



A restructuring international order and the paradigm shift in China–U.S. relations

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Abstract

2018 turned out to be a watershed year for China–U.S. relations. The paradigm shift in bilateral ties could be attributed to the restructuring international order and vice versa. Coexisting in the same international system, China and the U.S. are increasingly comparable in economic strength, but their domestic systems remain significantly different. Therefore, in an effort to remove “heterogeneous elements” from their own systems, the two countries have started to drift apart and are showing signs of “decoupling”. The future of China’s ties with the rest of the international community will depend on whether it can find a proper and favorable position in the changing international order.

Keywords China–U.S. relations · International order · Period of strategic opportunities

China–U.S. relations have experienced ups and downs over the past 40 years. In the past several years, many western and foreign scholars have warned about the possibility of a “new cold war” (Da 2015a). In December 2017, the Trump administration issued its first National Security Strategy. In 2018, it put forth a number of confrontational trade and economic policies targeted at China. Thereafter, China–U.S. relations nosedived at an unprecedented speed. At this critical moment, it is of great strategic significance to accurately evaluate the nature of the changes to China–U.S. relations, understand the relationship between the shift in bilateral ties and the restructuring international order, and recognize possible impacts of such changes on China’s long-term prospects.

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1 A restructuring international order and shifts in China–U.S. ties

China–U.S. diplomatic relations, which were normalized on January 1, 1979, have weathered various ups and downs. For instance, the relationship went through a crisis after June 4, 1989 when western countries, led by the U.S., imposed sanctions against China. At the time, this intense diplomatic conflict threatened China’s political security. More tests to follow—the Taiwan Strait Crises from 1995 to 1996, the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the “EP-3 Incident” in 2001 were all short-term yet huge shock to the China–U.S. relationship. Indeed, the recent tensions are not on par with those experienced in the late-1980s and early-1990s in terms of sheer intensity.

Be that as it may, there is a fundamental difference between the recent escalating tensions and the other crises the two countries have encountered over the past four decades. The concept of a “paradigm shift”, created by American physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn in his *Structure of Scientific Revolution*, could be used to define the changes in the China–U.S. relationship. A paradigm shift is a fundamental change in the basic concepts, assumptions, theories, methods and standards of a scientific discipline. It is clear that the fundamental assumptions and approaches that have defined the China–U.S. are changing. For instance, the Trump White House views engagement with China, a basic strategic approach adopted by eight successive American presidents from Nixon to Obama, as problematic. In its first National Security Strategy report (The White House 2017), the Trump administration argued that engagement should be replaced by strategic competition. Many American strategists have long assumed that, through continued engagement, China would evolve into a more liberal, pluralistic, and democratic country. However, many Americans have abandoned this view (Campbell and Ratner 2018). On the Chinese side, many experts have held that so long as China was integrated into the current international system, it could peacefully develop and even 1 day surpass western countries in terms of economic and even “comprehensive power”, but this idea also unraveled in 2018 amid the trade war and the looming “technological cold war”. Though this might not be the most intense conflict in the 40-year history of the bilateral relationship, the current tensions are unparalleled.

Among all the aforementioned bilateral issues, the international order is also going through a period of change.

In 70 years since the end of World War II, the so-called liberal international order has gone through periods of division, enlargement, unraveling, and even breaking apart. In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. made attempts, together with other major powers, to create a global economic and political order, as represented by the UN and Bretton Woods System. But shortly after the start of the Cold War, this not-yet-established international order split into two separate orders in the East and the West. Competition and confrontation took place between the two ideologies, two military blocs, and two parallel markets led by the U.S. and the Soviet Union,

respectively. The liberal international order became a bounded order that was limited mainly to the western world. Later in the 1980s, as Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe gradually waned in strength and appeal. The western order started to expand and enlarge, finally expanded into a global order after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Meanwhile, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other international institutions reached out to the entire world, and NATO and the EU expanded eastward. During this period the U.S. became the world's only superpower. The liberal order advanced triumphantly until the 2008 financial crisis, and has shown signs of unraveling since Brexit and the beginning of the Trump presidency.

Interestingly, the international order and China–U.S. relationship have always had an effect of resonance in past four decades. In other words, the normalization of China–U.S. diplomatic relations in 1978–1979 and the severe challenges facing the two countries today happened to coincide with the expansion and the unravelling of liberal international order. Given the great weight that China and the U.S. carry in international relations, the association between a restructuring international order and the vicissitudes of the bilateral relationship is probably not a mere coincidence.

On one hand, the liberal international order has always affected China–U.S. relations. From U.S. President Richard Nixon's "ice-breaking" visit to China in 1972 to the establishment of bilateral ties in 1979, the threat from the Soviet Union pushed the two countries closer. In other words, what put the conservative Nixon administration and the Cultural Revolution era Chinese government on speaking terms was the idea that China and the U.S. were not as much in conflict with each other as they, respectively, were with the Soviet Union. Negotiations over the establishment of bilateral ties gained momentum in 1978, as the Chinese government decided to become part of the West-led international order so that China could achieve its new goal of the "four-modernizations" (Vogel 2013a). On December 18, just 3 days after the *Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between China and the U.S.* was released, the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee was convened and set China on the path toward reform and opening-up.

These two historical events—the establishment of bilateral ties and the launch of the reform and opening-up policy—almost coincided, because they actually led to each other. So, one can draw the conclusion that the main variable that pushed Nixon to visit China in 1971 was the international structure, or the so-called "grand triangle" of the U.S., Soviet Union, and China. Furthermore, the variable that pushed Deng Xiaoping to accelerated the negotiations on setting up diplomatic relations with the U.S. in 1978 was China's aspiration to join the international order led by the West. China's strategy was to integrate, and as a result, it became increasingly involved with the rest of the world.

On the other hand, the American business community and political strategists were excited by the prospects of China's reform and opening-up, and wanted to begin engaging with China. The goal for the U.S. was to benefit itself in strategic and economic terms by "dragging" China into the West-led international system

and shaping China's strategic direction. While China insisted on integrating into the international system, its strategic interests converged with those of the U.S (Da 2015b). And that helped the two countries overcome the major difficulties over the past four decades and in general maintain stable bilateral relations in. Even the severe 1989 crisis did not destroy all contact between them. George H.W. Bush, then U.S. President, wrote a letter to the Chinese leaders shortly after the events and sent his national security advisor, General Brent Scowcroft, on a secret trip to Beijing in early July. Deng Xiaoping, then-Chinese leader and President Bush understood that, after all, the mission of "engagement/integration" had not yet finished (Vogel 2013b). But it was not until the mid and late 1990s that their relations, which had been at a low ebb for years, began to pick up again and approach fuller "engagement and integration".

On the other side of the coin, China-U.S. relations also affect the liberal international order. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the prime minister of Britain; 2 years later, the Ronald Reagan became U.S. president. Under their leadership, a neoliberal politics and economics came to prevail in the West. Meanwhile, in the late 1970s, the Chinese leaders started to steer their country toward reform and opening up. Despite the stark differences in political systems, western neoliberalism and Chinese opening-up had strong parallels, as both highlighted the decisive role of the market in economic activities and the widespread deregulation. The normalization of China's relationship with the United States and the West as a whole helped the spread, as it were, of the previously West-led international order to the rest of the world.

However, as a byproduct of deepening globalization and worldwide power shifts, some people in developed countries came to question the international order in the past ten-odd years. Of course, China claims it has no intention to be a challenger; instead, it is a firm defender of the international order through its words and actions. But the rise of China, with its own unique political and economic system, is indeed a shock to the West. The international order, as China perceives it, governs the relations between states. All countries should act by the rules that underpin the international order, but they do not necessarily have to build their own domestic political and economic systems upon Western liberal values. But Western countries pinned their faith on the values which, in their eyes, sustain the current international order. They believed that while international institutions can be reformed or changed, the underlying liberal values are stable and constant. It is these values that shape the way countries interact under international rules and, more importantly, the political and economic systems of individual countries. Apparently, the West did not accept China and Russia, among other emerging nations, as liberal countries as far as political values are concerned, but many western elites used to believe that these countries will liberalized as the West keeping on engaging. Now, several decades past, the U.S. found it failed in its efforts to shape the course of China's development.

“For decades, U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China’s rise and for its integration into the postwar international order would liberalize China”, the Trump administration spelled out in its National Security Strategy (The White House 2017). China ran “contrary to our hopes”. Many in the West have become anxious about an enlarged liberal order into which less liberal or illiberal countries have integrated deeply. Some in the U.S. believe they are at quite a disadvantage in a competition with some newcomers such as China due to the different economic and political systems. This constituted the background of escalating China–U.S. tensions since the end of 2017. While the restructuring of the international order entailed changes to national foreign policies and, therefore, China–U.S. relations, the escalating tensions between these two major powers certainly resulted in further changes in the international order.

The current conflicts, which might not seem as intense as some crises that China and the U.S. experienced in the past 40 years, is unprecedentedly profound, as they were driven by and, at the same time, resulted in a restructuring of the international order. China–U.S. relations returned to normal after the 1989 crisis because the direction of the international order remained unchanged. But now, the international order itself is in a process of restructuring, and both China and the United States are adjusting their own development plans. That means even if the 90-day trade war truce stabilizes the relationship, China–U.S. ties will still not get back on the old track.

2 Decoupling and the removal of heterogeneity

Since China and the United States established diplomatic relations, the two economies have become deeply interwoven. Moreover, the two societies have developed very strong people-to-people ties in past four decades. These achievements were gained in the process of U.S. “engagement” with China and as Beijing tried to “integrate” into the system led by the Washington. The expansion of the so-called liberal international order and the profound interdependence of both countries have sustained both China and the United States since 1980s. The two countries’ economic interests were so intricately interwoven, and the two countries were so heavily dependent on each other that economists coined the term “Chimerica” to describe them (Ferguson 2008). Now, as the international order restructures and the bilateral relationship undergoes an unprecedented shift, economic “decoupling” has become a buzzword in the media and among western pundits (For instance, Luce 2018).

Economic and trade disputes seemed to be the most important of all the bilateral conflicts in 2018. The United States claimed that it stood to lose in its interactions with China, given the different economic models of the two sides. The trade imbalance, China’s industrial policies, market access issues, lack of intellectual property

protections, export subsidies, and support of SOEs' further complicated China–U.S. relations. Trump's erratic decision-making style and his administration's chaotic decision-making processes brought the aforementioned issues into sharp focus on different occasions. But if we can see through the policy complications and inconsistencies in U.S. government publications, we may find that the core of U.S. complaints was actually the difference between the U.S. and Chinese economic models.

In October 2017, the U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration (2017) issued a memorandum in making it clear that it opposed granting China market economy status. The basis for this decision was that “the state's role in the economy and its relationship with markets and the private sector results in fundamental distortions in China's economy”. Likewise, in the *2017 Report to Congress on China's WTO Compliance*, the U.S. Trade Representative (2018) claimed that “U.S. policymakers hoped that the terms set forth in China's Protocol of Accession would dismantle then existing state-led policies and practices in China..... But those hopes were disappointed. China largely remains a state-led economy today”. Washington believed that the Chinese government intervened directly and significantly in domestic economic activities to support Chinese enterprises (especially SOEs) through unfair means that caused the U.S. to suffer severe disadvantages. Whether or not the grumbles are reasonable, the huge difference between the Chinese and U.S. economic models and systems is a sure thing. Such a difference was once tolerable to the U.S. government and enterprises when the Chinese economy size was relatively small and Chinese companies were not that competitive in the global market. But now, as China is closing the economic gap with the United States, such differences became intolerable, and Washington accused Beijing of unfairly supporting the domestic companies in global competition.

The Trump administration's solution is to lure China into closing the structural gap or to seek more economic independence. The extra tariffs the U.S. threatened in 2018 can be viewed as an attempt to decouple the two economies. Part of the U.S. government and some of its strategists saw extra tariffs as both a means and an end. Some believe it is a bargaining chip to force China to accept the U.S. offer, implement the “structural economic reforms”, and narrow the gap on economic models. Others, however, think that it is the end—to reduce economic interdependence with the hope of stopping China from taking further advantage of the U.S. on trade and significantly slowing or even stopping China's economic rise. The agreement reached President Xi and Trump at a post-G20 meeting in Buenos Aires on December 1 seemed to suggest that the U.S. succeeded in swinging the “big stick” of tariffs to drive China toward economic structural reform. But if future China–U.S. talks fail to make progress, it is possible for the Washington to resume the economic decoupling process.

It is noteworthy that the U.S. intended not only to decouple economically from China, but also to hold back people-to-people and military exchanges. For example, when the U.S. Congress passed the *Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization*

Act, the executive branch of the U.S. government also attempted to restrict foreign investment in certain sectors of the economy. The United States also disinvited China from participating in the 2018 Rim of the Pacific naval exercise. As for people-to-people exchanges, the White House debated banning Chinese nationals from studying at U.S. universities, though this did not turn into real policy due to opposition from some cabinet members and university leaders (Sevastopulo and Mitchell 2018). In fact, Washington has already taken action against Chinese students and scholars by tightening visa application procedures. These policies revealed the deep concern among U.S. policymakers about the potential risks that China's investments might pose to U.S. security interests (Council on Foreign Relations 2017), and the misperception that China intends to access U.S. universities and innovative technologies to fill its capacity gap (The White House 2017, 21) and expand its influence (Hoover Institution 2018). The underlying logic conforms to that of economic decoupling: the different natures of the political, economic, and social system have put the U.S. at a disadvantage through close contact or even integration with China in the areas of investment and people-to-people exchanges. Since China is relatively backward in terms of technology and know-how, it can benefit much more than the U.S. in this process.

As shown in Table 1, the relationship between the United States and any country can be explained from their relations in three distinct dimensions: the first is whether the two countries are in the same international system; the second is whether the two countries' domestic political, economic, and social systems are same or similar; the third is whether the national strength of the two countries are (or tend to be) symmetric or not. For instance, during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were two peer powers but totally different in domestic systems. The two countries lived in and led two parallel international systems. The best example of this model (model I in Table 1) is the Cold War. The United States had a four-decade-long confrontation with the Soviet Union, a Cold War that could have become "hot" if not for the fear of nuclear destruction.

After the collapse of Soviet bloc, basically all the countries in the world were integrated in the same international system. It was almost impossible for any country to separate itself from this international system or disaffiliate from the others and achieve fast and stable economic growth at the same time. Therefore, in the post-Cold War era, institutional compatibility and national power gaps are the two dimensions that determine the strategic relationship between any country and the U.S. Washington's relations with the rest of the world fall generally into four categories (Model II–IV). As shown in Table 1, model II applies to states that have an economy roughly or approximately the size of the U.S.'s and resemble the U.S. in political

and economic institutions. In such a case, the United States would be inclined to compete with those states, for example the EU, Japan, with which Washington used to be in competition. The widening gap in national strength, however, has in recent years dragged their relationship down to the next level. Model III illustrates the strategic relationship of “hegemony and consent” between the United States and a smaller economy that is similar to the U.S. in its domestic system. This model works for the vast majority of the world’s countries. If there is a huge institutional difference between the United States and a small economy which seems nowhere near the former in national strength, then model IV will apply. These small countries, like the so-called “rogue states” identified by the United States, will always face the risk of isolation or regime change. The only case to which model V applies today is China–U.S. relations. China, though still lagging behind the U.S. in comprehensive national strength, is steadily narrowing the economic gap and becoming a major global political and military power. But the fundamental differences in domestic political and economic systems are opening a widening breach between the two countries. Since the hope of shaping China and induce it to change its own system, like other medium and small countries, is diminishing, decoupling would be a natural choice for some nationalists or populists in the U.S.

To put it another way, China–U.S. decoupling can be viewed as a way of the two countries to remove the heterogeneous elements brought by the other country, a country with different domestic political and economic system. While the U.S., as set forth, underscored economic difference, China has always been vigilant and sensitive to the U.S. and the West’s potential infringement and intervention in political and national security issues. For example, the People’s congress has passed several laws related to national security in recent years. The laws can be viewed as part of China’s efforts to remove “heterogeneous elements” that might possibly jeopardize national security. However, these efforts stirred anxiety and discontent in the United States. To make themselves feel safe, it is understandable for the two major countries with fundamentally different domestic systems but interwoven international systems to decouple their ties to some extent. It actually removes heterogeneity. But both sides will communicate effectively to make their intentions accurately understood. They should also act rationally to remove extraneous matters to avert thorough decoupling or separation. If thorough decoupling does come about, China and the United States will create their own international systems under their own respective leaderships. In that case, the two countries will precipitate a new Cold War, as they will exist in different international systems with comparable national strength and a fundamental institutional gap, just as the U.S. and the Soviet Union once did. China and the United States have to guard against this, however, high the chance that it comes to pass.

Table 1 International system, national strength, domestic system, and strategic choice of the United States (designed by the author)

	International system	National strength	Domestic system	U.S.'s strategic choice
Model I	Different	Peer/near peer	Different	Cold War (with Soviet Union)
Model II	Same	Peer/near peer	Same or similar	Competition (with Europe/Japan in 1980s)
Model III	Same	Mismatch	Same or similar	Hegemony-Bandwagon (with most medium and small countries)
Model IV	Same	Mismatch	Different	Isolation/regime change (with "rogue states")
Model V	Same	Peer/near peer	Different	Decoupling/disengagement (with China)

3 The implications for China's "period of strategic opportunities"

In November 2002, the 16th CPC National Congress' working report (Jiang 2002) predicted a "20-year period of strategic opportunities" for China's growth and development. This notion was reaffirmed at the 17th CPC National Congress 5 years later (Hu 2007). In 2012, the 18th CPC National Congress' report (Hu 2012) pointed out that China remained in an important period of strategic opportunity, but that the country had to develop a correct understanding of its changing character and conditions. The 19th CPC National Congress, held in 2017, stressed that "both China and the world are in the midst of profound and complex changes. China is still in an important period of strategic opportunities for development; the prospects are bright but the challenges are severe" (Xi 2017). What's more, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee held a meeting on December 13, 2018, urging the Party to "dialectically review any changes in the international environment and domestic conditions, get prepared for potential adversities, and continue to seize the strategic opportunities for development" (People's Daily 2018). In short, for 16 years, Chinese leaders have insisted on the notion that the country is in an important period of strategic opportunity due to both a favorable international environment and China's development potential and certain policy changes. The aforementioned statements recognized the significant changes to the international environment. But what are the implications of the paradigm shift in China–U.S. relations on China's period of strategic opportunities?

To answer this, we must first work out a definition of the external environment for the "period". Some scholars argued that in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Bush administration changed its national

strategic priority from balancing against China, which it viewed as a major strategic competitor, to counter-terrorism in the Middle East. Then came the notion of “an important period of strategic opportunities” in 2002. In this light, the current paradigm shift in China–U.S. relations might put an end to the “period” because China will become the top national security concern of the U.S. government for quite a long time to come. But at that time, others saw a broader picture and suggested that the “period” actually refers to one in which “China can continue to go all out for development, and won’t have to prepare the country for war against any major threats or use military means to defend core interests or important strategic interests” (Zhu 2014). Interpreted this way, the period of strategic opportunities covers not only the first 20 years of this century; instead, it began at the end of 1970s upon the launch of the reform and opening-up program, and since which China has stayed focused on national development. That is to say, such a period exists, not because China is not a strategic concern of the United States, but due to the international order’s openness and inclusiveness. The past four decades witnessed both China’s constant efforts to participate in the international system and the country’s substantial economic and social progress. Though the West has never viewed China as a liberal country, and Beijing has never agreed that the current international order is a liberal international order, China does benefit from the open, rule-based and consent-based order. In other words, China is not a supporter of the liberal international order as defined by the United States and other Western countries, but it is a major beneficiary and enthusiastic supporter of those “liberal characteristics” of the international order. China will remain in a period of strategic opportunities as long as the international order remains rule-based, inclusive, and open.

In this sense, China still remains in the period of strategic opportunities. Though the global order has been somewhat destabilized, there are not yet clear alternatives. There is no other order that can completely replace the current one. All countries have to live under this order; China and the U.S. are not exceptions. China’s peaceful rise can still continue under the current order, but the trends in China–U.S. ties will have a considerable bearing on how the international order restructures. The escalating conflicts between China and the United States over the last year have not yet led to decoupling, and the chances of a thorough decoupling remain slim moving forward. While Trump’s China policy revealed a consensus in Washington about the end of the strategy of engaging Beijing, no consensus has been reached on a substitute strategy. The United States has not yet designed any policies that aim to contain China’s development and progress.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence’s speech at the Hudson Institute on October 4, 2018 was by far the Trump administration’s most systematic statement on its China policy (Hudson Institute 2018). Despite making many complaints about China, Pence did not propose any guidelines that one could interpret as a “strategy”. In

addition, the 2017 *U.S. National Security Strategy* suggested strategic competition as the core of China–U.S. relations, but did not make any specific recommendations on how to approach the competition. The decision-making process of Trump’s China policy team in 2018 showed diverging opinions on China policy within the Trump administration; no wonder the U.S. government displayed fickle policy stances when negotiating with Chinese official. Trump hardliners and “globalist” faction have different opinions on various issues. Clearly, there is no consensus in Washington or the U.S. strategic community on how to approach China policy. In a speech in Singapore on November 6, 2018, Hank Paulson, former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, warned of an “economic iron curtain” if the U.S. and China cannot find a way to get along. He did not, however, put forth a different U.S. strategy for China.

The absence of a new China policy or internal consensus in the United States does not guarantee that Washington will not adopt a very destructive policy toward China in the future. If the current international order collapses or the U.S.-led Western bloc creates a “mini high-level liberal international order” that excludes China, Beijing will not be able to make further progress within the openness and inclusiveness of the current international order. In that case, China’s period of strategic opportunities would likely come to an end. Therefore, China’s strategic priority is to secure a favorable position in the international order, however, it changes. To that end, Beijing needs to bring China–U.S. relations back from the edge and make sure that it can benefit from a changing international order through stable bilateral ties. Moreover, China needs to play an active part in the adjustment of the international order, making every effort to create a favorable external environment to facilitate the critical tasks of the continuing great national rejuvenation.

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