## **QI Panel:**

## **Is U.S.–China Conflict Inevitable? A Debate Between Jake Werner and Michael Beckley**

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1:00-2:00 PM EST

**Jessica Mathews 1:10**

Good afternoon, everyone. It's a great pleasure to welcome you to this discussion about the most consequential and arguably the most dangerous bilateral relationship on the planet. My name is Jessica Matthews. I'm a Distinguished Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and its former president, and a member of the Quincy Institute board. So it's my great pleasure to be with you today and to introduce our speakers. Jake Werner is the Acting Director of the East Asia program at the Quincy Institute. He has been a research scholar at Boston University at the University of Chicago, and at universities, both in China and in Shanghai and in Taiwan. Michael Beckley is a non resident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and associate professor of political science at Tufts University. He's previously served at the Department of Defense at the RAND Corporation. And at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He is political scientist, Jake is as well and a with a PhD in in history. Both of them share the view that the state of the US Chinese relationship is not healthy, indeed dangerous, and arguably on a trajectory towards active conflict. But they have very different views about why that is so and about what sort of US policy might help to push the relationship in a different direction. So we're going to hear first their case for what the state of the relationship, in other words, their diagnosis, and then we will do a second round of their prescriptions for how US policy should change. Finally, I'll give them each a chance to address what they see as the weakness is in the others view. And finally, we will turn to all of you up for questions. And I urge you to, to write your questions down for us as you listen. So let's start Jake with you. And I'll give you five to seven minutes to set out your case for what the relationship looks like now.

**Jake Werner 3:44**

Thank you, Jessica. Thanks to Michael for for joining. And thanks to the Quincy Institute team for organizing this. I think I I tend to see when I talk with people in DC I tend to see two broad kinds of people. One set who thinks that conflict with China is inevitable, so we better better prepare for war right now. And it doesn't matter how confrontational we are, in fact, the more confrontational, the better. And then a second group of people who, who thinks that it's going to be impossible to have a war between the US and China. So we should feel free to be as confrontational as we want to do. And then so we have this sort of emerging consensus across this broad divide that United States should be highly confrontational towards China, and increasingly exclude China from strategically and economically essential parts of the global system. I think this is dangerously destabilizing. The the however, the the place that DC opinion is at the current moment, which is quite different than six months ago. It sort of tends towards the second group. And since the the quite belated diplomatic opening between US and China of the last few months, people are increasingly complacent about the risks of conflict. They see that the overheated rhetoric of the Trump administration and the first two years of the Biden administration has calmed down US China are talking with each other. Just heard that one year, we'll be visiting DC soon. And, of course, a number of high level US officials have been visiting Beijing over the last month. So there there is sort of optimism that we can avoid conflict without actually changing anything substantive about the way that we're interacting with China.

**Jake Werner 5:29**

And the, the the difficulty here is that if we continue, and this sort of substance of the diplomacy thus far that we've seen thus far, is essentially these visits, there isn't any substantive change, talk about changing the deeper issues that are driving the conflict. I think that those issues are so dangerous, that if we cannot figure out a way to change the landscape, that is currently pushing the US and China into conflict, that we do face, the likelihood of a very serious conflict, and the forces behind building towards that conflict are only likely to grow. So what is it that's behind that conflict? I think that both sides are currently identifying a whole range of insecurities that they identify in their society. And these are particularly, particularly difficult in the political legitimacy of the existing system, the dynamism of the economy, and the position of status in the global system. Both sides think that these are very serious problems. And they are identifying the other side as the source of those problems. And at least as important by mobilizing our own domestic society to confront the other side that will allow us to get the buy in from a fragmented political system and economic system to finally get some kind of unity behind a set of policies that could address these, these glaring insecurities. I think this is happening on both sides. And that can be hard to recognize when we're in this kind of conflictual relationship. There's a tendency for there's a tendency when you're facing against facing off against a rival, to try to harden the differences between the two sides to deny that there are commonalities to say that it's all their fault, everything is fine on this side. I think that's quite wrong. Actually, the the sort of structure of competition that we see here is quite is quite, they're quite a quite a bit of mirror imaging going on here. And as we see, political actors in the United States increasingly define everything about China as a national security concern, political actors in China are doing the same thing towards the United States. The worse that project, the the further that trajectory goes, the harder it is to turn back from from the place that we're going.

**Jake Werner 8:00**

So I think, I suspect I agree quite strongly with Michael, that this rather optimistic attitude in DC about the relationship that has prevailed for the last few months, is quite wrong, because these underlying issues have have not been addressed. The place I think that we're likely to disagree is whether those underlying issues can be addressed. I don't think that we should blame one side or the other. I think that what has happened over the last 15 years, is that in those three issues, military security, economic dynamism, and status in the global system, the previous structure of the global system has largely broken down, elites in both countries have been wrong footed by this, they expected things to continue, basically, as they had been. And suddenly, that trajectory of sort of growth and greater entanglement and greater convergence around a set of global norms that has kind of blown up in their faces. And they've been struggling for the last 15 years to figure out how to deal with the loss of legitimacy in the political system and loss of dynamism in the economy. The the the way to address this is not to immerse the global system into a terrible conflict. The way to address this is to look at the sources of those problems in the way that the global system has become increasingly zero sum in nature. So whether that's the distribution of authority in the global political system, the distribution of growth and the global economy, or the distribution of status, whether that's sort of individual countries or cultural issues. All of these things, I think, have moved from a position of positive some possibilities to increasingly zero sum constraints. If the US and China US and China have a very strong interest in overcoming the zero sum pressures. If they work together towards overcoming them, they could change the forces that are pushing them into conflicts today.

**Jessica Mathews 9:59**

So Jake, before you finish and before we you move to your, your prescription. Can you say a little more about what you think of the Biden administration's current policies, how those are contributing to this zero sum environment?

**Jake Werner 10:16**

Right. So I first I want to be very clear that I think the diplomatic opening is extremely positive development, that has clearly lowered the temperature and create an opening for doing something different. The question is whether we're going to do something different. And the indications are weak thus far, the the problem with the Biden ministration approach is that it is to it is to imbalanced toward deterrence and exclusion of China. And that is sending China a very clear message that that the United States sees no future for China in the system the United States wants to create globally. If that's the case, then then of course, China is going to respond in aggressive ways. And that creates this cycle where the United States responds to Chinese aggression. China responds to American aggression over and over and over into an escalatory spiral that leads us into conflict. So the key the key issues here, I support a lot of what the Biden administration is doing that things that China does not like, the problem is the imbalance between these and and the looking for a positive, constructive relationship with China. So we see that around Taiwan, of course, the biggest security issue, where there has been quite a very aggressive moves to, to form up some kind of coalition in the event that China should, should commit aggression against Taiwan. There has been a deep erosion of the of the One China policy that had reassured China for many years that that this issue could be set aside indefinitely. And on on the other side, there is little to nothing. Aside from from some rhetoric that Beijing doesn't find very reassuring. We see this in the global economy, the administration has imposed a blockade on one of the most essential technologies for any form of economic growth. In the future semiconductors, advanced semiconductors are no longer permitted whether China can escape this blockade, I think I think it's quite likely that China will be able to escape the blockade. But the the idea that in the name of national security, the United States will, will decide that China must be permanently subordinated in its possibilities for growth in the global economy and to compete in the global economy. This is this is a terribly provocative move, that sends a very clear signal that the United States will not will not tolerate Chinese success. And this is a problem for China, not just because, because it's humiliating, not just because Because China wants growth so that it can build its military and become a great power. This is more importantly, this is a deeply dangerous to the to the Chinese Communist Party whose legitimacy is built on maintaining a dynamic, dynamic economy with increasing opportunity for the people of China. The Chinese economy is currently facing very difficult problems, and it's attempting to move away from the leadership is trying to move away from property speculation as the basis of growth in the economy. They liked the Biden ministration thinks that high tech growth is going to be essential to the future of their economy and for the United States to say no, we will not allow that. This is this this sorts of exclusionary policies are really not consistent with the possibilities for constructive relationships.

**Jessica Mathews 13:31**

Okay, let's let's turn to Michael, for a different view.

**Michael Beckley 13:35**

Great. Thanks so much. Thanks, Jake for for having me. And, Jessica, it's great to see you. Working at the Carnegie Endowment was my my first job and remains one of the best I've ever had. So I'm very grateful for the support I had early in my career from the Carnegie Endowment. I you know, I have a pretty dismal view, similar to Jake of the relationship, I basically just see it as a Cold War. I don't think it's it's the Cold War, because obviously, China's not the Soviet Union. We're not living in the 50s and 60s in the world that had just been shattered by the two worst wars in history. But you've got the fundamental elements of a Cold War, which is a real conflict of vital interests, and to countries that are both willing and able right now, to use an array of tools in their arsenal to prod and probe and coerce each other short of outright war. And because I view this cold war situation as being driven by structural forces, I just don't see it as amenable to the kind of outreach that Jake although I think it's well intentioned and not necessarily a bad thing. I just don't see it realistically causing a significant thought in US China relations anytime soon. So Jake, for example, mentioned, you know, how can we make these issues between the United States and China less zero sum the Chinese always talk about Win Win outcomes, but I honestly struggled to think of a major issue in US China relations that has Win Win elements mean Taiwan at the end of the day is either going to be ruled from Taipei or Beijing it can't be ruled from both the East and South China Seas. Those are obviously in dispute. Russia can be propped up or ground down, democracy can be promoted or squelched. You know, for the United States, the all those alliances in East Asia are a force for stability. But for China, it looks like hostile encirclement. And I think both countries are correct in their assessments of those alliances. And, you know, I used to ask my students if aliens came to the earth to kill us all with the United States and China cooperate. And I used to be pretty confident about that. But honestly, after COVID, I'm really my faith in their ability to resolve transnational issues has been shattered, it looks like zero sum competition has infested, even though is if you just look at how they responded to COVID. And if you look at what both sides have been saying about climate change, and to me, it's not just like a conflict of interest, it looks like the United States and China just have fundamentally different worldviews they disagree about how borders should be drawn internationally, or what constitutes a human right, or how governments should relate to their people. And it seems in particular, that China thinks that we should live in a world where ancient autocratic civilizations should be allowed to kind of dominate their traditional spheres of influence, whereas the United States is pretty dead set on eliminating those old empires by protecting Taiwan, in this case, or Ukraine from being re swallowed by, by Russia. And so you just have this this standoff, the sides have beef with each other. And then you also see both sides willing and able to coerce each other to achieve their objectives. And they're basically competing in every domain, militarily, economically, in terms of forging alliances. So to me, this looks like very much like a Cold War. And I think it's going to last for quite some time, because for one, that's just what happens in Cold Wars. So political scientists have actually create a database of what they call enduring rivalries, which is basically two great powers just going out each other for for decades. And they found that these things lasts for about 50 years, on average, and they only end when one side loses the ability to compete, and runs out of gas, or gets bludgeoned and in a massive war, or when the two sides ally against a common enemy, and I just don't see a common enemy that's going to unite China and the United States anytime soon.

**Michael Beckley 17:25**

So one issue is just that Cold Wars tend to last quite a long time. The second is when you look at all those conflicting interests I just mentioned between the United States and China. To me, it's I don't see the sides been able to just deal those away and some kind of backroom deal between Jake Sullivan and Wang Yi or whoever the, you know, whatever Chinese diplomat is still around to do the negotiations, because I think both sides interests are rooted in their national histories, their their geographic location, their regime type. To me, you know, my study of China has convinced me that the CCPs current conception of its interests have been heavily shaped by a couple of events by the century of humiliation when China was ripped apart by imperialist powers, and by the democratic revolutions in 1989. That toppled a bunch of communist regimes and almost undid China's and I think those those events have convinced the CCP that their prime directive must be to never let China be bullied or, or divided again. And that in turn then requires this relentless amassing of wealth and power and expanding China's territorial control and ruling the country with an iron fist. You see this determination to do all of these things in Chinese documents, American interests, I think you could argue are less entrenched. So maybe there's some wiggle room there. But I still think at least currently, US interests are too rigid, to allow for major compromise between the two sides. I mean, the main US foreign policy interest is to basically prevent overseas events from spoiling the wealth and freedom that Americans currently enjoy here. And while I understand many Americans would love to avoid foreign entanglements, some believe that that could be accomplished through through retrenchment. But I think to this day, most of the foreign policy elite believe that we learned a valuable lesson in the 20th century, namely that powerful tyrannies abroad should be contained early before they've started to overrun their region. And that, in turn requires maintaining strong alliances in peacetime. And so you know, we can debate about whether that's right or not. But I just think that that's generally how American policymakers believe the world works that the existing order generally serves us interests. And so when they see China trying to redraw the map of East Asia or backing Russia's invasion of Ukraine or massively subsidizing its industries or hurting ethnic minorities into reeducation centers, I think they see not just policy disagreements but really as like an attack on this broader order that they believe is undergirded US security and prosperity. So you have this this entrenched Conflict of Interest.

**Michael Beckley 20:01**

And I think the last factor that makes me very pessimistic is what political scientists call the credible commitment problem. Namely, that it's hard for either country to make major concessions to the other without exposing itself to further exploitation. And neither country can really convince the other that they wouldn't exploit those kinds of openings. So if, you know, the United States stopped selling arms to Taiwan as a sign of good faith, the military balance could shift radically in China's favor, and China could exploit that. Alternatively, if China backs off Taiwan militarily, they have to worry that the island will continue to drift towards independence, you see that same kind of dynamic, you know, if once I can let Russia win the war in Ukraine, or will not let Russia win the war in Ukraine, they face potential pushback in the economic sphere, you know, if China abandons its industrial subsidies, and does what the United States says they're pretty much condemned to technological laggard status. But if the United States allows China to subsidize its industries, then that's going to probably hollow out more of the US economy and certainly erode any semblance of an open trade order. So it's just very hard for either side to give a concession that would be both big enough to satisfy the other side, but also would not then allow that side to run roughshod and pocket that concession, and then use it to demand even more. So. Unfortunately, I'm very pessimistic at present. Hopefully, there'll be a shift in the balance of power somewhere down the line that opens up space for diplomatic breakthrough, but right now, I just don't see it.

**Jessica Mathews 21:28**

Okay, great. Jake, let's turn to you and and here is specifically as you can, if you were in charge of the Biden administration's China policy, what would you do?

**Jake Werner 21:44**

I would probably be paralyzed with overwork. So just recognizing what's going on, even though I am critical of of some of the decisions of administration is making, there's a tremendous this is sort of an overwhelming issue that impinges on every single facet of US foreign policy and even domestic policy. And I think actually, that is what gives me some hope that that we could we could find a pathway towards a constructive relationship by working together on these on overcoming these zeros on forces that are pushing the two countries against each other. And I think I guess, compared compared with Michael, I'm, I think that both actually both of the countries are less aggressive than than what I'm hearing from Michael, a good a good example here is, is the way that the two countries have conducted their relations. On the issue of the Ukraine and the Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United States has certainly supported Ukraine's defense, but it has not attempted to, to, to, to overthrow the Russian regime, the United States has been very responsible, I think, and in limiting the potential threat to the Russian regime, which could end in extreme destabilization or nuclear war. I think that's been that's been smartly played, for the most part. And on the Chinese side, of course, China is not is not even supporting the Russian military in any direct by transferring fatal, fatal goods to the Russian military. So China has also been quite restrained in its support for Russia in the Ukraine war. So yes, the US and China are on opposite sides of this war. Yes, probably in their heart of hearts, they would they would prefer the there aside from the board and take everything. But they're not conducting themselves in that way. Not yet. I think what that gives me that indicates to me and and, and I think and even redoubling that conviction is is that the United States is that China has attempted in, in some fashion in some limited fashion, to to broker peace in Ukraine. And the United States after I think, quite counterproductive, initial rejection of those efforts has now welcomed them. If they're if China is going to be constructive towards creating peace in Ukraine, then the United States welcomes those efforts, the administration has said. So I think that to me, is really a model of what we can see here, like both the recognition that the two sides do not want conflict and are willing to take real steps away from conflict. They are not throwing themselves against the other and they're not trying to, to execute an unconditional defeat of the other side. And they are willing to, under the right circumstances, at least, when they're feeling the right pressures, they're willing to work together to to execute common interests. It actually is not in the interest of either side that either Ukraine be completely defeated or Russia completely defeated. That would be extremely either one of those would be extremely destabilizing outcome. The the best outcome would be peace that both sides can live with and the US and China are pushing that direction we see this, we see this across a range of issues, there's a potential for this kind of alignment across a range of issues. Taiwan does not have to be ruled from either Beijing or Taipei. It's not It's because Beijing has accepted for decades and decades has accepted a de facto autonomy for Taiwan, as long as it's not officially recognized. The goal for US policy should be maintaining that that ambiguous status quo. And we can do that I think if we have a balanced policy towards China

**Jessica Mathews 25:31**

Would you say that you recently seen such a balanced policy?

**Jake Werner 25:40**

No, but I but it's also but it also is not, you know, it's not the I think the choice that Michael has laid before us, like a pure binary choice is that China can invade Taiwan, or the United States can declare its support for the independence of Taiwan, we haven't seen either one of those. Right, we're still here quite, quite in the middle. And if we can maintain ourselves in the middle

**Jessica Mathews 25:59**

Before we turn to do criticism of the others, I want to hear more from you. But what specifically in the Biden administration's set of policies, certainly in the economic sphere, as I understand it, you feel that the word competition has been used to kind of mask policies that are actually a good deal, closer to exclusion than they are to, to help the competition. Tell us a little bit about what you would like to see changed there that you think is substantial enough to change the trajectory of the relationship?

**Jake Werner 26:35**

Right, right. So Right. So I think this is an important and important points coming out of this recent paper that I wrote that in DC, every sort of antagonistic move against China is being called competition. That is that is really, that really misleads us because many of the things that people in both parties are pursuing, are actually exclusionary exclusion is the opposite of competition. Competition, competition is a form of connection, whereby the two countries try to improve each other through through the rivalry, exclusion, such as the the blockade on semiconductors that the Biden administration has imposed, or the exclusion of a whole range of Chinese companies from from rich country markets. The the the pressuring allies to pursue similar exclusions, these sorts of things are intrinsically destabilize, and they're not competition. China, I think, could accept a competitive framework, it cannot accept an exclusionary framework, because that goes to the possibilities for Chinese growth and Chinese status in the global system. So I think it is important that the United States, I welcome healthy competition, but healthy competition can't be based on on exclusionary initiatives. And I worry very much that China is going to go down this road as well, there certainly are these impulses in Chinese statecraft. China is less powerful in the United States. So it has been more cautious on these things. But there are indications that China could move in this direction. And if both if both powers move towards exclusion, then I think very quickly, we'll see the the formation of rival rival risks, geopolitical blocks, and then we will be in the world world that that Michael thinks we're already in. But I think that we have time, we can work together around these extremely urgent issues in, in global security, such as the Ukraine war, such as a, an indefinite continuation of the ambiguous status quo around Taiwan, we can also really importantly, work together around global development around debt restructuring for countries and debt distress, which is, which is an extremely urgent issue right now. And around creating adjust to climate transition. Both countries have a really intense interest in in achieving these things right now, however, the rivalry is getting in the way. So each initiative, the other side pitches as a way to counter the one side pitches as a way to counter the other side. And then the other side tries to sabotage that initiative. Now, if we could get to a place where we have a more constructive relationship, I think these issues can be worked through and the two countries could could come together around around a set of policies that would increase the the, the the rate and the quality of global growth, which would itself remove one of the key zero some pressures right now, the sense that the US and China can't both succeed in the global economy, it has to be one or the other. If growth is faster and higher quality, that sense of zero sum competition will disappear.

**Jessica Mathews 29:34**

Will ease Thanks, Michael, your your prescriptions for US policy.

**Michael Beckley 29:40**

Well, I would love to see engagement of the kind that Jake is talking about. But one one point of skepticism I have is just I feel like that was tried for much of the last 40 years, you know, especially in the 90s in the 2000s the United States made offers that I think would be unthinkable today just given where US policy So and the point is not that the United States has done everything right or was always nice to China or never did anything provocative, but just that, you know, the United States went further in those decades, then I think would be politically possible today to go towards what Jake is, is advocating. But we know now from Chinese documents that have been leaked out as well as China's actions since then, that, in general, a lot of these American overtures really failed to fundamentally change how Chinese leaders assessed American intentions or just swayed the CCPs efforts to become more dominant in in East Asia and beyond. I mean, there's lots of examples. You know, right after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, President George HW Bush sent this apologetic letter to Dong XIAO PING saying, let's get the relationship back on track. And we know now that dung gave was telling his comrades internally that United States have been deeply involved in basically fomenting those those protests and was trying to wage a world war without Gun Smoke to topple the CCP. We saw similar assessments in the 90s. So like in 1998, you know, Clinton goes to Beijing to really cement his engagement policy, he grants China most favored nation trading status without all those human rights standards that were supposed to be attached. And then to seal the deal when he's in Beijing, he becomes the first US president to publicly articulate the three nodes on Taiwan, you know, we're not no independence, no to China's no membership for Taipei and international organizations. And we now know, just a few months later that Jiang Zemin gave gave an internal speech to essentially the whole CCP foreign policy bureaucracy where he said that Washington so called engagement policy had the same aims as a containment policy, namely to and I'm quoting from him here, to try with ulterior motives to change our country's socialist system, a political plot to westernize and divide our country put pressure on us to overwhelm us and put us down and then he said at one point in that speech from now on, and for a relatively long period of time, the United States will be our main diplomatic adversary. And you know, these these kinds of assessments continued even as the George W. Bush administration, you know, set up those US China Strategic Economic dialogues, those were expanded under Obama, the Obama administration tried to pursue strategic reassurance. But you know, my research from my PhD advisor, Andy, Nathan, and Andrew Scoville, they went through all these Chinese sources. And they they concluded that at the end of the day, the Chinese leadership still views, the United States has this revisionist power that's trying to keep China down. And I think in some ways, they're not necessarily wrong about that. Because, you know, yes, access to us technology, and markets are great. But, you know, the Chinese are understandably much more struck by the fact that the US has this big powerful military, that it has NGOs and journalists, you know, calling out China's internal affairs. And just the many times that top American officials have said that the whole purpose of this engagement policy is to liberalize China, over time to basically put the CCP out of business, and the CCP has basically made it its mantra, we're not going to do that. If you look at the curriculum of the party school, which Xi Jinping used to run, the top lesson is all about avoiding the kind of Gorbachev style concessions that led to the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party. And you know, in other words, I think, as John said, US offers of engagement are really more of like a Stealth form of containment. And it just seems like Xi Jinping has really internalized if you just look at what he's doing. I mean, he's certainly not Mao Zedong, or anything like that. But he kind of is like the anti Gorbachev in many ways, he spent his time in power, doing the exact opposite of what the Soviets did towards the end of the Cold War with this big military buildup, the reassertion of party control and pretty much every aspect of Chinese society, this big economic campaign to basically sanctions proof, the CCP and then if you just listen to his rhetoric, you know, he's talking about preparing the nation for extreme scenarios and stormy seas. And so I just, I just don't see any of these overtures that that Jake is talking about, from the from the American side really been able to puncture through that wall of, of insecurity on behalf of the Chinese. And so I think that just that doesn't mean that you should then attack China, it just means we have to be realistic about what diplomacy can actually achieve. Diplomacy can continue.

**Michael Beckley 34:18**

But I think the challenge we have right now is how can we also deter Chinese aggression, but also not do it so aggressively that we cause the CCP to lash out? And so my, my take is that I think the United States should do basically a couple of things. One, try to focus on competing in the few areas that would really up in the balance of power. So I to me, those are, you know, China's attempts to absorb Taiwan and then China's attempts to monopolize what they call choke points in the international economy, whether it's computer chips or telecommunications networks, I think if the United States can work with its allies to just develop alternatives to Chinese economic predominance in those days So you don't get the Amazon effect where everyone just has to go to Beijing and China gets a lot of leverage. That's good. And that's much better than sort of a full scale trade or tech war. And then the second is I actually think that China over the long term or that really the medium term is going to weaken as a great power relative to the US. That's where a lot of my academic research has led me to believe I just think the economic problems that China has the the demographic problems, the strategic and circumvent that China's facing means that, you know, we can look forward to a day maybe in the 2030s, where China won't be able to throw its weight around nearly so much. But if we can, but first, we need to get there. And I just worry that in the shorter term, there could be windows of opportunity for China to really lash out. And that's why I'm so concerned about Taiwan, as well as about these crack efforts that Beijing is trying to make to really dominate these key choke points in the global economy. So let me just tailor and focus on that, that would be ideal.

**Jessica Mathews 35:54**

Well, so can you be a little more specific? I mean, are there do you think US policy on Taiwan is too uncertain right now? Are you arguing for it to be more black and white or?

**Michael Beckley 36:13**

No, I am very hostile to attempts to change U.S. declaratory policy. So you know, saying, you know, we'll defend Taiwan under any circumstance, and certainly not calling for Taiwanese independence, I'm of the opinion, the United States should be talking softly, but building up a big stick. And so continuing to say, Look, we're not just deterring Beijing, we're deterring Taiwan from declaring independence. And at the same time, though, we are going to build up the military capacity to prevent Beijing from resolving this issue, non violently. And I think that would be the the ideal. I mean, it really is a continuation of past us Taiwan policy. It's not changing the policy, but it is making up for the fact that the military balance in the Taiwan Strait has been shifting radically in China's favor. And China's just gotten much more aggressive. I mean, you see the shows of force going on essentially daily, about at least flexing those muscles, I just think that demands a military response in terms of just building up the capacity to be able to deter China from making a big move on Taiwan.

**Jessica Mathews 37:19**

Okay, let me let me turn to some of the questions that we've that we've received. Several listeners have have asked specifically about Taiwan, and whether it will be possible to avoid a hot war over Taiwan, maybe. Jake, you want to say a word on on that? Do you see the US as having been also at fault in in walking away from or certainly overstepping the bounds of the Taiwan relationship that worked for 40 years? Until recently? What What would you recommend there? What do you foresee?

**Jake Werner 38:16**

Yeah, the United States is at fault. And China is at fault. Like we're we're stuck right now in a security dilemma. That means that each side is taking defensive actions that it considers defensive against the measures that it considers on the other side to be aggressive. They genuinely each side genuinely believes that. And that the outcome of that of being trapped in a security dilemma is that we escalate ever further. And the escalatory pressures just make things worse, because the the more intense the opposition from the other side is read as a partner that we can never talk with someone we can ever trust. So that that dynamic is eroding the Taiwan status quo on both sides, I think we should recognize that the Taiwanese government has been highly responsible in this regard is the one actor that I think has been taking a very restrained and responsible position, the US and China have both been eroding the status quo. And I don't think that's has to do so directly with Taiwan, I think it's the underlying problems in the relationship where each side is defining the other as the source of their problems, and therefore no longer trust the assurances that held the peace for many decades. I don't think anything has changed substantively about the situation that either internally and the thinking of government officials and the two governments or militarily in the region, that that means that we can no longer maintain this previous status quo. The real problem the source of the problem is that the two sides have lost trust in each side has lost trust in the other and the overall rivalry in the relationship is is drowning the possibilities for peace around Taiwan. So I am extremely worried about this. I think it is I think it will be, it will be hard to put the relationship on a solid foundation. But at the same time, both sides recognize very clearly that they do not want to have conflict over Taiwan. So there is a strong incentive. And there has been improvement in the last couple of months through this diplomacy in in the way that the two sides are talking about this. So I think there is hope, but it is very dangerous situation.

**Jessica Mathews 40:21**

Do you want to add anything to that, Michael?

**Michael Beckley 40:24**

Yeah, I mean, it's obviously not a hopeless situation, I'm reasonably confident the two sides will avoid a hot war over Taiwan. But one thing that does scare me is, you know, I think the Americans would be totally willing to just kick the can down the road is in perpetuity, but I just worry the Chinese, maybe not so much, you know, Xi Jinping has talked about it's an inevitable requirement of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation that Taiwan eventually, one way or another comes back into the fold, it doesn't necessarily mean that he'll try to make that happen, or under his tenure. But at what point does the CCP just get tired of waiting for the Taiwanese to come back to the motherland. And I think they're, you know, from Chinese perspective, if you're just looking at trends on Taiwan, the fact that more and more Taiwanese view themselves as solely Taiwanese and not Chinese, the fact that even though most Taiwanese sis and still favor the status quo, if you actually look at those that favor the status quo, but are in favor of longer term moves towards a more independent posture, that's, that's doubled from something like 12% to 25% of the electorate. And because Taiwan is a democracy, I would if I were in the CCP, I would be worried that those sentiments are going to be increasingly reflected in Taiwan's policy. And at the same time, Taiwan seems to be getting a lot more diplomatic and material support from the outside world, including from the United States. So we have elections coming up in Taiwan, later this year, there's going to be candidates that maybe aren't as practical as tying when has been, as Jake mentioned, that are more willing to run their mouth and talk more about a state to state relationship or about a more independent posture for Taiwan, you also have elections coming up in the United States, where there's gonna be lots of people on both sides of the aisle, using this as an issue to look like they're tough on China. So I just worry, there are provocations coming at the same time that China is feeling that maybe it's peaceful means of bringing Taiwan back into the fold or disappearing. And China has these military means that have gotten increasingly powerful to really forced the issue. That's why I don't think we can write out entirely the risk of a war over Taiwan.

**Jessica Mathews 42:30**

Okay. One of our listeners asked the question of whether demographic decline in in China and relatedly its current economic woes that stem in part from very poor policy and abrupt reversal on the COVID pandemic, whether that buys enough time for this very fraught relationship to cool. And to end much more happily, I'd be interested in in what both of you feel in answer to that. Jake, you want to start?

**Jake Werner 43:16**

Yeah, I mean, I think I think this sort of gets to an underlying an important underlying condition. On both sides, both sides actually are being pulled in two different directions. There's one very strong pull towards imagining everything through a national security lens. Imagining that every thought everything the other side does, no matter how innocuous is just part of a plot to displace the power of your side. You know, we have a Chinese company is is wants to build a battery factory in Michigan, and there are people locally who are saying that that factory is gonna have cooling towers that will hide ballistic missiles. All right. And and we have reports and that's it's not just, it's not just a sort of local people who have who have been who have been hearing the demonization of China on the news, coming up with this these sorts of conspiracy theories. We have reports coming out of the State Department that says the Chinese Sister City program is part of a malign influence campaign. So that's not just on the United States side, that kind of dynamic see everything through national security lens, seeing everything through a xenophobic nationalist framework, where you tribute, all your problems to the other side. And everything the other side does this sort of part of one giant plot against you. That is very common that is common in the United States, and it's common in China is very dangerous. On the other hand, though, both countries are being pulled towards hopes for an open and inclusive global system, the kind of system that we had for the last 40 years, but that broke down. So I accept Michaels comments on this. I think he's quite right to say that that we did have a mutually beneficial relationship between the US and China from the 80s until 2008. But I do not think that that actually shows that therefore we can never have a beneficial relationship. Again, I think despite the fact that leaders on both sides were quite antagonistic towards each other, the fact that they both existed within a larger framework that aligned their interests, and made them see that their future relied on the other succeeding as well. The fact that we have enjoyed that in the past means that we can enjoy that, again, it's not something about the intrinsic imperialist nature of United States or the intrinsic authoritarian nature of China. That means we cannot have a constructive relationship with each other. All right.

**Jessica Mathews 45:42**

Let me ask you both. One of one of our listeners asked the question, specifically, what about Xi Jinping when you when you look at past and make arguments based on how it was, and maybe we can get back there, that raises the question of whether she is a quantum step different in his goals, and in his beliefs about the outcome of the relationship? Which would either of you or both of you like to like to comment on that?

**Michael Beckley 46:18**

I mean, I can, I can maybe start and then Jay can can pick it up. I think you can read what Xi Jinping has been saying. And it's not a very bright story about the future of US China relations, he's now recently taken to explicitly just calling out the United States for it's all around in circles in of China. And he's been, you know, giving speeches telling, you know, Chinese young people, they have to be ready to eat bitterness, you know, basically tighten your belts, because, you know, we have geopolitical issues to take care of. And if you just look at what he's been saying to the armed forces, about how they need to be able to fight and when they need to be ready to fight, it just does not give the impression that this is a leader that's looking for reengagement, and I think his his, his, the, some of the internal speeches that came out even really early in his reign where he was, you know, talking about the fear of color revolutions and about a Soviet style collapse and his diagnosis as to why the Soviets went down and the blame that he put on the existing government that he said was not, you know, willing to stand up and fight for what was right and basically sold out to the West I think shows his his view of what needs to be done and you know, the political science research to is just very clear that personalist dictatorships once the regime revolves around a cult of personality of one person, those regimes are more than twice as likely to initiate wars as even other types of autocracies. So like military junta's, or one party states where there's more of a semblance of collective rule for all the obvious reasons that you know, these personals dictators tend to purge people that disagree with them and potential political rivals, everyone gets scared to tell them bad information. And as a result, they make catastrophic miscalculations, I think that played a big role, frankly, in Putin's invasion of invasion of Ukraine. And I just worry that similar dynamics could be taking place under she things like zero COVID, and all these crazy policies that have been coming out that to me that just does not inspire confidence that she is some reformer. And, you know, dictators, as they get old, generally don't mellow out with old age, you know, they tend to get more entrenched in their beliefs. So I worry that she's gonna go down that route.

**Jessica Mathews 48:24**

What about you, Jake? Do you see she as a departure from previous Chinese rulers? Recent?

I think I think that I mean, I'm not I'm not sure what, what we mean, when we say reformer, there's no question that Xi Jinping has reformed a lot of the ways that the Chinese government works, he centralized power, he has dramatically dramatically increased political repression. He has launched a massive, extremely disruptive anti corruption campaign, he has he has elevated national security in in into in politics, to give it a much stronger place in politics. He has pursued a rhetoric if not policies of greater egalitarianism, compared to the the out of control inequality that preceded him. He has he has changed quite a bit. On the other hand, of course, there are these very strong continuities that he believes in party rule, he believes that China should continue to have strong economic growth, to create opportunity for for its people to raise its status in the global system. These are things that that all Communist Party leaders have thought since at least since the reform period. So, of course, there is some continuity, there are some such sharp changes, I would attribute this less to the personality of Xi Jinping himself. And more to the to the situation coming out of the crisis of 2008 that that royal politics in China and in the United States, and in India, and in Brazil. And in Poland, and everywhere in the world, there is actually a strong change everywhere in the world. And the tenor of politics and the nature of political possibilities, has moved increasingly towards nationalist thinking towards greater xenophobia towards greater authoritarian currents, but also towards, towards prioritizing security and egalitarian society. So there's there's a real mix of forces out here and we see them in US politics, we see them in Chinese politics as well. So I think that there, there has been really dramatic changes. But these changes respond to a changing possibilities in the global system. And the reason that those three decades of really effective engagement between US and China were the were the two sides accomplished huge, huge shared goals in terms of shared economic growth in terms of maintaining peace, and prosperity, not least between themselves, but allowing China to, for all the aggressive rhetoric in the Chinese government, there have been only a handful, literally a few combat deaths from the People's Liberation Army since 1979, which is just an unparalleled record of military restraint for for global power. So I think that Xi Jinping is more aggressive, it comes from the sense of being under siege. It comes from the greatness, the strengthening of nationalism within Chinese politics, that is responding to this crisis environment coming out of the crisis of 2008. So these are, these are things that I do not want to excuse, because I deplore many of them. But I think that we can work with them. Rather than saying that these are features, these are sort of intrinsic features of Chinese politics that the United States can ever work with. I think that's quite wrong. And we see that, for example, in the move towards industrial policy in both China and the United States. So the form of economic statecraft that both countries have engaged in has really changed significantly over the last 10 years, possibilities for thinking about how to reform the way that the global economy works as well as national economies have really opened up because the two sides have moved closer together on the issue of whether whether the state should be used to promote public good through markets. So that's just another example of places that if the United States and China trusted each other, and we're talking to each other substantively, rather than just as a formal exercise, there would be real possibilities for thinking about how we could change the really destabilizing conditions that came out of the crisis of 2008. Change the zero sum forces that are pushing US and China against each other, and create a much a much hope, more hopeful, and more legitimate, global system that would benefit the people and the leaders of both countries.

**Jessica Mathews 52:45**

So let me push you a little bit on that. Because I think you both agree that much of US policy in the past has been interpreted by Chinese leaders. And you've both given powerful examples of that have been interpreted by Chinese leaders as a veiled attempt at either encirclement or worse. So when you say if we trusted each other, how do we get from here to there?

**Jake Werner 53:21**

So the the idea here, and this is why I think that Michaels example of of the three decades of, of positive engagement between the two countries, proving that we that we are bound for confrontation is I reject that characterization. That actually bears out my argument, I think that the leaders on both sides were hostile to the leaders on the other side, they had deep suspicions of them. They didn't share their political values, they thought they had it out for them. And yet, the US and China work together, achieved great things for decades, for decades, despite all these intense tensions. Why? Because they because they existed within a larger system that aligned their interests, and showed them that success on one side helped success on their side. Alright, that's what we've lost. And that's the reason the relationship has broken down. So if we want to avoid very serious conflict, that would have terrible consequences for everyone in both countries and the world, we need to figure out how to create a new framework that aligns our interests, and shows us that success on one side is success on our side as well. And so I think that's where the discussions around the distribution of global authority around the way that the global economy works around how to address the climate crisis. Discussions should focus on changing the zero sum constraints that will, that will sort of build confidence that we can do more push reform further create a create a more a more inclusive, global system with faster growth and fair distribution of authority. It's It's not a difficult it's not it's not an easy path. It's it would be extremely difficult, but I think I think the only alternative is very serious conflict. And if we're successful, then the outcome would be, would be tremendously in the benefit of the American people, as well as the Chinese people, as well as people in countries around the world.

**Jessica Mathews 55:12**

So a couple of our listeners have raised the question of whether climate change is a policy with potentially existential threats to both countries, that could be the the route towards finding an area for for cooperation does either of you see that as a as a, as a major factor in the future of the relationship?

**Michael Beckley 55:41**

I'm personally very pessimistic about that. I mean, we just saw John Kerry go over to Beijing to try to hash out some kind of cooperative deal. And Xi Jinping got up and gave a speech and said China is not going to adjust its emissions on anyone else's timetable, or, or scale because we have the right to develop. And I think it's a good example of yes, there are public goods that need to be provided. And there are clearly common interests here. The problem, and we see this, and you see this in all realms of social science, frankly, is that you still get zero some debates over who bears more responsibility, who should pay what costs? How do you enforce that the other side is holding up their end of the deal. And I think just what we've seen through round after round of US China Climate discussions is they just are never going to see eye to eye for the Chinese. They say, you know, the Americans you had, you know, more than a century to pollute, and now it's our turn. And so you should bear the responsibility of trying to rein in this problem. And you know, we may be the biggest emitter in total, but you're the biggest emitter and per capita terms. And that's what ultimately, really matters, we have a fifth of humanity to take care of. And for the United States, you just look at the graph of US emissions versus Chinese emissions. And you know, they used to be roughly equal. Now, it's China's just surge so far ahead, because of the stage of development, and the type of development that it's pursuing. And so it just doesn't seem like cooperative solutions, where both sides will come together and voluntarily agree to limit their emissions. That just doesn't seem in the cards, it just seems like they're both it doesn't mean things are hopeless. On the climate front, though, I think ideally, you'll have some kind of space race sort of dynamic, where ironically, competition to lead the way and renewable energy technologies and be the leader on this issue will cause both sides to try to be the best version of themselves. But in terms of both sides coming together and just signing an agreement and then sticking to it. Unfortunately, I'm just very, very pessimistic about them.

**Jessica Mathews 57:37**

Well, unfortunately, we still have some interesting questions in the queue. But I'm afraid that our time is up. I want to thank both of you for a thoughtful attempt to get inside this, this terribly important relationship and to suggest how things might be different and both to Jake Warner and to Michael Beckley. Thank you very much. And on behalf of the Quincy Institute, I want to thank all our listeners. Thank you. Thanks, Jessica. Thanks, Michael.