FOREIGN AFFAIRS

America and China at the Edge of Ruin

A Last Chance to Step Back From the Brink

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Since the early 2010s, the relationship between Beijing and Washington has steadily shifted from cautious engagement to tense rivalry. Step by step, both sides have adopted national security strategies that treat the other not merely as a competitor but as the principal threat to their core values, political legitimacy, and vital national interests. This evolution has been driven not only by external events but also by domestic political incentives, bureaucratic maneuvering, and deeply rooted anxieties about vulnerability, decline, and status. Each country's increasingly muscular attempts to deter the other have caused rising friction in the realms of defense, economics, culture, and diplomacy. What began as hedging

behavior has hardened into mutually reinforcing strategic postures that assume long-term hostility as the organizing principle of policy.

A world in which the two most powerful countries organize their strategies around mutual enmity is one marked by arms races, institutional paralysis, and the neglect of shared threats such as climate change, pandemic infection, and financial instability. In such a world, conflicts can readily spiral out of control. In the absence of meaningful guardrails, the present trajectory risks locking both societies and the international system into a condition of managed hostility, diminished prosperity, and chronic insecurity—a condition in which competition becomes an end in itself and the costs are borne not by Beijing and Washington alone but by the whole world.

The world, in other words, will be a far more unhealthy, unequal, and perilous place if Beijing and Washington accelerate their competition and continue to narrow the space for collective problem solving. Moreover, with an escalation in tensions that is driven by mistrust and domestic political pressures, the danger today lies less in a deliberate conflict than in an accidental one. Take the April 2001 collision between a Chinese fighter jet and a U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance plane near China's Hainan Island. Or the May 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which the United States maintains was accidental. Were such incidents to happen under today's circumstances, they could trigger not just a war but a nuclear war.

Yet this trajectory is not irreversible. The coming months may present a rare window in which political developments, economic imperatives, and strategic fatigue on both sides create conditions conducive to stabilizing and normalizing bilateral relations. Such opportunities are delicate. As

veteran scholars in the United States and China, we have lived through nearly six decades of fluctuation in the bilateral relationship, and we understand the shadow of confrontation between our two countries. But we also loathe the possibility of another generation entering a new cold war. Without timely and deliberate policy action, inertia and rivalry will prevail by default, raising the risk of a confrontation with global consequences. What the world needs is not so much a return to the traditional forms of U.S.-Chinese engagement as a new normalization of relations that pulls each side back from the brink.

EMBEDDING HOSTILITY

As it stands, each side views the other through the lens of worst-case assumptions. In Washington, China is generally defined as the primary systemic challenger to U.S. global leadership, technological primacy, economic dominance, and democratic norms. In Beijing, the United States is widely perceived as the central force attempting to contain China's rise, undermine the Chinese Communist Party, and preserve "America first" supremacy at China's expense. These perceptions are no longer confined to rhetoric; they are embedded in military planning, alliance and partnership structures, export control regimes, and public diplomacy, effectively locking both countries into a persistent state of distrust and reactivity that not even friendly summits between the countries' leaders can unwind.

The depth and consequences of this reality are visible in the military, economic, and diplomatic domains. For instance, military deterrence has become progressively more complex, uncertain, and difficult to achieve thanks to the rapid modernization of nuclear and conventional forces, as well as the expansion of new warfighting capabilities in space,

cybertechnology, and artificial intelligence–enabled systems. This complexity will encourage our countries to hedge by multiplying both the number of weapons and their diversity. A rapidly escalating arms race is already underway, adding more uncertainty and ever more cost to the mix. The western Pacific, meanwhile, has seen intensified naval and air encounters, with several near misses between Chinese and U.S. forces. The danger of kinetic conflict, whether through miscalculation, accident, or crisis escalation, is no longer theoretical. And such a conflict would be between two nuclear powers and the world's two largest economies.

Economically, U.S.-Chinese interdependence was once seen as an indispensable stabilizing force in bilateral ties, and it unquestionably contributed to global economic growth. In 2001, when China joined the World Trade Organization, its per capita GDP was $1,065 and the United States' was $37,133. By 2023, the corresponding figures were $12,951 in China and $82,769 in the United States. Both countries greatly enhanced their respective positions during that period, although internal dislocations in both countries had disruptive effects: China's northeast was hit hard by unemployment, as was the United States' Midwest.

For these reasons and the increasingly fraught security relationship in recent years, both countries have come to see interdependence primarily as a vulnerability, with economics subordinated to national security. Sweeping export controls, industrial policies, and supply chain realignments have taken precedence over efficiency and growth, and the language of "decoupling," "de-risking," and "self-reliance" reflects a broader reality: both countries are willing to absorb significant economic costs to reduce reliance on the other. This erosion of the economic pillar

of the relationship not only undermines bilateral stability but also contributes to global market fragmentation and uncertainty. The recent disruptions in the trade of rare-earth elements and the sale of high-capacity chips are two notable examples.

Culturally and diplomatically, mutual mistrust now shapes public narratives and foreign policy identity. Although China does not publish the number of American visitors it has each year, it is widely accepted to be a mere fraction of what it was before the COVID-19 pandemic; indeed, very few Westerners are seen on the streets of Beijing these days. Academic and scientific cooperation has become particularly constrained, with the number of Chinese students receiving F-1 visas from the U.S. State Department falling nearly 27 percent between 2024 and 2025. Students, professors, and researchers in both countries are looking over their shoulders. Some U.S. states are passing legislation to curtail cooperation with Chinese educational institutions, and Chinese educators will tell you that low-level officials in their country are wary of assuming responsibility for initiating new intellectual ventures with Americans. With people-to-people ties fraying, each government is increasingly willing to frame the relationship in geopolitical and civilizational terms, raising the stakes beyond mere policy disagreements and making any hint of compromise politically noxious at home.

ROUND ONE

The two of us have seen this before. We are both approaching 80 years old, and we remember when U.S.-Chinese hostility was not abstract but tangible—expressed through war, ideological antipathy, and the fear of nuclear annihilation. For Americans of this age, the Korean War was a national trauma that reinforced images of China, along with its ally North

Korea, as a battlefield adversary. People lost loved ones and friends. More than 30,000 American soldiers died during the hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, and the war entrenched a political culture of suspicion that shaped education, media, and public life for decades. The subsequent war in Vietnam, in which the United States fought an adversary allied with China and the Soviet Union, extended that sense of permanent mobilization. Young Americans were exposed to mass casualties and moral uncertainty, and the war ultimately caused the death of over 58,000 Americans, many of whom had been conscripted into service. Even those who did not serve in either conflict lived under the discipline of Cold War preparedness, practicing nuclear attack drills in schools and absorbing the reality that cities could be erased in minutes.

The equivalent Chinese generation endured even more disruption. The Korean War demanded immense national sacrifice from a newly founded state, sending millions of soldiers across the Yalu River into the Korean Peninsula and diverting scarce resources from desperately needed domestic reconstruction. People in China are taught that Chinese soldiers fought heroically in the Korean War, that more than 180,000 died, and that they defeated the Americans on many battlefields. But Chinese people today also know that the result was a strategic stalemate along the 38th parallel, where the war started. And the costs of fighting the United States indirectly in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were staggering. According to Chinese reports, at the request of Hanoi, Beijing clandestinely and successively dispatched troops to Vietnam for air defense, engineering, and logistics. From 1965 to 1968, over 320,000 Chinese troops were sent to Vietnam.

Our generation learned firsthand how strategic hostility seeps into

classrooms, families, and personal aspirations. We experienced sustained hostility between Beijing and Washington not as an abstract geopolitical game but as a deeply human tragedy whose real costs could be measured in lost lives, lost opportunities, and generations shaped by fear rather than possibility.

A DEEP RESET?

By the early 1970s, leaders of both countries recognized that these costs were too high. After backchannel meetings between their respective deputies, Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger, Chinese leader Mao Zedong and U.S. President Richard Nixon initiated a top-down process to repair relations in 1972. Because the two societies could not comprehensively engage with each other, it fell to these leaders to correct misperceptions and foster peace and cooperation.

Today, there are signs that Xi and U.S. President Donald Trump might welcome a similar moment. For starters, in October 2025, Xi and Trump met in Busan, South Korea. Both leaders stressed cooperation and de-escalation in U.S.-Chinese relations, especially on trade, although with some notable caveats. Xi said China and the United States should be "partners and friends," urging both sides to focus on long-term mutual benefits and to let trade and economic cooperation anchor the relationship rather than fuel friction. According to news reports, China agreed to resume purchasing American soybeans, to suspend rare-earth export controls, and to work with Washington to curb illicit fentanyl trafficking.

In response, Trump sought to reset the tone of U.S.-Chinese relations. He called Xi "a tremendous leader of a very powerful country," signaling a clear shift—at least rhetorically—toward diplomacy and trade-based

cooperation over confrontation. His optimism for a broader deal suggested the meeting was intended not as an endpoint but as a steppingstone toward more comprehensive economic cooperation. He also referred to the summit as a gathering of the "G-2," which signaled to Beijing a new, higher level of respect.

This should not be taken lightly. Chinese leaders are most prickly when they sense that the United States is trying to deny them respect and isolate them and when they sense they are in a weaker position than Washington. In the Obama era, Washington explicitly rejected Beijing's call for "a new model of major-country relations" and dismissed suggestions that China be considered half of a new G-2. Now, however, with China's gains in strength and stature—and Washington's missteps in domestic and foreign policy—Beijing is feeling more confident, a sentiment that Trump's comments bolstered.

To be clear, Beijing and Washington should not pursue some kind of dual hegemony that would rightly alarm their neighbors and middle powers far and wide. But they should make room for each other in the international system and regional security architectures. Doing so reassures other countries that they are not about to become victims of a runaway great-power competition. Going forward, both Beijing and Washington should ground their interactions in the reality of multipolarity and multialignment.

The South Korean meeting fell short of a deep reset since it focused mainly on trade and sidestepped major strategic issues such as technological competition, supply chain decoupling, and security tensions. But since the meeting, Trump has extended an olive branch on technology: in December 2025, he announced that the American

chipmaker Nvidia would be allowed to sell its second most powerful semiconductor chips to China—a decision that rolled back, somewhat, policies aimed at blocking Chinese access to advanced technologies. According to Trump, "President Xi responded positively."

PARALLEL PULLBACK

There are also signs that both societies would welcome taking a step back from the brink. Public opinion polls in both countries indicate that people increasingly view the current path of confrontation as too costly. Attitudes are converging on the idea that both governments should focus more on healing domestic ills—from inequality and beyond—and reduce or avoid external adventures. A recent Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll, for instance, found that a majority of Americans, 53 percent, now say the United States "should undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China," up from 40 percent in 2024. A poll published in December 2025 by Tsinghua University's Center for International Security and Strategy, meanwhile, shows that Chinese citizens are softening toward the United States. When asked to rate their opinion of the United States on a favorability scale of one to five, respondents gave an average score of 2.38, which is up from the 2024 average of 1.85. (For comparison, India's favorability was 2.06 in 2025, and Russia's favorability fell from 3.66 in 2024 to 3.48 in 2025.)

Beijing and Washington, after all, have a common economic need at the moment and for the foreseeable future: to build or rebuild a strong, stable middle class. Sustained conflict between the two countries would significantly hurt both economies and this effort. In China, this dynamic was evident at the Fourth Plenary meeting of the Communist Party's Central Committee, held last October. The meeting was suffused with the

idea that the economy needs to be reenergized, in part through economic policies that are more resilient, less rigid, and free from foreign policy distractions. The members declared that China should "advance reform and development through greater openness and seek to share opportunities and achieve common development with the rest of the world." This attitude is reminiscent of former paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's reform thinking, which argued that China should pacify the outside world so it could draw more resources from abroad and focus on building its domestic strength. Deng's reforms unleashed four decades of dramatic growth in China beginning in the late 1970s. An upcoming test of China's economic development policy will be the degree to which Xi actually puts more priority on nonstate economic organizations and creates conditions for greater domestic innovation.

The Trump administration's "America first" mantra and the Democrats' message of prioritizing affordability are similarly reflective of a country that is internally focused. As the administration's 2025 National Security Strategy declared, "The days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over." This does not necessarily mean the United States will pursue isolationism—as the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January proved—but rather that it is seeking a closer alignment between its resources and its commitments and is placing a greater focus on domestic ills, including affordability, drugs, unemployment, and inflation, and its relations with nearby regions. A confrontation with China does not appear to fit within this calculus: whereas Trump's 2017 NSS was explicitly structured around great-power competition with Beijing, the second Trump NSS barely refers to China. A single warm day does not spell the end of the winter freeze, but it is a start.

FLASH POINT FIRST

The best place to begin stabilizing the relationship is, perhaps counterintuitively, with its most dangerous dimension: the long-simmering issue of Taiwan. The growing volatility in the Taiwan Strait makes it important to address this issue quickly, and it might even be easier to reduce tensions than many believe.

China's 2005 Anti-Secession Law sets out specific conditions under which Beijing may resort to "nonpeaceful means" to resolve the Taiwan question: namely, if Taiwan declares independence, if major incidents occur that would lead to Taiwan's separation from China, or if all possibilities for peaceful unification are completely exhausted. By the Chinese government's own legal and political standards, current cross-strait conditions do not meet those criteria. Moreover, despite frequent speculation and emotionally charged commentary on social media, Beijing has not officially declared that a military takeover of Taiwan is imminent or inevitable. Instead, the Chinese government continues to reaffirm its preference for peaceful unification, insisting that it is stepping up full-scale deterrence, such as encircling the island with extensive live-fire exercises, only to prevent secession.

In other words, despite a tense military atmosphere, it is still possible to relax the political hostility over the Taiwan Strait. Now is the right moment for the two countries to reassure each other. It is in Beijing's interest to reiterate its peaceful intentions, and it is in Washington's interest to reinstate its previous position that it "does not support Taiwan independence."

Although such statements might be dismissed as mere lip service, they carry real weight. Words and behavior matter. In early November 2025,

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi created a firestorm in China when she said Japan could become involved in a conflict over Taiwan under certain circumstances. In the minds of many Chinese, the remarks tied Japan closer to Taiwan. The Chinese-Japanese relationship has deteriorated significantly since then, with China applying economic and diplomatic pressure on Japan. If Washington were to reiterate its disapproval of any potential unilateral declaration of independence by Taipei, it would not only reassure Beijing but also show Tokyo that Washington wants to lower the temperature in the region.

HELLO FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Beijing and Washington can also take steps toward a new normalization by addressing more malleable issues, such as economic and cultural obstacles, on which there is already significant societal agreement in both countries. China and the United States could, for example, reopen their respective consulates in Houston and Chengdu, which were closed in a display of tit-for-tat retaliation in July 2020.

Beijing and Washington could also negotiate a reciprocal, dramatic drop in the average tariff rate that each is applying to the other. In addition, China could consider reducing subsidy levels on some of its exports. Tariffs and trade barriers are hurting the most vulnerable segments of the U.S. and Chinese populations, and their capricious implementation feeds corruption in both countries and in third parties around the world. Although China and the United States think they are using economic leverage to constrain the other, over time, tools such as tariffs and export controls will lose their edge and ultimately weaken both economies. A better approach would be to recognize that the pursuit of comparative advantage is the best starting point for trade policy. This does not mean a

return to total free trade—each country has identified dependencies that are counter to national security and must be addressed. But it does mean that the average tariff rate should be at its lowest possible level consistent with national security and reciprocity.

Both countries could also take steps to break down cultural walls and nurture a more accurate understanding of each other's rapidly changing societies. Some American observers, for instance, expect China's political structure to drastically change in ways similar to the shifts that brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, many Chinese analysts believe that China will soon catch up with the United States in economic, technological, and military terms. In reality, neither outcome is likely. Yet such misperceptions have already influenced actions and policies, harming the long-term interests of the two countries. If each country's impression of the other is not balanced by realistic and objective forecasts, there is the very real danger that each side will exaggerate its own power and underestimate the other's.

Oddly enough, the opposite danger also exists—each side could see its own position eroding quickly and become anxious enough to take action sooner rather than later. In some Chinese circles, for instance, there is a lack of confidence about China's ability to resist external pressure in support of Taiwan's separation from China. Likewise, there is anxiety among some Americans that the United States will soon lose its technological edge over China. In other words, each country has become something of a mystery to the other, which feeds the chances of miscalculation.

An important means by which to diminish these perceptions is to encourage deeper connections and engagements across all sections of

society. The constraints on journalists, for example, should be relaxed. And academic and research exchanges should be restored to their pre-pandemic levels. Government action in both these domains is only one part of the solution, however. In order to change the atmosphere, our respective citizens have to want to participate, as well. To that end, authorities in both societies might create a more hospitable environment by not categorically referring to each other's students, scholars, and media as spies.

Finally, it is incumbent on both sides to once again pursue military-to-military talks not only to reduce the chance of accidents and misperceptions but also to see whether Beijing and Washington can work on some of the issues driving the arms race between them. Such talks must be grounded in the recognition that U.S.-Chinese tensions over trade, technology, ideology, and security are not a mere blip but part of a long arc. The starting point should be a joint affirmation (perhaps a joint statement) that there is space for both countries in Asia and beyond and that efforts to reduce tensions need to be taken with urgency.

"SEIZE THE HOUR!"

Today, policymakers and scholars in both countries have extraordinary analytical tools at their disposal, including artificial intelligence, that earlier generations did not. This technical capacity is essential to the sound management of global relationships. But even the most sophisticated policymakers reliant on advanced technology cannot simulate a real war, which would impose an unbearable loss of life. Preventing a deadly confrontation between China and the United States will thus require something else: strategic memory, crisis experience, and cross-cultural trust that is built over decades.

Our two countries have the opportunity now to rebuild these guardrails. While the tone at the top has, thus far, softened, it is by no means institutionalized; the carefully managed equilibrium could prove wobbly. If Beijing and Washington lose this chance for a new normalization, it will be impossible for them to protect their strategic interests in the future. There is but a fleeting moment for the two countries to recalibrate their goals and approaches toward each other. As Mao put it in a January 1963 poem urging revolutionary action, and as Nixon famously quoted during his historic 1972 visit to China highlighting the urgent need for U.S.-Chinese engagement, "Ten thousand years are too long. Seize the day, seize the hour!"
