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Panel I: The State of U.S.-China Relations Heading into 2021

# Diverging Perspectives on U.S.-China Relations

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Chair Bartholomew, Vice Chair Cleveland, and other distinguished Commission members, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today on the current state of U.S.-China relations. I want to take this opportunity to highlight three interrelated areas in which diverging perspectives pose a risk to Washington's China strategy and America's security more broadly.

- **Diverging Perceptions of Bilateral Relations.** First, there is a widening perception gap on the cause of the recent worsening in the U.S.-China relationship. American scholars tend to attribute the downturn largely to Beijing's destabilizing actions, while Chinese scholars are prone to blame Donald Trump's more confrontational approach. This divergence makes it difficult for Washington and Beijing to agree on the underlying causes of friction in the bilateral relationship.
- **Diverging Assumptions on Time Horizons.** Second, there is a growing perception gap regarding trends in relative power and influence. Xi Jinping argues that "time and momentum are on our side," while Joe Biden highlights enduring American strengths and says China "is not competition for us."<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, polling in third countries reveals that outside observers believe both China and the United States are struggling.<sup>2</sup> Counterintuitively, these diverging assumptions about relative power trends imply that leaders in Beijing and Washington each appear to believe time is on their side.
- **Diverging Assessments of America's Strategy.** Third, America's bipartisan consensus on China strategy is at risk due to disagreements about the Trump administration's adoption of a more competitive approach. Some experts reject the logic that underpins this more competitive strategy, others support that strategy but question the effectiveness of the Trump administration's implementation, and still others generally approve of both the strategy and its execution. This divergence threatens to magnify divisions in the American expert community, threatening bipartisan agreement on China policy.

Resolving these diverging perceptions will be crucial if we are to address the China challenge while maintaining the spirit of bipartisan cooperation that has long characterized U.S. policy on Asia. The Commission is in a unique position to stimulate public debate about each of these critical issues, not only among the expert community in Washington but also across a broader audience in the United States and abroad. To that end, this testimony concludes by outlining several policy implications and key principles for U.S. strategy on China and Asia more generally.

### **Diverging Perceptions of Bilateral Relations**

The bilateral relationship between the United States and China is worse today than it has been in at least three decades. Indeed, polling by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows that American public assessments of China are at their lowest point ever for members of both parties.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, surveys by the China Data Lab at the University of California, San Diego find that Chinese feelings toward the United States have also become significantly more negative, especially over the past year.<sup>4</sup> Washington and Beijing may not agree on much, but both sides acknowledge that the bilateral relationship is at or near its nadir in modern times.

Where American and Chinese experts tend to disagree is on the reasons for the worsening of the relationship. Conversations with Chinese officials and experts suggest that most blame the Trump administration for damaging the relationship. Fu Ying, for example, has argued that “shortly after Donald Trump assumed office, the new U.S. administration began to adjust judgments and policies regarding China . . . provocations forced China to react and take countermeasures, resulting in a rapid slide in bilateral ties.”<sup>5</sup> This does not, however, explain why China has grown far more unpopular not just inside the United States but also outside. In fact, Haifeng Huang has conducted polling inside China that reveals its public “vastly overestimates China’s global image and popularity,” because “China’s one-sided information bubble about the country’s power and popularity has made the public overly sanguine and even complacent about the country’s global standing.”<sup>6</sup> This reinforces anecdotal evidence from the author’s recent discussions, in which many Chinese experts and officials have rejected the notion that China’s own actions are to blame for much of the downturn in perceptions of China abroad.

Americans, on the other hand, are more likely to see the Communist Party’s actions as the root cause of these tensions. As Elizabeth Economy argues, “U.S. policy has changed because China changed.”<sup>7</sup> Concerns about China have been growing for years, but there has been a dramatic uptick in the past decade. Today, 73 percent of Americans have an unfavorable view of China, and 72 percent see China as a rival.<sup>8</sup> For the first time in decades, more people believe the United States should actively work to limit the growth of China’s power rather than undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with Beijing.<sup>9</sup> The reasons for Americans’ growing concerns about China are numerous, but human rights abuses often top the list, as well as frustration with China’s handling of, and disinformation around, the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> The Communist Party’s repression in Hong Kong, genocide in Xinjiang, and coercive campaigns beyond China’s borders have done real damage to its image abroad. In just the past year, the percentage of Americans who reported no confidence in Xi Jinping to do the right thing in world affairs rose from half to three-quarters.<sup>11</sup>

This divergence in views among Chinese and American experts and officials is driven by several factors. First, the growing difficulty of travel has made it harder for both sides to exchange opinions, particularly since health-related restrictions have limited in-person interchanges. Second, the separation of digital ecosystems and increasingly restrictive Chinese information environment have accelerated the creation of two distinct information bubbles. Third, experts on both sides of the Pacific now rely increasingly on small virtual exchanges with like-minded scholars, which tend to reinforce rather than challenge experts’ preexisting views. Even when international travel resumes, this perceptual divergence will likely remain because it is deeply rooted. Therefore, Wang Yi and other Chinese leaders may find themselves disappointed when their anticipated “window of hope” with the Biden administration does not open.

### **Diverging Assumptions on Time Horizons**

Another type of window is even more problematic—the “window of opportunity” that leaders in each capital think is closing on the other.<sup>12</sup> Experts in Beijing and Washington increasingly argue that the other’s governance system is growing more erratic and inoperable. Many Chinese officials appear to be persuaded that China’s rise will continue and that the United States is

undergoing an unavoidable period of decline. Conversely, a number of American experts are concluding that China is entering a period of slowing growth and growing domestic challenges, which will provide the United States a long-term competitive advantage. Meanwhile, many in third countries believe both China and the United States are failing to manage their domestic challenges and exercise effective leadership on the world stage. As a result, leaders in both China and the United States appear to believe time is on their side, while outside observers disagree.

The growing confidence of Chinese leaders has been readily apparent in their public statements. Xi Jinping recently noted that “the opportunities we face outweigh our challenges . . . time and momentum are on our side.”<sup>13</sup> Chinese leaders have long talked about a “window of opportunity” to take a more proactive role on the world stage, but many in Beijing now appear to believe this window will be extended.<sup>14</sup> For example, Wu Xinbo asserts, “Beijing has more self-confidence. . . Biden has come back, but the U.S. can’t make a comeback.”<sup>15</sup> Kacie Miura and Jessica Chen Weiss note that “Beijing remains confident that long-term trends are in its favor.”<sup>16</sup> Rush Doshi concludes, “For Beijing, a United States that is less engaged abroad, more divided at home, and seemingly uninterested in pandemic management or economic competitiveness is one with dim prospects.”<sup>17</sup> As Julian Gewirtz’s puts it, “China thinks America is losing.”<sup>18</sup>

While many in Beijing grow more skeptical of America’s staying power, some counterparts in Washington are reevaluating China’s path and also finding it wanting. Elizabeth Economy argues, “The negative consequences of Xi’s approach—local government paralysis, a declining birthrate, and international opposition, among others—have begun to hold China back from the finish line. Xi needs to course correct.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Dan Blumenthal writes that the “Communist Party faces deep problems and possibly even decay. . . . Xi is pushing the CCP—and China—to the brink.”<sup>20</sup> As a result, Michael Beckley and Hal Brands contend, “These intensifying headwinds will make China a less competitive long-term rival to the United States but a more explosive near-term threat.”<sup>21</sup> In short, many experts in both Washington and Beijing think the underlying forces in the other country will eventually diminish their rival’s power, as long as they avoid a conflict in the short term.

Observers in third countries, however, argue that both China and the United States are failing. Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang at the Pew Research Center have shown that many European and Asian publics have declining confidence in both the United States and China.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while Washington and Beijing have focused increasingly on “great-power competition,” the rest of the world is increasingly skeptical of both sets of leaders. Mishandling of the pandemic has accelerated these views, with the Center for Strategic and International Studies finding that roughly half of European and Asian thought leaders expect both the United States and China to lose influence as a result.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the Trump administration’s embrace of an America First approach and Beijing’s more assertive “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy have done additional damage to their global standing.

The only good news here is that this divergence of views could dampen the likelihood of conflict in the short term. If Beijing and Washington believe their competitor’s window of opportunity is closing, then each may think time is on its side and wait patiently for its position to strengthen. That both sides believe time is on their side is not entirely atypical for rising and declining powers.

Rising powers tend to be slow to recognize the full extent of their power. Once that recognition occurs, however, they can be remarkably confident and assertive, as were Wilhelmine Germany, Imperial Japan, and even the United States around the turn of the 20th century. Powers experiencing relative decline, on the other hand, often struggle to recognize underlying trends until a shock forces them to bring their commitments in line with their resources. The question of whose side time is on, therefore, will be a key—and likely disputed—issue in U.S.-China relations for the foreseeable future.

### **Diverging Assessments of America’s Strategy**

A third area of divergence is more domestic than international: differing perspectives on China strategy within the American expert community. At least three distinct viewpoints exist, each animated by a different set of assumptions and metrics for judging success. Understanding these three competing views is crucial to explain why the U.S. strategic community remains divided on how to respond to China’s rise, despite growing consensus around the concerning nature of Beijing’s behavior.

One group of experts believes the Trump administration adopted the wrong China strategy. It argues that competition with China has spun out of control and risks conflict. For example, Michael Swaine, Jessica Lee, and Rachel Esplin Odell have written that “America needs a new strategy in East Asia.”<sup>24</sup> They suggest that “China does not constitute an existential threat to the global order or the United States” and worry that “America’s broader, zero-sum approach toward China is driving a security dilemma with Beijing.”<sup>25</sup> What is to be done? Fareed Zakaria advocates, “A wiser U.S. policy, geared toward turning China into a ‘responsible stakeholder.’”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Tom Christensen concludes, “The effort since 2005 to urge China to become a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the existing international order has often been frustrating, but it has hardly been a failure.”<sup>27</sup> For these commentators, the key metric for measuring a strategy’s success appears to be whether it positively shapes Chinese behavior and dampens Sino-American tensions.

A second view is that a more competitive approach to China is warranted but that the Trump administration’s execution of that strategy was flawed. Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan have written, “The era of engagement with China has come to an unceremonious close . . . ‘strategic competition’ should animate the United States’ approach to Beijing going forward.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, Campbell and Ely Ratner have warned that the Trump administration’s policies “put Washington at risk of adopting an approach that is confrontational without being competitive.”<sup>29</sup> From this point of view, the problem was not the administration’s strategy, but rather that “the strategy was often ignored or undermined by the man most crucial to its success—the president,” as Josh Rogin has suggested.<sup>30</sup> These observers suggest that the key metric in judging U.S. strategy is not the quality of bilateral ties with China, but rather ally and partner willingness to work with the United States to develop effective multilateral responses.

A third perspective is that the Trump administration adopted the right basic strategy on China and implemented it relatively well. Supporters of this view, such as Derek Grossman, argue that the Biden administration will “inherit alliances and partnerships that are in much better shape than conventional wisdom would suggest.”<sup>31</sup> Grant Newsham similarly concludes that the Indo-

Pacific “is better off than it was in 2017” and notes that Trump “at least made [China’s] leadership more uncomfortable than had any of his predecessors in the last 40 years.”<sup>32</sup> These experts see a more positive regional response to the Trump administration, perhaps because they believe it is necessary to “break some China” to encourage balancing behavior by third countries. Indeed, Mike Pompeo argued, “Some small countries . . . fear being picked off. Some of them for that reason simply don’t have the ability, the courage to stand with us for the moment.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, these advocates tend to believe that the key metric for judging America’s strategy is whether countries are more actively balancing against China, not whether publics or experts in third countries harbor positive views of the United States.

All three schools are likely to remain relevant in parts of the academic and policy communities focused on U.S.-China relations and Asia strategy. But because they each use different metrics to assess success and failure, these groups often talk across one another. There is a risk that the divergence in their assessments will continue, or even grow, once the Biden administration adopts its new approach. After all, the shift from the Trump administration to the Biden administration will likely represent a transition from the third school to the second, which could lead to critiques from both ends of the spectrum. Whether Biden’s team can build consensus around its approach while managing these criticisms will be one of its central challenges.

### **Policy Implications**

Diverging perspectives on the causes of Sino-American tensions, the time horizon of the competition, and the effectiveness of U.S. strategy threaten to disrupt the spirit of bipartisan cooperation that has long characterized U.S.-Asia policy. Researchers and policymakers need to urgently address these diverging perceptions to decrease misunderstandings with China, among U.S. allies and partners, and in Washington’s own policy community. The Commission is in a unique position to stimulate public debate about each issue, not only in Washington but also across a broader audience in the United States and abroad. As American leaders consider how to advance U.S. interests in Asia, they should keep in mind five overarching principles that should govern U.S. regional strategy and U.S.-China relations:

- **Present a Positive Vision.** The United States is most competitive in Asia when it helps other countries succeed.<sup>34</sup> Too often, however, recent American strategy has criticized China without providing an attractive alternative. To remedy this omission, the United States needs to develop more appealing and constructive agendas in the security, economic, technological, governance, and other arenas. For example, the United States is among the world’s most trusted sources of vaccines.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, providing COVID-19 vaccines and medicines at little or no cost to allies and partners—as the United States has done with AIDS relief—should be a key part of a more positive American regional strategy.
- **Avoid Grand Bargains.** Beijing has been remarkably successful at persuading policymakers in Washington to limit critiques of China while seeking “grand bargains.” These overarching deals often sound good but seldom deliver, as demonstrated most recently by the failure of the Phase One trade deal. American policymakers would therefore be wise to pursue multiple separate negotiations, recognizing that progress in

one domain should not require agreement in other areas.<sup>36</sup> For example, cooperation on climate change or unfair state subsidies should not be conditioned on aligning views (or disavowing critiques) regarding the South China Sea, Taiwan, Xinjiang, or Hong Kong.

- **Target Collective Pressure.** It is time for the United States to move beyond the broad incentives and penalties that it has often used to shape Chinese behavior. A better approach, with more realistic objectives, would rely on targeted pressure applied in concert with our allies and partners to disincentivize malign behaviors by entities and individuals. Targeted collective pressure plays to two enduring U.S. strengths: its powerful economic tools and its global network of allies and partners. For example, the United States should work with like-minded countries to ban foreign sales of products from Chinese companies that use intellectual property stolen from foreign firms.
- **Build Discrete Coalitions.** Rather than pursuing a single “alliance of democracies,” the United States should build coalitions with allies and partners in different issue areas.<sup>37</sup> Four separate coalitions are already emerging: a security coalition around the Quad, an economic coalition around the G7, a technology coalition around the T12, and a governance coalition around the D10. Further developing these groupings is critical to push back effectively against destabilizing behavior by China. Yet efforts to merge these coalitions are likely to fail, as few states share the same concerns about China across all issue areas. Therefore, the United States should encourage countries to collaborate where they are the most comfortable, slowly building habits of cooperation over time.
- **Leverage Universal Values.** Finally, the United States needs to root its China strategy in the values it shares with many allies and partners.<sup>38</sup> When the United States downplays values or adopts strategies of reciprocity against authoritarians, it undermines coalition-building efforts with many like-minded countries. American leaders should recognize that shared values are critical to lasting coalition-building efforts and need not lead to “zero-sum” conflict. For example, supporting human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang does not weaken the U.S. hand; conversely, it strengthens the U.S. position by demonstrating that Washington is willing to speak up for its principles and encourage other like-minded allies and partners to do the same.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to discussing ways the Commission can advance these efforts to safeguard American security, prosperity, and values.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Kinling Lo and Kristin Huang, "Xi Calls for Unity, Resilience as He Sets Out China's Vision for Next 30 Years," *South China Morning Post*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3117314/xi-jinping-says-time-and-momentum-chinas-side-he-sets-out>; and Gigi Sukin and Khorri Khorri Atkinson, "Joe Biden on China Being a Threat to the US: 'Come on, Man,'" *Axios*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/biden-china-threat-us-5f0e3fa4-4869-4038-aa0d-d3164e63f3fc.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Tang Siew Mun et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report," ISAEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, January 16, 2020, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TheStateofSEASurveyReport\\_2020.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2020.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, "Do Republicans and Democrats Want a Cold War with China?," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, October 13, 2020, 5, [https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/201013\\_china\\_brief\\_1.pdf](https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/201013_china_brief_1.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Lei Guang et al., "Pandemic Sees Increase in Chinese Support for Regime, Decrease in Views Towards the U.S.," *China Data Lab*, June 30, 2020, <https://chinadatalab.ucsd.edu/viz-blog/pandemic-sees-increase-in-chinese-support-for-regime-decrease-in-views-towards-us/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ying Fu, "China-US Relations Face Difficult Choice," *China-US Focus*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/china-us-relations-face-difficult-choice>.

<sup>6</sup> Haifeng Huang, "How Information Bubble Drives the Chinese Public's Views of China's Global Standing and Fuels Grassroots Nationalism," *China Data Lab*, December 16, 2020, <https://chinadatalab.ucsd.edu/viz-blog/how-information-bubble-drives-the-chinese-publics-views-of-chinas-global-standing-and-fuels-grassroots-nationalism/>.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Economy, "The U.S. Rethink and Reset on China," *Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development*, Winter 2019, <http://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2019-issue-no-13/the-us-rethink-and-reset-on-china>.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," *Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes Project*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>; and Smeltz and Kafura, "Do Republicans and Democrats Want a Cold War with China?," 8.

<sup>9</sup> Smeltz and Kafura, "Do Republicans and Democrats Want a Cold War with China?"

<sup>10</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Mapping the Future of U.S. China Policy," accessed January 21, 2021, <https://chinasurvey.csis.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> Silver, Devlin, and Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries."

<sup>12</sup> On windows of opportunity and rising powers, see David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Kinling Lo and Kristin Huang, "Xi Jinping Says 'Time and Momentum on China's Side' as He Sets Out Communist Party Vision," *South China Morning Post*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3117314/xi-jinping-says-time-and-momentum-chinas-side-he-sets-out>; and Khorri Atkinson and Gigi Sukin, "Biden on China: 'There're Not Competition for Us,'" *Axios*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/biden-china-threat-us-5f0e3fa4-4869-4038-aa0d-d3164e63f3fc.html>.

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<sup>15</sup> Chun Han Wong, "China's Xi Looks to Take Advantage of a Strong Economic Hand," *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-looks-to-take-advantage-of-a-strong-economic-hand-11610744376>.

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