regime, most Chinese people still support CCP and the government. Most people I met, they did not like Xi Jinping, maybe, but they don't see an alternative in China. A lot of people are still better off, although in the last couple of years, the economy has been in trouble. But they look back, for example, those people bought a house 20 years ago and they still made a lot of money, although the price is lower now. So, it's a very complicated picture in China. So, we have to assess China's change along a much longer perspective.

D: The next question would be, do you think the US and China's policies towards each other are motivated primarily by ideological competition? Or other factors like economic interests and security concerns?

Z: Ideology is now at the forefront because Joe Biden talks about the battle between the U.S. and China as a battle between democracy and autocracy. This battle is a zero-sum game—either it changes the Chinese Communist Regime or the American Democratic Regime; there's no compromising ideology on this issue. I don't think this ideological confrontation will result in anything significant. And from that perspective, an ideological conflict is there, but a more fundamental conflict is the competition for great power because China is a rising power, and the U.S. is the incumbent power. China is challenging the U.S.'s global dominant supremacy and leadership in the international system. The U.S. has suffered from ruling-power syndrome--Graham Allison at Harvard used that term—and would do whatever it takes to preserve U.S. dominance in the world. That's why you hear about the 100-year marathon, the long game. In the 1950s, Americans were talking about who lost China. Now we are talking about who would lose to China. Joe Biden is so clear; "I would not allow China to surpass the U.S. under my watch." And even Harris said that the U.S. will win the competition, and will make sure the U.S. will win the competition in the 21st century. And so that's the fundamental issue of the conflict.

These are fundamental changes. When you talk about the economy and technology, they all relate to this great power competition. And they, because of this great power competition, include economics, technology, the military, you name it—all fronts of competition. And this type of competition, at this time, has intensified. China, for many years, had low profile policy, but China abandoned low-profile foreign policy. The U.S. is determined to preserve its top-dog position. So, in that context, I don't see any compromise between these two countries on ideology, particularly on the great-power competition issue.

D: I think it's a good segue to the next question. What specific changes in US policy might we see under a different administration, if we look at the Harris administration or we see the Trump administration? Do you think it could either improve or strain relations with China?

Z: I don't see improvement. I don't have any optimism. I'm very pessimistic about this relationship. It doesn't matter if Trump won or Harris won. The fundamentals of this relationship will not change. As we talk about ideological battles, great-power competition, Taiwan issues—all of those issues will not disappear. They can only intensify. The only difference between Trump and Harris is style—the way they handle these issues. But I don't think any of these or either of these two candidates would compromise on fundamental issues of ideology, though Trump said he did not care about ideology. Yes, the U.S. government, whoever worked for him, they care, and also about the great-power competition, the military, economics, and the Taiwan issue. All of those issues. There's no way the U.S. would back off.

So, the current, whatever I have to call it, the US-China relationship went through a cycle pattern of up and downs before 2016. But it has been free-falling since then. Last year's summit put a floor on the relationship. It is stabilized at a very low point. So, this low point will continue, if not worsen, again.

D: I can see with Trump and Harris. I can see things not being as good.

Z: Yes, China has no way to compromise either. They haven't compromised since last November, but how far can they go? I don't know. Xi Jinping, if he compromises too much, will be in trouble in China, too, because he thought America would have a regime change in China, which is fundamentally life or death.

D: Yeah. Do you think China's current approach is more focused on managing tensions with the United States or seeking alternative partnerships particularly with countries like Iran and Russia?

Z: Both. China tries to stabilize its relationship with the U.S., for sure, because the U.S.-China relationship is key to all other relationships, but because the U.S. has not backed off or made any concessions, there is no hope in the near future. So, China must work with like-minded countries, just like the U.S. is working with like-minded countries, which include Russia, Iran, and North Korea. In the meantime, they want to encourage animosity between the U.S. and its allies and partners. That's one strategy for China to survive the competition.

D: Yeah, It's about survival. You're right. That makes sense. Do you think the US and China find a new equilibrium that avoids direct confrontation? But yet it acknowledges competition.

Z: No, not in equilibrium, and yet this relationship is asymmetric. The U.S. is much more powerful. China is still in a vulnerable position, and these dynamics might change. And due to those dynamic changes, the relationship would also change. China might go downhill, or might come back. So, equilibrium is not there yet, and the U.S. now sees a lot of problems in the country, too. If Trump is elected, I don't know how American democracy will survive; hopefully, it will not be destroyed. Even if Trump is not elected, he will not accept the result, would we see another Jan 6th type of damage to American democracy. So there are a lot of variables, a lot of policies driving these dynamic. I don't see equilibrium anytime soon. It's a very dynamic relationship.

D: What has to happen to facilitate change towards more democratization in China among the people?

Z: I don't see how Americans can bring democracy to China, why? Chinese people never had democracy for 1,000 years. And imperial China was the autocracy. And you're in my Chinese politics class, we read Lucian Pye. He talked about China's authority crisis, all the revolutions, all the reform was to strengthen authority. They thought the decentralization, fragmentation, the weakening of authority was the cause for China's humiliation in the hands of imperialist powers. They want to have a strong state. Here comes the CCP's authoritarianism.

And, so, I don't know. For me, I really found that if the Chinese people have democracy, that would be fantastic, that would be great. But we cannot live in wishful thinking, and we have to face reality. Change in China is determined by the Chinese people; if they want democracy, so be it. We support that, we welcome that, we help that. But I don't see that at this time, why I would want that for China. I don't see that as an alternative anytime soon in China. That's why we need to engage the Chinese people, Chinese society, civil society, everything, when the economy develops further, and they put pressures on the government. That's a natural process, not what the Americans bring democracy to China. Engagement did not bring democracy to China. A new cold war would not bring democracy to China, either. We must give the Chinese people the choice of both.

D: Allowing them to visit our country, and have a taste with democracy.

Z: The American people, American professors, like us to go to China to help the Chinese people understand the American way, and let Chinese scholars, Chinese students, Chinese people come to the U.S. to learn firsthand about American democracy, which is not perfect, but it's different from China. Today, the types of barriers set by both sides are not conducive to change in China; they only help the Chinese nationalist sentiments used by the government against America.

D: That makes sense. And one other question about semiconductors, Taiwan creates 70 % of the world's semiconductors and 90 % of the most advanced semiconductors. Would that somehow prevent China from wanting to unite Taiwan by force because of semiconductors?

Z: I don't think that's the determining factor at all. And if they are able to take Taiwan by force, they will do it anyway. That is a fact that America should take into consideration. 90% of advanced semiconductors are produced in Taiwan. If there is a military conflict, that would be destroyed, and that's not in the interest of America. It's also not in the interest of China and

Taiwan. So, the U.S. should, in that case, continue its deterrence and also work with Taiwan's semiconductor industry, those companies. And now the U.S. has tried to get some of them to invest in the U.S.. Taiwanese semiconductor companies have set up factories in the U.S. already. Yes, those are important steps. So, China would not do anything because of the semiconductor industry. I don't think that's an important factor for China.

D: That's not a factor at all, ok.

Z: Because if they invade, it would be destroyed.

D: that's all the questions that I have. I want to thank you for your time, and it was great catching up and seeing you.