

Conflict will be inevitable without a change in course of the U.S.—China relationship.

Despite recent diplomatic outreach and reassurances by the Biden administration, the current trajectory of the U.S.—China relationship is incompatible with healthy competition.

Many current U.S. policies appear aimed not at competition with China, but at excluding China from the global commons and rejecting interaction with China entirely. Through the U.S. political lens, most actions by China are seen as sinister. The United States and China are caught in a cycle where each insists they are defending the international order against the other. This bolsters hardliners on both sides calling for more confrontation and nativism. Unless this cycle is interrupted by reconceptualizing our relationship with China, the two largest countries in the world are bound for mutually destructive conflict.

Washington must abandon its knee-jerk desire to “counter China” in all its activities.

U.S. leaders should abandon the simplistic image of China as a monolith opposed to every American value and interest. At the same time, we must also reject Chinese propaganda which portrays China as entirely blameless.

The reality is more complicated. Like the United States, China has benefited from the current international order. China is best conceived as a status quo power with an interest in pursuing incremental reforms to an increasingly dysfunctional global system. Misrepresenting China’s interests and intentions as invariably destructive undermines American credibility, while convincing the Chinese leadership that the United States will not tolerate a Communist Party-led China. Instead, China should be conceptualized as a difficult but potentially constructive interlocutor whose problematic behaviors can best be addressed by drawing it into the international order rather than excluding it.

U.S.—China cooperation is both possible and necessary.

For nearly fifty years, Beijing and Washington have successfully avoided the transformation of Taiwan into a focal point of strategic competition and a potential trigger of war. This has been made possible in part by every new incoming U.S. administration reaffirming the “One China” policy.

Restoring the sense that the United States and China can cooperate toward a shared conception of the common good is crucial in order to interrupt the current cycle of mutual suspicion and conflict. Recent examples of successful cooperation between the two countries include securing the Paris Climate Accords, bringing the Ebola epidemic under control in West Africa, and joint efforts on science and technology.

The criterion for cooperation should be whether Chinese actions contribute to or undermine the reforms needed to reduce zero-sum pressures, institutionalize restrained multipolarity on all sides, and open up possibilities for mutual gain.

The United States should embrace these principles for common good diplomacy: 1) seeking inclusion for all, not just U.S. allies and partners; 2) affirming and engaging China’s constructive ideas; 3) avoiding polemics; and 4) pursuing negotiation, not confrontation, to manage differences. The United States and China should apply these principles to several specific areas of cooperation: 1) development in the Global South; 2) addressing climate change; 3) renegotiating global trade and economic rules; and 4) reforming international institutions to create a more open and inclusive world order.

Once the principle is established that the United States and China can cooperate toward shared interests, it will be possible to engage in vigorous competition without triggering a dangerous slide into conflict.

Additional resources

- Quincy Brief No. 45 - [Competition Versus Exclusion in U.S.—China Relations: A Choice Between Stability and Conflict](#)
- Quincy Brief No. 46 - [Common Good Diplomacy: A Framework for Stable U.S.—China Relations](#)