

US must recognise China's place in the world – as a responsible nation



Both Donald Trump and US Congress should act with care, with the first step being to end the ongoing trade war sooner than later



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China has been responsible nation on the geopolitical front, not having gone to war since 1979

Hardly a day seems to go by without some new story appearing about rising antagonism between China and the West. Beijing ordering government and public offices to remove all foreign computer appliances within the next three years – doubtless a tit for tat against America's freezing out of Huawei – is just the latest. There are always plenty to choose from, right down to a debate about whether TikTok is a "harmless App" or an "insidious Chinese threat to America", as the National Interest website put it earlier this week.

Everyone is aware of the bigger issues. There is a trade war between the US and China, initiated by American president Donald Trump. The US Congress has now passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which allows sanctions to be applied to individuals who undermine "fundamental freedoms and autonomy in Hong Kong", and the House of Representatives has passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, which would require the Trump administration to condemn and take action against Beijing's re-education policy which is viewed as targeting the Muslim Uighur population in the western region of Xinjiang.

Take these issues, combined with the US's ongoing commitment to a vigorous naval presence in the South China Sea – most of which China claims, against the protestations of several countries in the region – and at one level there appears to be a strange disconnect. Perhaps because Trump still refers to Xi as "a friend of mine" and "an incredible guy", there is a sense in which these clashes – both actual and potential – can be managed and kept separate. Somehow we are reassured that they do not all add up to

something far bigger.

Look at it from another perspective, however, and they certainly do. It would be hard for the Chinese government not to see a wave of unrelenting hostility bearing down on them and, in terms of American public opinion, they would be absolutely right. According to the latest Pew Research Centre poll, 60 per cent of Americans now have an unfavourable view of China, the highest figure since the question was first asked in 2005.

Niall Ferguson, the US-based historian, recently wrote that there is indeed a new Cold War, and it is with China, not Russia. Ferguson dates the start of this conflict to 2019 because it was then, he believes, that "Trump's hostility went from foreign policy idiosyncrasy to conventional wisdom", with even the Democratic presidential contender Elizabeth Warren calling for a tougher line on Beijing.

Ferguson's rather chilling view is that if what he calls "Cold War II" is confined to economic and technological competition – which is a suspiciously big "if" – "its benefits could very well outweigh its costs". He points to the research and development spurred by the original standoff between the US and the Soviet Union and the possibly unifying effect on a polarised America if its citizens realised that they once again had a common enemy.

There are those who would welcome a Cold War II on the grounds that they are so ideologically opposed to what is officially termed "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" that they relish a confrontation (which they hope America would win, of course).

The rest of us who shudder at the thought need to make sure that we do not drift any further towards such a cataclysm by default. Urging the US to put an end to a trade war that has cost American farmers dearly, rather than irresponsibly suggesting that a deal could be put off until after the next US presidential election, as Trump recently did, would be a start.



Chinese President Xi Jinping (R) and US President Donald Trump attend their bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Osaka

Donald Trump's reference to Xi Jinping as 'a friend' gives people a sense that clashes between the US and China can be managed

Another would be to ask, as the broadcaster and analyst Fareed Zakaria did in a recent essay in Foreign Affairs magazine: "What would be an acceptable level of influence for China to have, given its economic weight in the world?" In the essay, Zakaria raises the usual criticisms of China but he also asserts that "today's China is a remarkably responsible nation on the geopolitical front. It has not gone to war since 1979. It has not used lethal force abroad since 1988. Nor has it funded or supported proxies or armed insurgents anywhere in the world since the early 1980s. That record of non-intervention is unique among the world's great powers."

He also mentions that China is now the second-largest financial contributor to the United Nations and its peacekeeping

programme. It has put forward an ambitious trade programme – the Belt and Road Initiative – that "could be a boon for the developing world if pursued in an open and transparent manner, even in cooperation with western countries wherever possible". Also, while Beijing certainly seeks to extend its influence abroad (what country doesn't?), it has not tried to meddle in foreign elections. For its efforts, China has remained shut out of the leadership of US and Europe-dominated institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF.

Zakaria is right to argue that "a wiser US policy, geared toward turning China into a 'responsible stakeholder', is still achievable".

This does not mean any country capitulating to Beijing. It does, however, mean insisting on engaging. It also means recognising that any kind of war, whether of words or trade, let alone arms, is to be avoided at all costs.

Congress should act with care. So should Trump. And we should react to those who talk excitedly of a new Cold War that America could win with the horror that dangerously naive framing deserves.