



Political Tensions and Economic Stability in Sino-American Relations

Laurence-Olivier M. Foisy

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Érick Duchesne

Département de science politique

Faculté des sciences sociales

Université Laval

Québec, Canada

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Introduction

For years now, diplomatic relations between the United States and China have seemed to be deteriorating. Events such as the trade war initiated in 2018, the global coronavirus pandemic, Beijing's forced internment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the implementation of a national security law in Hong Kong, the American ban on the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei, Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, and the allegations by the United States that China is now sending spy balloons across the continent, all put a lot of strain on their relationship.(BBC News 2020; Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs 2020; Collinson 2023; Lanteigne 2020, 1; U.S. Department of the Treasury 2020)

In 2020, the United States National Security Council released a document that stated: "Given the strategic choices China's leadership is making, the United States now acknowledges and accepts the relationship with the PRC as the CCP always framed it internally: one of great power competition."(National Security Council 2020) Later that year, the FBI director declared during a speech that: "[...][the] greatest long-term threat to [America's] information and intellectual property, and to [its] economic vitality, is the counter-intelligence and economic espionage threat from China."(Wray 2020) While many hoped that the transition from Trump to Biden in 2020 could usher in an era of stability, the Democrat president's way of dealing with China does not contrast much with that of his predecessor.(Mishra 2022, 6) The war in Ukraine and Beijing's continued relationship with Moscow made it all the more difficult for Biden to find a way to reshape Sino-American relations.(Korolev 2023)

Additionally, every time something bad happens, reputable media outlets rush to publish dramatic and alarming headlines such as "Officials Push U.S.-China Relations Toward Point of No Return"(Wong et Myers 2020), "How the U.S. Could Lose a War with China"(Gilsinan 2019), and "The risk of China-US military conflict is worryingly high"(Bo 2020) It's now common for journalists to write about a potential new cold war between the two superpowers. "The Cold War With China Is Changing Everything"(Brooks 2023), and "The USChina Cold War Has Already Started" (Dupont 2020).

With such a negative representation of the conflict in the media, it would be normal to believe that the relationship between both states could potentially lead to a disastrous outcome. However, looking at their economic relation, it's possible to notice that trade between the two countries does not seem to be affected by these tensions. In fact, despite a drop in bilateral trade in 2021 attributable to the covid-19 pandemic, trade between the two giants has reached its highest point in history in 2022.(US Census Bureau 2023)

Research Question

This leads up to the question: **How can the stability of the economic relationship between China and the United States be explained in the context of their increasing political disagreements?** Are trade relations directly related to political relations or are they independent? As Shambaugh wrote, “[their] relationship has been fundamentally troubled for many years and has failed to find extensive common ground to forge a real and enduring partnership.”(Shambaugh 2016, 299) However, as Luckhurst argues and as it is possible to observe, “The governments of China and the USA have enhanced their economic cooperation since the GFC, reducing the likelihood of strategic competition leading to conflict.”(Luckhurst 2016, 239)

Literature Review

While no one argues that it is going exceptionally well between China and the United States, scholars are divided on the issue. This section will review how some of the main approaches of international relations view this situation.

Structural Realism

Realism offers many possible interpretations. For structural realist John J. Mearsheimer, a conflict is likely to happen between the United States and China. According to him, the Anarchical structure of the international system forces states to seek hegemony since it is the optimal way to maximize their security and guarantee their survival, the primary objective of every state.(Mearsheimer 2014, 34) In Mearsheimer’s opinion, the United States should contain China’s rise at all costs because as he wrote: “If China becomes an economic powerhouse, it will almost certainly translate its economic might into military might and make a run at dominating Northeast Asia”(Mearsheimer 2014, 37:38)

Indeed, China has been increasing its military spending for years and now possesses the second most well-funded military force in the world after the United States. In 2023, China announced that its yearly budget was now \$224B, an increase of 7.2% from the year prior and more than double the budget of ten years ago.(Center for Strategic and International Studies Mon, 12/28/2015 - 12:00) However, this strain of realism struggles to explain how the United States and China have been able to cooperate economically for so long. If the United States, a status quo power, the “most powerful state in the world”, is threatened by China’s rise, why does it continue to feed its growth by trading with it? While clear efforts

are being made to slow down trade such as increasing tariffs on certain types of goods, it is unclear how effective these measures are. There are rising pressures from American firms for the government to remove these tariffs. Manak, Cabanas, et Feinberg (2023) argue that for a lot of these restricted products, there are simply no other alternatives than importing them from China. These goods continue to be imported at a higher price, which is then passed on to the consumer.

Classical Realism

In a different fashion, Classical realism posits that it is possible to understand the behaviour of states by analyzing it through the prism of human nature. For them, it is not the structure of the international system that causes states to collide with each other but the imperfect nature of humans. They criticize Mearsheimer's structural theory describing it as a "self-fulfilling prophecy".(Kirshner 2012, 70) One in which there is no issue. For Hans Morgenthau, a famous human classical realist, states can escape conflicts through wit and well-crafted diplomacy. He wrote: "This being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realized, but must at best be approximated through the ever temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious settlement of conflicts."(Morgenthau et Thompson 1993, 13) According to Kirshner (2012), p.66, 68, the best way to prevent a military conflict between China and the United States is for America to engage the rising giant, acknowledge its threat, and place a greater emphasis on politics, diplomacy as well as domestic politics. Morgenthau also believed diplomacy was the main tool in achieving world peace. He wrote: "This method of establishing the preconditions for permanent peace we call peace through accommodation. Its instrument is diplomacy."(Morgenthau et Thompson 1993, 175)

In the case of the United States and China, however, it's hard to see how the two states are actively trying to escape conflict through wit and diplomacy. China has been accused of conducting 'wolf warrior diplomacy' while the United States openly flaunts its intention to compete with China.(Martin 2021) It certainly appears like economic interdependence plays a much bigger role in the two countries avoiding conflict than "well-crafted diplomacy" since trading, not diplomacy, is a stable constant in their relationship.

Security Dilemma

For classical realists, the deterioration of Sino-American diplomacy could be a sign that a great power competition is about to happen. This intense security competition is famously

known as the security dilemma, a concept introduced by Herz (1950), p. 157. The dilemma is then that even though one state might arm itself strictly for defensive reasons, it would be rational for its neighbours to want to arm themselves in return just in case, considering that states cannot know each other's true intentions in an anarchical system where self-help is the norm.(Viotti et Kauppi 2012, 56) This creates a vicious cycle of mistrust and insecurity that can lead to conflict.

In 2015 Graham Allison used the security dilemma in his power transition theory called the Thucydides Trap to demonstrate that “war between the US and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognized.”(Allison 2017, 27; 2015) He used previous cases of conflict between rising powers and established powers to conclude that in this kind of situation, conflict is more likely to happen than not.

Despite its impressive mainstream success, Allison's work has been widely criticized for its flawed methodology. Richard Hanania denotes three notable methodological flaws in his research. He shows that “[...] if we control for other variables that could determine whether rival powers end up in war, the results look much less impressive.”(Hanania 2021, 19) For example, time might be a contributing factor in his 500 years analysis but its possible effects are not discussed in his work. States might not react the same to threats now as they did hundreds of years ago. Indeed, the world is more interdependent now than it has ever been and it does not make sense to compare states as they were before the invention of the telegraph to modern states where various information is readily available to the public and where capital can flow instantly between countries through the internet. This does not invalidate the security dilemma but it nuances its effects.

Neo-Institutionalism

According to Bruce Russett, liberals, who tend to be more optimistic than realists, also believe in its existence but the difference is that they “[...] [see] democratic government, economic interdependence, and international law and organizations as means to overcome [it].”(Dunne, Kurki, et Smith 2013, 95) In the case of Sino-American relations, economic interdependence can be a likely way out of security competition. Liberals acknowledge the benefits of maintaining good diplomatic relations but emphasize the significance that economic cooperation (but also other types of cooperation) has on maintaining a cordial relationship. This cooperation is enhanced by both countries' participation in a wide range of institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the Financial Action Task Force. Keohane and Martin take a direct jab at Mearsheimer when they write: “[his] characterization of conflict in world politics makes institutions appear essential if states

are to have any hope of sustained cooperation, and of reaping its benefits”(Keohane et Martin 1995, 50) Indeed, they believe institutions are a key vessel for cooperation, they allow states with divergent interests to gather and cooperate despite their differences. For institutionalists, the reason why institutions can facilitate cooperation is that they can enable a form of cheat monitoring system rendering possible credible commitments. For liberals, the fear that the other might cheat is the greatest impediment to international cooperation.(Stein 1982, 313)

Another neo-institutionalist concept is that of Complex Interdependence. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye defined it in terms of “reciprocal costly effects” where costly means “[...] effects that are consequential. [That] may reduce costs, or provide benefits, as well as imposing costs.”(Keohane et Nye 2012, 232) The authors add that “These costs need not be economic but may instead involve significant effects on other values, including moral standards, aesthetic tastes, personal security, or ecological integrity.”(Keohane et Nye 2012, 232) In this way, power, viewed in absolute terms, is defined by asymmetries, where the state which is the least sensitive to cross-border flows and the least vulnerable to external events and policy alternation, has power over the other.(Keohane et Nye 2012, 232:233). This interdependence developed steadily since China opened up to foreign investments in the 80s and rose greatly after it entered into the World Trade Organization. While the United States benefited greatly from China’s cheap labour and growing market, China could count on the United States to buy its products and invest in its economy. As Joseph Nye wrote in his 2020 article *Perspective for a China Strategy* that “there are too many symmetries in U.S.-China interdependence at this point [for one to have power over the other], though that might change if there is a much more radical decoupling.”(Nye 2020, 125) Both powers seem to be proportionally sensitive to each other’s actions and vulnerable to each other’s policies. It’s therefore in their best interest to cooperate. As Manak, Cabanas, et Feinberg (2023) wrote: “The American Soybean Association claimed that the trade war not only harmed U.S. soybean producers, but also made foreign competitors more appealing. For example, Brazil benefited from Chinese retaliatory tariffs on U.S. soybeans, which saw a 63 percent drop in exports from January to October 2018.” This is a good example of how, due to complex interdependence, the United States can hurt its economy by trying to hurt China’s.

This relates to Keohane and Nye’s *Power and Interdependence*. They wrote:

Governments will argue over the distribution of gains and complain about the loss of autonomy entailed in rising economic interdependence (vulnerability as well as sensitivity); but they will generally find that, when there are domestic political demands for greater economic welfare, the welfare costs of disrupting

international economic relations, or allowing them to become chaotic, are greater than the autonomy benefits. Reluctantly, they will permit economic interdependence to grow, and even more reluctantly, but inexorably, they will be drawn into cooperating in the construction of new international regimes by creating integrated policy responses. (Keohane et Nye 2012, 34)

This explains a lot of the current situation. Indeed, China and the United States both face pressure from their population, although in different ways, to continuously improve their economic welfare. China's Communist Party's legitimacy depends, among other factors, on its capability to lift people out of poverty, which it has done quite impressively in the last 40 years. The United States, on the other hand, is a democracy where the population can vote out the government if they are not satisfied with their economic situation, which creates an incentive for the government to pursue interdependence with China in the name of economic prosperity. There is a lot of pressure from business various American business lobbies to ease tariffs with China. In 2021, a collective of influential Washington business associations wrote a letter to the Biden administration urging them to end the "trade war" with China claiming it was a drag on the American economy.(Mozur et McCabe 2021)

The problem with Keohane and Nye's theory is that it does not account for cases where a government openly claim its desire to dismantle interdependence. They believe that "[q]uite evidently, governments continually sacrifice economic efficiency to security, autonomy, and other values in policy decisions." (Keohane et Nye 2012, 34) This applied to the Trump administration which had been very vocal about decoupling from China. Why then has their trade relationship kept on growing despite their desire to "decouple"? How could the "strongest" state in the system struggle with keeping its economy in sync with its international political aspirations?

Furthermore, Nye also believes that in the globalized 21st century, both countries face mutual risk from issues such as global warming, drug trafficking, cyber-terrorism, and COVID-19, which cannot be solved unilaterally.(Nye 2020, 127:128) He wrote: "On many transnational issues, empowering others can help us to accomplish our own goals." (Nye 2020, 129) He describes the Sino-American relationship as a "cooperative rivalry" but wonders if both countries "can develop attitudes that allow them to cooperate in producing global public goods while competing in the traditional areas of great power competition." (Nye 2020, 130) He warns that "Exaggerated fears and worst-case analyses may make such a balanced policy impossible. (Nye 2020, 130)

Constructivism

Explaining the role of exaggerated fears is where constructivists excel. China scholar Alastair Iain Johnston who in his article *How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?* Analyzed how the media, played an important role in creating a negative mischaracterization of Chinese foreign policy, which he believes, “reduce[s] the range of interpretations of Chinese foreign policy, potentially narrowing policy options available to decisionmaker [...]and[...] could contribute to an emerging security dilemma in the U.S.-China relationship.” (Johnston 2013, 7:8) He accuses the media of creating faulty conventional wisdom. He dismisses allegations that suggested a change in China's assertiveness in 2010 by reviewing the six events the media used to support their claims and by demonstrating how the “discourse about a newly assertive China has suffered from a dearth of definitions and valid indicators”(Johnston 2013, 9) He also mentions how the media only reporting on the negative events can influence and strengthen the belief that China and the U.S. are competitors and not cooperators, thus fueling the security dilemma. (Johnston 2013, 46) Johnston wrote that the problematic analysis of China's assertiveness “suggest[s] that the nature of the media-blogsphere[sic] interaction may become an important factor in explaining the speed and intensity of future security dilemma dynamics between [...] the United States and China.”(Johnston 2013, 48)

David Shambaugh, another constructivist China Scholar, also gives importance to the role of perception in shaping the public discourse about the relationship between the two giants. He wrote that “China has a very, very long way to go before it catches up with the United States [...]”(Shambaugh 2016, 293) and that he “[...] remain[s] mystified why there is an”illusion of Chinese power” held by many around the world.”(Shambaugh 2014) According to the author, perception matters greatly in international relations, and the fact that people perceive that China will overtake, or has overtaken, the United States as the first world power can influence policymakers in their decisions about how to act vis-à-vis China. (Shambaugh 2016, 294) A good example of that is how a large chunk of the American people, whether they were Republicans or not, supported his tough stance toward China.(Silver, Devlin, et Huang 2021) Knowing this, it makes it very hard for his successor to adopt a softer stance since doing so could appear weak and displease voters. Thus, the government is trapped in a situation where it has to keep on being tough on China, even if it is not in its best interest.

Furthermore, Shambaugh wrote in 2013 in his book *China Goes Global* that “long time observers of Sino-Americans know that there is constant ebb-and-flow, frequent frictions, and a kind of love-hate repetitive cycle in mutual images.(Shambaugh 2013a, 139) In this way, he adds, the relationship is”never as bad as it seems, or as good as it seems.”(Shambaugh 2013a, 139) In his book 2013 *Tangled Titans: The United States and China*, Shambaugh

argue that cooperation and competition happen simultaneously on a spectrum. He wrote: “What changes is the balance between these two features.”(Shambaugh 2013b, 21) However, in his 2016 book *China’s Future*, the author observed that “The Sino-American relationship is finding it increasingly difficult to find a [...] positive narrative and trajectory into the future.”(Shambaugh 2016, 299) Interdependence, or, according to Shambaugh, “the fear of it falling apart”, is the “[...] ‘glue’ that seems to keep them together.”(Shambaugh 2016, 299)

Jonathan Luckhurst has a similar point of view. He wrote in his 2016 book chapter *China–US Economic Cooperation as Antidote to Strategic Conflict*: “There is too much at stake — economically, politically, and strategically — to let relations deteriorate significantly under the pressure of political rhetoric or security tensions.”(Luckhurst 2016, 229) He believes that “[bilateral] economic interdependence decreases prospects for hostility by increasing perceived gains and risks from economic relations, giving incentives to reduce tensions and limit damage from political differences.” (Luckhurst 2016, 217) This could be the “glue” that Shambaugh referred to. He demonstrates ways in which officials from both states make efforts to diverge from these negative narratives by way of discursive adjustment. He gives two examples: How China went from ‘peaceful rise’ to ‘peaceful development’ and how the United States went from ‘pivot to Asia’ to ‘rebalancing to Asia’.(Luckhurst 2016, 229) Luckhurst concludes his chapter by writing that “[so] long as political discourse and domestic politics in each country does not damage their relations, China–US economic cooperation should continue to be an antidote to strategic conflict.”(Luckhurst 2016, 240)

Additionally, Wendt, a constructivist scholar, believes there are four “Master Variables” that can help understand the collective identity formation process. They are Interdependence, common fate, homogeneity, and self-restraint.(Wendt 1999, 317) In the case of China and the United States, three of those variables seem to play a favourable role in maintaining a cooperative relationship. Interdependence, which already has been established as a core component of the relationship. Common fate, which Wendt describes as distinct from interdependence, refers to something exterior. He wrote: “Interdependence means that actors’ choices affect each other’s outcome, and as such implies interaction. Common fate has no such implication.”(Wendt 1999, 349) Some examples of common-fate situations that impact Sino-American relations include global warming, Cyber criminality, Covid, etc. The last one is Self-restraint. In a situation where both states are powerful enough to easily eliminate the other, “[...] then states are constrained from going to war and thus, ironically, may be willing to trust each other enough to take on collective identity”(Wendt 1999, 358) The United States and China are the first and second greatest military power in the world. They both possess nuclear weapons and have the capacity to destroy each other. This could be a factor

that contributes to the maintenance of a cooperative relationship.

Theory

Wendt believed that there might have been more variables than four and that understanding how those variables worked to form a larger model was a theoretical problem in itself. (Wendt 1999, 365) This research will be using his theory and the theory of those who have built upon it to understand how the economic relationship between China and the United States relates to their political relationship.

Constructivism is different than realism or liberalism. It strays away from positivism and focuses on the role of ideas and norms in shaping international relations. It emphasizes the role of a multitude of actors, states, NGOs, individuals, and the intersubjectivity between them. Fierke wrote: “Constructivists embrace an intersubjective ontology, emphasizing norms, social agents, and structures, and the mutual constitution of identity.” (Dunne, Kurki, et Smith 2013, 193) Each state is composed of individuals with their agency and identity, acting according to what they believe is in their interest. What matters here is that their actual interest may differ from their perceived interest. Indeed, people will tend to act according to their perception of reality, not reality itself. This perception is shaped by their identity, which is itself shaped by their social surroundings which are shaped by the individuals which it comprises. This is what constructivists call intersubjectivity.

Actors’ behaviours are bound by the norms and the social structure they are subjected to or have been influenced by, coming from their family, employer, religious group, society, or other forms of social groups. In the words of Jonathan Luckhurst: “Agency is context-dependent and social, existing in complex flows of interactions and processes; individuals are reflexive, but not isolated from the constitutive effects of practices and shifts in background knowledge.” (Luckhurst 2019, 3) Individuals, who in the pursuit of their self-interest, wish to alter the economic, political, or social norms and structure, can then form groups with other individuals with similar interests. These groups can get bigger and gain more importance or can be influenced by bigger groups. Through what Johnston calls micro-processes — “[...] the susceptibility of structures to minor perturbations, contingencies, nonlinearity, and path dependence set in motion by the conscious reflection and action of agents of change” (Johnston 2008, p. xiv:xv) — these groups can influence actions of states. According to Johnston, this socialization process should matter a lot when studying the behaviour of states. (Johnston 2008, xv)

Therefore, to understand bilateral relations between states, it is important to analyze and

understand the socialization process happening between them and within each of them. This is why realism is important in understanding the Sino-American relation as most Chinese IR scholars and a sizable portion of its political class tend to agree with it.(Zhang 2020, 241; Shambaugh 2013a, 49, 66) It is, therefore, possible to assume that certain Chinese policymakers are likely to act according to the dictates of the theory in response to actions made by the United States, and that the United States policymakers, knowing this, might act in a preventive way, anticipating “realist” actions from China. The fact that Allison’s book was so popular among statesmen is a good indicator of what kind of ideology circulates among American decision-makers.(Hanania 2021, 13) This kind of ideational propagation could increase tensions and fuel their security dilemma.

As Wendt wrote: “Social theories do not determine the content of our international theorizing, but they do structure the questions we ask about world politics and our approaches to answering those questions.”(Wendt 1992, 422) Constructivism is about understanding how others perceive the world. In this manner, it can act as a bridge between important and useful elements of each theory of international relations. It can acknowledge the role self-interested human nature plays in international politics while retaining room for structural analysis and the effects it can have on the behavior of states. It also recognizes the role of institutions and does not see power as inherently absolute or relative. Constructivism offers malleability and a deep level of analysis which can help understand a specific set of events, and their context, in a situation where there are so many contradicting theories and speculations. Nuance is key in understanding the complex situation which is the Sino-American relationship. This is how a research using constructivism can further our understanding of the Sino-American relationship.

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Appendix

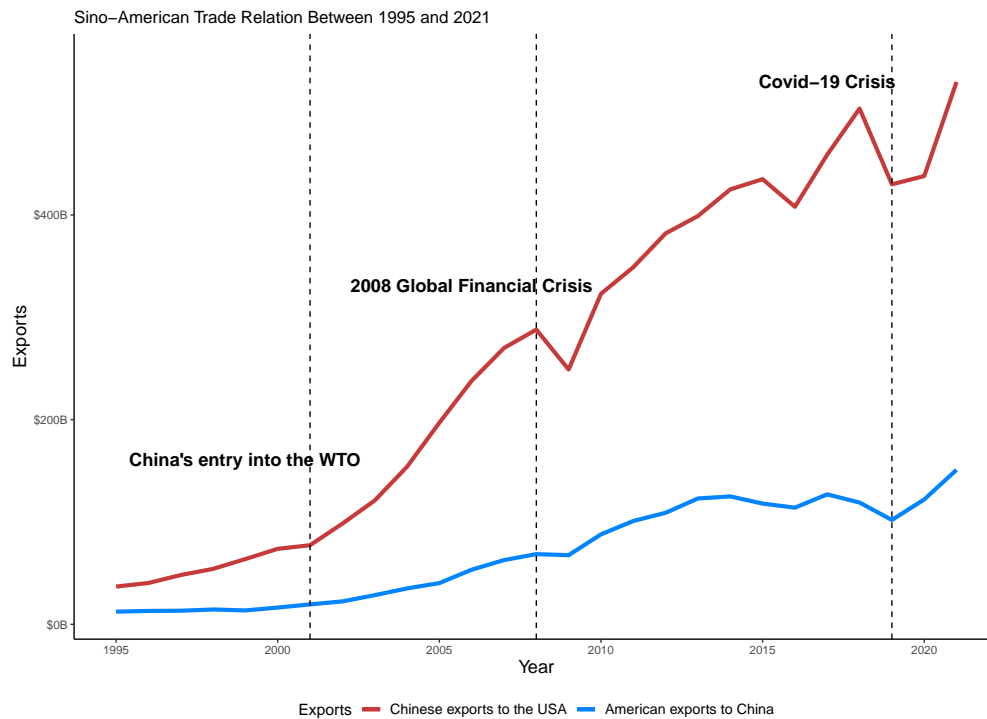


Figure 1: Sino-American Trade Between 1995 and 2021 Source: Census.gov (2023)