How China and America See Each Other
And Why They Are on a Collision Course

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Debating China: The U.S.-China Relationship in Ten Conversations
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It has become one of the most obvious clichés in international politics: the United States and China have the most important bilateral relationship in the world. What is not so obvious is the nature of that relationship. Until recently, most observers were willing to settle for an accurate but inelegant description: that the countries are neither friends nor foes.

At first glance, this designation seems reasonable. The United States and China are clearly not allies. They share no overriding security interests or political values, and their conceptions of world order fundamentally clash. Whereas Beijing looks forward to a post-American, multipolar world, Washington is trying to preserve the liberal order it leads even as its relative power wanes. Meanwhile, numerous issues in East Asia, such as tensions over Taiwan and disputes between Beijing and Tokyo, are causing U.S. and Chinese interests to collide more directly. Yet the two countries are not really adversaries, either. They do not see each other as implacable ideological or security threats. And the fact that their economies are so deeply intertwined makes both countries hell-bent on avoiding conflict.

But the world has changed a great deal since the “neither friends nor foes” label was first slapped on U.S.-Chinese relations two decades ago. The remarkable expansion of Chinese power and the global financial crisis that ravaged the economies of the United States and Europe have accentuated the sense that the West is declining and the rest are rising. The gap between U.S. and Chinese power, which was already narrowing before the financial crisis, has since closed further. In 2007, the United States’ economy was four times as large as that of China; by 2012, it was only twice as large.

Any substantial shift in the balance of power between two countries is bound to change their attitudes and behavior toward each other. It should come as no surprise, then, that new strains have recently emerged in U.S.-Chinese relations. China has adopted a more assertive foreign policy since 2010, taking tough stances in territorial and maritime disputes with its neighbors. Its rapid military modernization program and cyberattacks have unsettled Americans and their East Asian allies. And Beijing has seen Washington’s response to this new toughness—the so-called pivot to
Asia—as a thinly disguised attempt to contain Chinese power.

Maintaining a reasonable grasp of the fluid U.S.-Chinese relationship is hard enough; an even tougher challenge is understanding the substantive disagreements between the two countries on the many issues critical to preserving stable ties. A new collection of essays edited by the political scientist Nina Hachigian attempts to accomplish both tasks. The idea behind *Debating China: The U.S.-China Relationship in Ten Conversations* is simple but clever: for each of ten conversations, it pairs one leading American expert on Asia with a Chinese counterpart to debate a specific bilateral issue. Hachigian moderates the series of conversations by framing the key questions the participants should address; the debaters exchange opinions and then, in a second round, focus on their disagreements. The result is a book that summarizes and scrutinizes each side's positions on everything from human rights to climate change. As a whole, the project is illuminating but disheartening; those optimistic about the future of U.S.-Chinese ties will find little to cheer in these pages.

**RITES AND WRONGS**

On some issues, the American and Chinese debaters share much common ground. They agree, for example, that the U.S.-Chinese relationship has become plagued by distrust, particularly as nationalism in China has surged. Remarkably, even some Chinese scholars acknowledge that many of the structural causes of friction will persist as long as China's domestic political system remains unchanged.

But sharp, even fundamental, differences emerge in the exchanges on China's military modernization, human rights, Taiwan, and regional security. The debaters see these issues from clashing perspectives and question each other's underlying premises. The Chinese scholar Zhou Qi insists that China does not see eye to eye with the West on human rights because the Confucian order is based on societal rites—"prescribed codes of ritual behavior"—rather than fundamental individual rights. Andrew Nathan, a Columbia University professor, flatly rejects this claim, saying it implies that there is a Chinese exceptionalism that exempts Beijing from complying with universal norms.

Without a doubt, the most revealing part of the book is the conversation on China's military modernization, which features two writers with irreconcilable differences: Xu Hui, a professor with the rank of senior colonel at China’s National Defense University, and Christopher Twomey, who teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School. Over the last two decades, the People’s Liberation Army has developed a range of new capabilities, including quiet attack submarines, mobile nuclear missiles, and advanced jetfighters. Twomey questions why China needs to expand its military so much when its security environment has improved. Today, China faces no threat of land invasion, and none of its neighbors comes close to matching Chinese power. Xu retorts that, by the same logic, the United States “should have given up on its military transformation a long time ago,” since the Americans not only enjoy complete military technological superiority but also have no powerful neighbors to threaten them.
The debaters are divided not just by their philosophies: in some instances, they simply see the facts differently. The Chinese participants regularly dispute their counterparts' information or historical narratives, such as when Jia Qingguo, a Peking University professor, disagrees with Alan Romberg of the Stimson Center over whether Taiwan was ever actually an integral part of China. On some of the most sensitive issues, including Chinese territorial claims, the Chinese scholars tend to toe the Communist Party line, providing few insights into the motivations behind Chinese behavior.

One useful takeaway from the exchanges is that some bilateral disputes are more amenable to compromise than others. Judging from this book, Washington and Beijing should be able to overcome their differences on economic policy, climate change, and global responsibilities unrelated to security, since those issues are less poisoned by underlying distrust and each side has an interest in cooperation. But it is also painfully clear that other, deeper disagreements will play a larger role in determining the nature of the bilateral relationship—and that these disputes will remain unresolved for the foreseeable future. The United States and China should forget about trying to resolve their conflicts over China’s military modernization, East Asian security, Taiwan, and political values and should instead find a way to manage them.

Indeed, the real value of *Debating China* is the extent to which it reveals that the U.S.-Chinese relationship is heading in an increasingly competitive direction. If the countries stay on their present course, the old neither-friends-nor-foes label will become irrelevant, and the most important bilateral relationship in the world will no longer be defined by engagement; it will be characterized by managed rivalry.

**ASSUME AWAY**
An explanation for this worrying trend can be found in the assumptions, arguments, and principles that the Chinese participants use in supporting their positions—and in the Americans’ responses. The most basic assumption underlying the Chinese scholars’ arguments for why Washington should change its Asia policy is that China is becoming more powerful. Many of the Chinese debaters mention the International Monetary Fund’s widely cited estimate that the size of the Chinese economy will likely overtake that of the U.S. economy between 2020 and 2025. Pointing to this remarkable growth, Wu Xinbo, a professor at Fudan University, calls for an end to the “U.S.-centered Cold War structure” in East Asia. Yuan Peng, a leading Chinese scholar of U.S. foreign policy, suggests that because the rise of developing countries is upending the existing world order, China should seize the opportunity to “modify unreasonable international mechanisms . . . including international or regional organizations, regimes, and laws.”

Not surprisingly, such arguments about a shifting balance of power and the inevitability of China’s rise fail to convince the Americans. As they see it, the existing world order not only serves Chinese interests but also is capable of accommodating China’s growing role and power. At the same time, some of them caution that there is nothing certain about China’s future. As the
political scientist Kenneth Lieberthal argues, China's sustained economic development is far from guaranteed, given the constraints imposed on the country by demographics and the scarcity of resources.

Another revealing theme is each side's belief that many of the other side's actions and policies lack legitimacy. To the American writers, China's brash assertion of territorial claims, no-strings-attached assistance to resource-rich developing countries, and mercantilist trade policies undermine the liberal world order. But this criticism smacks of hypocrisy to the Chinese writers, who point out that Western countries, including the United States, were guilty of the same vices during their ascendance. They also argue that China's new assertiveness is perfectly appropriate for a great power. Moreover, they claim, the United States underwrites the global order not out of altruism but out of naked self-interest.

The revelation in *Debating China* that should worry Washington most is the degree to which its repeated insistence that the United States does not seek to contain China has fallen on deaf ears. As the Chinese writers make clear, both ordinary and elite Chinese believe that the United States will never willingly cede its global hegemony and allow China to become a great power in its own right. Wu bluntly states that "China doesn't like the United States' self-proclaimed leadership. . . . Beijing also suspects that Washington's intended role of balancer serves only to check a rising China, undermining its legitimate national interests in [East Asia]."
The Americans respond to this sentiment with a mixture of incredulity and exasperation. They do not understand how Beijing can accuse Washington of trying to block China's ascent when the United States has opened its markets to China, trained hundreds of thousands of China’s best and brightest at American universities, invested billions in Chinese manufacturing, and supported Beijing's accession to the World Trade Organization. They remind their Chinese colleagues repeatedly that there is no mainstream support in the United States for containing China. But the Chinese remain unconvinced and see any U.S. support for China as entirely self-interested.

**THE REALIST'S DILEMMA**

For the past three decades, U.S. policy toward China has rested on two assumptions, one based on liberalism and the other on realism. The first, liberal assumption is that as China integrates into the existing international order through trade and investment, it will inevitably, out of sheer self-interest, accept that order and take part in maintaining it. The second assumption, grounded in realism, is that until China becomes such a stakeholder (and even once it does), the United States ought to maintain the alliances and military might that allow it to deter and, if necessary, counter any Chinese actions that might threaten to undermine the existing world order.

The worrying dynamics on display in *Debating China* should tip the scales in favor of the realist view. The liberal assumption seemed more valid when China was relatively weak and lacked the ability to directly challenge the U.S.-led order. But what many liberals have overlooked is that China’s current acquiescence in this order does not add
up to an endorsement of it. Given the incompatibilities between the defining characteristics of the international system (namely, openness and rule-governed behavior) and those of China's domestic regime (closed politics and the arbitrary exercise of power), it is doubtful that Chinese elites will ever view the Western order as legitimate, even if they concede its practical usefulness.

As a result, as China continues to grow stronger, it will seek either to modify the existing order or, if such an endeavor proves too risky or too costly, to construct a parallel order more to its liking. Such an order would not necessarily stand in direct conflict with the U.S.-led order, in the way that the Soviet bloc did, but it would have its own rules, exclude the West, and allow China to play a dominant role. Indeed, Beijing's investments in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the planned BRICS development bank (a joint financial institution to be established by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) suggest that China is already moving down this path. China's controversial establishment last November of an air defense identification zone that overlaps with those of Japan and South Korea dramatically raised the risks of conflict with the United States and its allies. And it has further vindicated the realists' warning that China will not hesitate to challenge the Western order once it has the ability to do so.

The best American response to such behavior would be to continue its policy of strategic hedging—an approach, as explained by Michael Green of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, that backstops engagement by "shoring up relations with key maritime allies and partners and ensuring that states within the region are not easily intimidated by growing Chinese power." Strategic hedging can reassure China's neighbors and make Beijing think twice about advancing its interests through coercion. Meanwhile, liberalism offers no plausible alternative to such a policy, especially given how well versed in realism and balance-of-power tactics China's current leaders are. Of course, a policy of hedging, as typified by the pivot to Asia, will only confirm Beijing's long-held suspicion that Washington's liberal rhetoric masks a hard-nosed determination to perpetuate U.S. dominance.

But that is a price the United States must be prepared to pay. Until now, U.S. policymakers have relied on a two-pronged approach of hedging and engagement, drawing on both realist and liberal ideas about China. But as Chinese power continues to grow, maintaining such a balance will become harder than ever.