To the limit with China

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The best we can yearn for is a US-China relationship of controlled competition, which would avoid conflict and allow for limited cooperation.

New York - Observers of U.S.-China relations are increasingly talking about a new cold war. In addition to being engaged in a long-standing trade war, the two countries are now engaged in a destructive cycle of mutual sanctions, consular closures and increasingly bellicose official discourses. Efforts are underway to decouple the U.S. economy from China's economy as tensions rise in both the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

A cold war between the United States and China would leave both countries and the world in a much worse position. It would be dangerous and costly, above all, because it would prevent necessary cooperation on a set of regional and global issues.

The good news is that such a outcome is not inevitable. The bad news is that the chances of a second cold war are much higher today than just a few months ago. Worse, the chances of a real war, resulting from an incident involving the country's armies, are also greater.

What's going on? Some say that a Chinese-American confrontation is inevitable, as a result of the current friction between established power and increasing power. But this ignores the various episodes in history in which this kind of shifting from power did not result in war. For better and worse, in history there are few things that are inevitable.

A more serious assessment of how we got here starts with China. In recent years, and more and more in recent months, the Chinese government has embraced a more energetic path at home and abroad. This is reflected in China's strong action in Hong Kong with its implementation of a new severe national security law; inhumane treatment of their Muslim Uighur minority; clashes along its unstable border with India; the sinking of a Vietnamese vessel in the disputed South China Sea; and regular deployments of military force near Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands, which both China and Japan claim as their own.

This has led to deep disappointment with China in the United States, aggravating the underlying tensions arising from China's consistent theft of American intellectual property, trade practices that many blame for the disappearance of industrial jobs in the United States, concerted military strengthening, and growing repression in the country. Hopes that integration into the global economy would bring a more open and compliant China to the rules have not materialized.

Why is China now becoming more and more energetic? It could be that President Xi Jinping sees an opportunity to boost Chinese interests while the United States is concerned about the Covid-19 crisis. Or it could be a consequence of China's desire to distract domestic attention from its initial mismanagement of the virus and the economic slowdown exacerbated by the pandemic. It wouldn't be the first time a government has turned to nationalism to change the political conversation.

A third explanation is the most worrying. In this interpretation, China's recent behavior is not as opportunistic or cynical as it is representative of a new era of Chinese foreign policy — a policy that reflects the country's growing strength and ambitions. If this is the case, it reinforces the view that a cold war or worse could materialize.

Of course, all of this takes place during an American election campaign, and thePresident Donald Trump's administration seeks to blame others for their own inept management of the pandemic. To be sure, China's responsibility is no less, as it initially concealed information about the outbreak, was slow in its response, and it did not cooperate as much as it should have cooperated with the World Health Organization and others. But China cannot be blamed for poor contact retesting and tracking in the United States, much less for the fact that Trump failed to accept science and did not obey the mandates of social estrangement and mask use.

But it would be a mistake to attribute the changing views of the United States of China primarily to American domestic policy. A tougher policy toward China will endure, no matter who wins the impending presidential election. Indeed, U.S. policy toward China could become even more essential in a chairmanship of Joe Biden, whose government would be less concerned with negotiating narrow and more focused trade agreements on addressing other problematic aspects of Chinese behavior.

In the short term, both sides should ensure that crisis communications are correct, so that they can respond quickly to a military incident and keep it cut. In more positive terms, the two governments could find common ground by making any Covid-19 vaccine available to others, helping poorer countries manage the economic crisis of the pandemic, or both.

After the U.S. election, the two governments should start a quiet strategic dialogue to develop rules for the bilateral relationship. The United States will have to abandon unrealistic hopes of being able to drive regime change in China and instead focus on shaping China's external behavior. China will have to accept that there are limits to what the United States and its allies will tolerate in the face of unilateral acts seeking to alter the status quo in the South China Sea, Taiwan, or with the Senkaku Islands.

In the long run, the best we can crave is a controlled competition relationship between the United States and China, which would avoid conflict and allow for limited cooperation when it benefits both countries. This may not seem like much, but it's quite ambitious considering how things are today and where they're headed.

The author

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