



# COVID-19 and U.S.-China Relations

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*Edited by*  
Zheng Wang

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# Invisible Battlegrounds: The COVID-19 Chapter in U.S.-China Relations

*Zheng Wang*

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), an unforeseen public health catastrophe, has resulted in 6.9 million deaths and wrought severe disruptions and repercussions across the globe (World Health Organization 2023). This pandemic has not only profoundly disrupted routine life and production within human societies but also triggered grave political, economic, and social consequences. Since its outbreak in December 2019, China and the U.S. have suffered catastrophically from the pandemic. So too has the U.S.-China relationship, which was already at a historic low point, experienced accelerated deterioration due to the pandemic.

Beyond the immediate health crisis presented by the coronavirus, a metaphorical “political virus” has permeated relations between these two nations, manifesting as mutual blame, disinformation, nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. This “political virus,” while less tangible than its biological counterpart, has proven to be equally, if not more, insidious and damaging in the long term, threatening international and bilateral cooperation precisely when it is most needed.

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While tragic disasters invariably bring immeasurable suffering and challenges, they also inadvertently provide the academic community with unique opportunities to delve into the profound structures of human societies and international relations. Calamities ruthlessly lay bare deep-seated issues and vulnerabilities within international societies, nations, and their interrelationships, which are concealed under normal circumstances. Remarkably, the implications of COVID-19 extend beyond the palpable and data-evident impacts on life and the economy. COVID-19 has also influenced people's perceptions, cognition, and emotions in unprecedented ways.

This book, *COVID-19 and U.S.-China Relations* presents a multi-dimensional assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S.-China relations. It delves into several key aspects of the relationship, including public health, trade and supply chains, people-to-people relations, public perception, the rise of nationalism and anti-Asian hate, and strategic assessments. Through an exploration of the complex impacts of COVID-19 on U.S.-China interactions, this book seeks to illuminate the myriad ways and underlying reasons the pandemic has negatively permeated this pivotal relationship. It underscores the need for objective and in-depth reflections on the pandemic and its far-reaching consequences, a crucial step toward healing and restoration in the post-COVID-19 era.

This book seeks to embark on a pioneering journey, offering what is, to the best of our knowledge, the first systematic and comprehensive exploration into the myriad impacts of COVID-19 on U.S.-China relations. While a substantial body of research and numerous publications have emerged to examine COVID-19 and its varied impacts on distinct facets of global and domestic issues, there remains a gap in exploring the nuanced and enduring impacts on the relations between the U.S. and China systematically. This volume endeavors to bridge that gap, providing the inaugural book-length treatment on this pivotal topic, seeking to unravel the complexities and far-reaching consequences of the pandemic on the diplomatic, economic, cognitive, and socio-cultural interplay between these two global powers.

The contributing authors of the book include leading scholars and rising stars from both countries, mirroring the project itself, which represents joint efforts and embodies the willingness for bilateral collaboration. As we tread into the post-COVID-19 era, this book presents itself as a timely reflection. The post-COVID-19 restoration of the U.S.-China relationship will have profound implications for both nations and the

world at large. As the editor of this book, I firmly believe that if scholars from both nations fail to reflect objectively and comprehensively on this disaster and its devastating consequences, it is challenging to envision how the two countries can mend their wounds and rebuild relations and societies in the post-COVID-19 era. We—the editor and authors of this book—humbly offer it as a tangible starting point in this vitally important reflective undertaking.

## POST-DISASTER IMPACTS AND DAMAGES ASSESSMENT

The relationship between the U.S. and China is often described as a marriage and its rapid deteriorations in relations as a bad divorce. The metaphor of a marriage is often used to describe the relationship between the two countries due to the complex and interdependent nature of their interactions. Indeed, for the better part of the last 40 years, the U.S. and China have engaged in close collaboration across a multitude of significant arenas, spanning the economy, education, climate change, public health, among numerous other fields. These collaborations have effectively unfolded at every echelon, from central and federal government interactions down to provincial and state level exchanges.

The rapport between the two nations was particularly strong during what many consider a golden era from 2002 to 2016. The year 2002 marked China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), while 2016 heralded a shift with the election of Donald Trump. This era fostered a term of endearment, "Chimerica" (Ferguson and Schularick 2007), symbolizing the symbiotic relationship that had developed, characterized by frequent and comprehensive interactions. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi (2022) provides the following statement about the pre-pandemic closeness of the two countries:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 300 flights shuttled between the two countries every week, and over five million travels were made across the Pacific every year. China-U.S. business ties, once negligible, expanded to U.S.\$750 billion in bilateral trade and U.S.\$240 billion in two-way investment. From tackling terrorism, financial crises and Ebola, to providing leadership in the signing of the JCPOA and the conclusion of the Paris Agreement on climate change, China and the United States did many great things benefiting the world through their cooperation.

A particularly salient example of this bilateral collaboration is explored in Chapter 2 of the book, “US-China Health Relations During COVID-19.” Joan Kaufman and Michael Gallo elucidate how China and the U.S. have enjoyed a lengthy and fruitful collaboration addressing numerous global health threats, a camaraderie that notably commenced with the SARS pandemic in 2003. The authors underscore how significant portions of China’s present robust public health infrastructure have been shaped and sustained through financial and direct support from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and various U.S. philanthropic organizations, including the Rockefeller Foundation, the China Medical Board, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among others.

The robust collaboration observed during the “golden age” encountered major hurdles during the Trump presidency, particularly in the wake of the 2018 Trade War. The advent of COVID-19 further accelerated the decoupling process significantly. To a certain extent, the pandemic symbolized a “divorce” or “separation” from what was once a mutually beneficial “marriage” between the U.S. and China. Much like a tragic marriage, despite having substantial common interests and shared responsibilities, the two nations found themselves on a path toward conflict.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a complex, multifaceted crisis, impacting nations on a scale reminiscent of war. Although the confrontations between the U.S. and China during the pandemic were not of military nature, they mirrored a war-like scenario in terms of disruption, separation, fear, resentment, and the stimulation of nationalist and anti-foreigner sentiments akin to wartime. The virus, an invisible enemy, besieged normalcy and international cooperation, erecting barriers between nations, communities, and individuals.

### *Separation and Decoupling*

The surge in U.S.-China tensions during the pandemic, coupled with China’s near-total isolation due to its “Zero COVID” policy, erected formidable barriers between the two nations. Numerous statistics from this period, including the sharp decrease in the number of visitors and visas issued between the two countries, paint a vivid picture of the situation. In Chapter 5, “Reconnecting Students and Academics in Post-Pandemic U.S.-China Relations,” Margaret Lewis draws upon statistics

to highlight a significant decline in the number of Chinese students in the U.S. during the pandemic: the count fell from nearly 375,000 in 2019 to 290,000 in 2022. Furthermore, new applications for student visas decreased by 30% from 2021 to 2022. Lewis also quotes Nicholas Burns, the current U.S. Ambassador to China, who states that there were between 14,000 and 15,000 American students in China as recently as 10 years ago—a number that dwindled to approximately 350 American students in the spring of 2023.

Margaret Lewis also points out that, although some costs of these deteriorating ties can be easily quantified, others, more intangible in nature, may have even graver implications for the bilateral relationship. For instance, a limited number of American students in China today suggests that, a decade or so down the line, the field of China studies in the U.S. may be increasingly populated by individuals with less firsthand experience in China. This dearth of direct exposure to each other’s societies, cultures, and peoples might further exacerbate existing misunderstandings and mistrust between the two nations (Fig. 1.1).

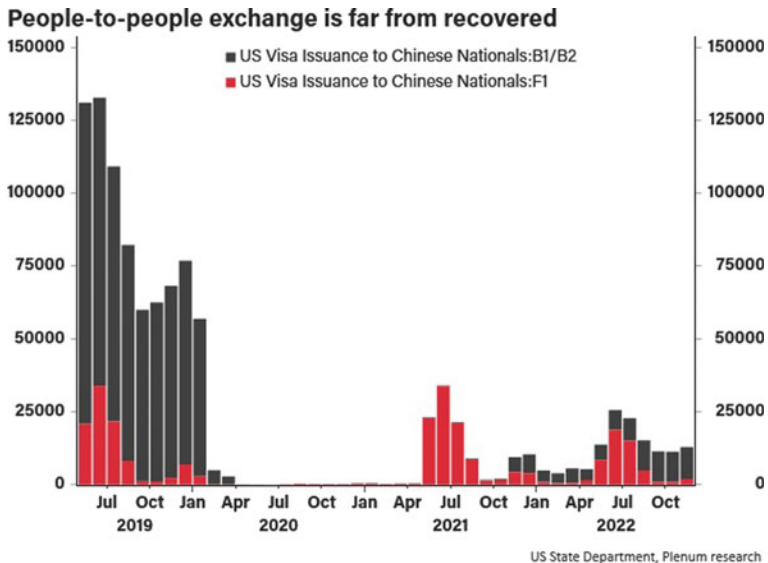


Fig. 1.1 Numbers of U.S. visa issuance to Chinese nationals, 2019–2022

The pandemic also exposed the fragility of and over-dependence on concentrated supply chains, particularly those rooted in China. As the virus wreaked havoc, disrupting manufacturing and logistics, companies and countries realized the imperative of diversifying supply sources to mitigate risks associated with over-reliance on a single country or region. The U.S. began exploring alternative supply chain networks, thereby incrementally decoupling from China's economic ecosystem. In Chapter 4, "COVID-19: Catalyzing U.S.-China Supply Chain Realignment," Bo Zhengyuan dissects the impact of COVID-19 on the supply chain dynamics between the U.S. and China, supported by extensive statistical data, figures, and tables. The chapter zeroes in on three pivotal shifts:

1. **The securitization of supply chains:** In both countries, the pandemic period has witnessed the growing recognition of supply chains as a critical facet of national security, necessitating measures to ensure their resilience, security, and robustness against disruptions that could negatively impact a nation's economy or public safety.
2. **Selective decoupling and de-risking:** COVID-19 has exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains, prompting a reevaluation of supply chain strategies in both the U.S. and China. This reevaluation is characterized by actions to relocate or diversify supply sources in sensitive or critical sectors. Under this trend, we observe China's imperative to bolster self-sufficiency and the U.S.'s endeavor to diversify its supply chain away from China.
3. **Reevaluation of China's Role in Global Supply Chains:** China's COVID-19 control measures in 2022 triggered severe production disruptions globally, prompting investors and governments to reevaluate China's position as a reliable hub for global supply chains. This reevaluation could have far-reaching implications for China's economy and foreign relations.

Indeed, in response to the pandemic, we saw both countries adopt policies that fostered economic decoupling. The anti-globalization sentiment bolstered by the pandemic facilitated momentum for economic decoupling as both nations veered toward protecting their domestic industries and reducing reliance on each other. The U.S.'s increasing

restrictions on Chinese technology firms under the guise of national security, and China's "dual circulation" strategy aiming for greater economic self-reliance, are quintessential examples of policy-driven economic decoupling. The pandemic also accelerated trends toward re-shoring and near-shoring as companies sought to bring production closer to home to avoid future disruptions.

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 in manufacturing and transportation, as well as different countries' new policies and regulations in response to COVID-19 controls, have also prompted a reassessment of some long-term policies and practices. China's spring 2022 lockdowns under its Zero-COVID policy notably rattled the global supply chain. Although such actions may not recur, the pandemic's memory and ensuing skepticism toward China, confirmed by numerous surveys in different parts of world, have led businesses and investors to reassess its reliability as a global supply chain hub. This reevaluation, likely persisting even as disruptions abate, could catalyze a decoupling trend from China, enduringly impacting global supply chains and China's future economic trajectory.

### *Information Warfare and Cognitive Dissonance*

Disasters have always been accompanied by debates about who is responsible and who should be blamed for the unfortunate occurrences. Confronted with tests of life and death, people become more outspoken and emotional, often leading to the emergence of various extremist thoughts and ideas.

In the early phase of the pandemic, information regarding the novel virus was severely limited. The information sphere transformed into a battleground where nations became ensnared in a narrative conflict, particularly concerning the origins of COVID-19. Chapter 3, "Contested Narratives: The COVID-19 Origins Debate and Its Implications for U.S.-China Relations," thoroughly reviews the unfolding debate between the U.S. and China regarding the origins of COVID-19. While Yanzhong Huang and Betty Best, the coauthors of the chapter, refrained from employing the term "information warfare," a reading of their contribution reveals that the debate over COVID-19's origins between the U.S. and China encapsulates several facets indicative of informational combat.

Their chapter delineates how both nations, represented by various officials such as ministers, spokespersons, and congressional members, have



exploited unverified suspicions and rumors to champion their own story-lines and undermine their adversaries. As corroborated with sources in this chapter, several U.S. officials, including former President Trump, initially labeled COVID-19 as the “Chinese Virus” or “Wuhan Virus.” Conversely, Chinese officials and state media have insinuated that the virus might have originated in the U.S. before being released in Wuhan, in an attempt to deflect responsibility for the initial outbreak. A surge of disinformation and propaganda further impaired mutual perceptions, mirroring wartime propaganda in which nations compete for narrative control.

During this period of information combat, both sides employed an “Us versus Them” mentality, aiming to redirect people’s anger toward the foreign enemy. In fact, each side operationalized the negative messages from the other to fuel domestic nationalism and distract people from their own governments’ dysfunctional performance. Unfortunately, it seems that both sides might have realized some of their objectives through this strategy and, paradoxically, may harbor a degree of gratitude toward one another. When President Trump referred to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus,” it provided his counterpart in China with an optimal tool to stir and mobilize the Chinese population, arousing their anger against a foreign enemy. Although Twitter is not accessible from China, many of Donald Trump’s tweets from this period were translated into Chinese and disseminated across China. Similarly, tweets from Zhao Lijian, the spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which promulgated the conspiracy theory that the virus originated in a U.S. military lab, were widely shared across both America and China. Even though these messages were primarily intended for domestic audiences, they contributed to the hostility and significantly angered citizens in the opposing country.

Indeed, disinformation and propaganda have significantly shaped citizens’ perceptions in both countries. As mentioned in Chapter 3, a Chinese scholar informed one of the authors, “I suspect 90 percent of those in rural areas or small cities are convinced the virus originated in the United States.” Unfortunately, this observation seems quite common in China, based on speaking with numerous individuals residing in China, including university professors. The authors of Chapter 3 also cited a recent Economist/YouGov poll, which indicates that 66% of Americans, including 53% of Democrats and 85% of Republicans, believe it is “definitely or probably true” that the virus causing COVID-19 emerged from

a laboratory in China. This poll reveals several notable points. First, three years after the COVID-19 outbreak, the majority of Americans subscribe to the Lab Leak theory. Second, the inclusion of party affiliations in the poll, like many similar surveys, underscores the politicization of the origins debate.

The blame game and conspiracy theories circulating about the pandemic's origins have resulted in a cascade of consequences. These have not only substantially contributed to the downward spiral in bilateral relations but also further entrenched the distrust and suspicions harbored by the two nations. Moreover, they have jeopardized bilateral collaborations, particularly in critical sectors such as healthcare, biotechnology, and scientific research, and rendered the scientific investigation into the origins of COVID-19 challenging, if not virtually impossible.

In Chapter 8, "The Pandemic and the China-U.S. 'Echo Chamber' Effect," Da Wei and Li Haixuan explore a peculiar "Echo Chamber" effect observed in U.S.-China relations during the pandemic. This phenomenon took shape as each nation predominantly reported the other's misfortunes, governmental dysfunction, and societal suffering amid the pandemic, thereby cultivating prevalent views about each other and perceived power shifts between the two countries. Notions such as the Chinese perception of "the East is Rising, the West is Declining" and the U.S. perspective of "China Peaks" became widespread, with each side foreseeing the other's fundamental decline, or even collapse, due to the extensive damage inflicted by COVID-19. Moreover, each nation now believes that the pandemic exposed intrinsic flaws in the other's political system and leadership, significantly influencing their strategic assessments and perceptions of power.

It seems to me, as the editor of the book, that this phenomenon aligns closely with the theory of cognitive dissonance. In his seminal work, "Perception and Misperception in International Politics," Robert Jervis (1976) employed cognitive dissonance to elucidate how states, via their leaders, perceive and misperceive one another. Within this framework, the contemporary U.S.-China relationship is entwined in a prototypical "cognitive dissonance." Following escalating tension and hostility in bilateral relations, particularly intensified by information warfare replete with disinformation and unverified "truths" about the other, individuals psychologically seek rationality for their judgments and actions toward the opposing nation. This psychological necessity propels people to "automatically" filter out incongruent information and pursue and

amplify details validating their assessments and actions. Consequently, both nations unconsciously amplify each other's present challenges and disappointments, while psychologically sidestepping and disregarding each other's developmental progress and potential. For these two superpowers, however, their reciprocal strategic assessments of each other carry immense significance and have global implications. If these assessments are influenced by disinformation and cognitive dissonance, they could result in tragic misjudgments.

*Prejudice and Perception:  
The Rise of Nationalism and Anti-Asian Racism*

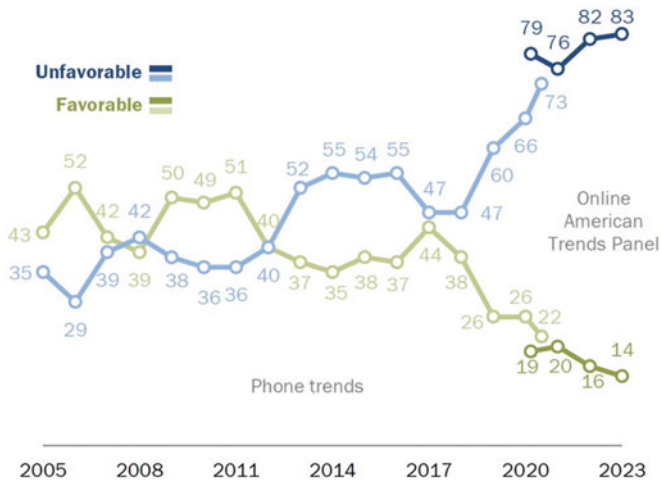
Pandemic-induced fear and uncertainty fostered a worldwide rise in nationalism, aptly termed as "Pandemic nationalism." The manifestations of anti-Asian racism in the U.S. during the pandemic paralleled the kind of racial animosities often exacerbated in wartime. Similarly, the virulent racism experienced in the wake of the virus is a stark testament to the societal schisms further deepened by the pandemic, much like the societal divides witnessed in wartime.

The pandemic precipitated a dramatic shift in public opinions within both the U.S. and China, each toward the other. Public sentiment in the U.S. toward China has soured significantly, experiencing an alarming increase in negative perspectives during the past several years. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2023a) aptly illustrates this trend: in 2018, less than half of the respondents (47%) expressed negative views toward China. However, by 2023, a striking 83% of respondents harbored negative opinions, marking a substantial escalation of 36% points over a mere five years (Fig. 1.2).

The timeframe in question coincides with the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in Wuhan, China. The pandemic not only claimed lives and disrupted economies but also sparked geopolitical blame games and heightened scrutiny toward China's handling of the outbreak, transparency, and cooperation with the global community. This period also witnessed escalating U.S.-China trade tensions and disputes over technological and geopolitical issues, further straining the bilateral relationship. The findings from the Pew Research Center serve as a stark reminder of the impact that global crises and political discord can have on public perception, and the resultant hurdles they pose to bilateral relations and diplomatic engagements.

## U.S. opinion of China remains negative

% who say they have a(n) \_\_\_ opinion of China



Note: Those who did not answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 20-26, 2023. Q3b.

"Americans Are Critical of China's Global Role - as Well as Its Relationship With Russia"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Fig. 1.2 U.S. public opinion of China, 2005–2023

This phenomenon is not just in the U.S.—according to another survey by the Pew Research Center (2023b), attitudes toward China are predominantly negative in 24 countries surveyed. A median of two-thirds express an unfavorable opinion of China, while a median of just 28% offer positive ratings. In each of the North American and European countries surveyed, half or more hold somewhat or very unfavorable opinions of China, including majorities of three-quarters or more in Sweden, the U.S., Canada, the Netherlands, and Germany. Indeed, post-COVID-19, China is grappling with a serious crisis of trust and burgeoning negative opinion.

In Chapter 7, “America Through the Eyes of Chinese Youth During COVID-19,” Mallie Prytherch explores the viewpoints of students at two of China’s premier institutions, Peking University and Tsinghua University, uniquely leveraging her position as one of the very few international

scholars in China during the COVID-19 pandemic to speak with Chinese students who are poised to become future leaders in business, academia, and politics. Employing a dual-method approach, Prytherch utilized a digital questionnaire, supplemented with semi-structured interviews to mitigate the limitations of the digital survey.

The research findings reveal invaluable insights into how COVID-19 has influenced the perspectives of China's future leaders toward the U.S. According to her research, over two-thirds of respondents expressed a more negative view of the American government since the onset of the pandemic. Moreover, many students, who had once contemplated pursuing extended living or working experiences in the U.S., have reevaluated their plans, attributing this shift to various factors associated with COVID-19. Additionally, a clear correlation emerges between experiencing anti-Asian racism in the U.S. and an enhanced support for the Chinese government. Not only did the pandemic affect the students' views of the U.S., but it also negatively influenced their perceptions of democratic systems at large. This chapter further elucidates that the COVID-19 pandemic is not merely a public health crisis but a pivotal juncture that has reoriented future Chinese leaders' viewpoints on their government, the U.S., and the wider spectrum of international relations, with potentially far-reaching implications.

This growing nationalism is evident in the U.S. as well. As Minxin Pei (2003) argued, nationalism used to be a dirty word in the U.S., and Americans used to believe that it appeared only in "backward" societies and would not find the fertile ground to grow within an advanced and mature democracy. However, what we have experienced in the last four years is fundamentally the astonishing rise of nationalism in this land, with Donald Trump as its cultivator. By leading this movement, Trump successfully transformed himself from a real estate businessman to the U.S. President. In my opinion, Trump's nationalism, or Trumpism, is a combination of an "America First" economic nationalism, white-supremacist racism, and anti-elite and anti-immigrant populism. Nationalism blinds judgment, justifies lies and extreme actions, creates an "Us versus Them" confrontation, and draws rifts within societies.

And yet, nationalism is a double-edged sword. To a certain extent, Trump too became a hostage of his nationalist movement, which turned into the biggest factor contributing toward his failure as a President, especially in handling the COVID-19 crisis. Aware of who sent him to the

White House, he has spent his term catering to the likes and preferences of American nationalists. As they are his power base, Trump has been extremely careful to never let them down. When the pandemic first arrived on American shores, these were the people who disliked wearing masks and opposed locking down their communities. Trump's reluctance to counter these sentiments precipitated the internationally observed anti-science and anti-intellectual posture of his administration throughout the pandemic.

In Chapter 2, Joan Kaufman and Michael Gallo comment on a distinct form of "vaccine nationalism" that influenced the Chinese government's decision to decline more efficacious mRNA vaccines. This stance endured even after the highly contagious Omicron variant began spreading in late 2022, following the lifting of the "zero-COVID policy," which led to widespread deaths, especially among the elderly population. I find Kaufman and Gallo's observations regarding "vaccine nationalism" particularly relevant in understanding China's differential attitudes toward domestic and foreign vaccines. During the initial stages of COVID-19, China successfully developed its own vaccines, which were heralded as a source of national pride and scientific innovation in official media and were also exported to many countries promoting China's global influence. However, under the "vaccine nationalism," the Chinese government continued to reject the importation and implementation of mRNA vaccines in China, even when its own vaccines were found to provide less protection against the virus.

During the pandemic, we have also witnessed a unique competition in "vaccine diplomacy" between the U.S. and China. Each nation has sought to portray itself as a global leader in the battle against the pandemic, while also casting a critical eye on the other's efforts and intentions. Both countries have donated large quantities of COVID-19 vaccines to numerous nations, a strategy largely tied to geopolitical competition for influence across various regions of the world. It seems to me that this "vaccine diplomacy" has induced a "rally round the flag" effect, typically observed in conflict or wartime, where nations and citizens unite against perceived external threats. However, this unity can also foster an "Us versus Them" mentality, further exacerbating international relations. At a critical juncture when the global community direly needed leadership, the two superpowers were primarily focused on blaming each other and competing for global influence.

While patriotic and nationalistic sentiments can forge unity and support during trying times, they may also sow seeds of xenophobia, racism, and jingoism. A poignant tragedy of our era is the escalation of anti-Asian racism and related crimes in the U.S. amid the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a report by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism (Yam 2022), Anti-Asian hate crimes surged by 339% nationwide in 2021, with cities like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles exceeding their previous 2020 records. Anti-Asian hate is one of the ugly by-products of COVID-19.

In Chapter 6, “COVID-19, Anti-Asian Racism, and U.S.-China Relations,” D.G. Kim employs public opinion polls and original survey data to delineate the direct linkage between COVID-19 and anti-Asian sentiment within the U.S. His research unveils a pivotal discovery: there is a striking correlation between pandemic-induced public anxiety and a rise in support for more assertive foreign policy measures against China—a correlation partly anchored in negative attitudes toward individuals of Chinese and Asian descent.

Kim’s research further unveils a noticeable increase in the discourse related to anti-Asian racism within Chinese state media, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Confronted with an American President who utilized the label “Chinese virus” and the stark images of vulnerable victims of anti-Asian hate crimes in America, a wide spectrum of Chinese society—from the nation’s assertive “wolf warrior diplomats” and government-operated media to countless Chinese netizens—intentionally increased attention toward anti-Asian racism in the U.S. An analysis of these narratives unearths two dominant themes: firstly, associating the spike in anti-Asian violence with racially charged U.S. foreign policy toward China, and secondly, perceiving such violence as a mirror reflecting the inherent flaws of American democracy and the hypocrisy of U.S. foreign policy.

Nationalism often necessitates foreign adversaries, which explains why Trump chose to label the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus.” When President Trump utilized this term in a tweet, it sparked significant outrage in China and marked a pivotal moment in U.S.-China relations. While nationalists derive satisfaction from seeing their adversaries struggle, nationalism frequently leads people to forfeit their rationality. This has been apparent in many actions and policies against China under the Trump administration, which have harmed Americans as much as they have harmed Chinese. Similarly, many behaviors exhibited by the Chinese

government, such as the so-called Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, have only served to diminish China's global soft power and exacerbate its international environment. Unfortunately, we have witnessed rationality being supplanted by emotionality, with rhetoric and symbolic politics assuming a more prominent role in bilateral relations.

For an extensive period, America's influence in China—particularly among its educated population—was a significant concern for the Chinese Communist Party, since many Chinese admired the U.S. political system, institutions, and way of life. However, never before has America's soft power and reputation been so damaged within China. For many Chinese, in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. no longer represents the light on the hill.

## ORGANIZATION

Each chapter in the book explores specific facets of the relationship, employing case studies, empirical statistics, and qualitative analysis to assess the pandemic's impact on bilateral relations. Additionally, each chapter also provides policy recommendations to address the observed effects and to nurture future collaboration between the two nations. The book includes eight chapters and an afterword. While I have introduced some primary findings and insights from each chapter in the previous section, this section provides an overview of the book by listing each chapter's title, author, and a brief abstract, and offering additional background about the book project and its writing process.

Chapter 1, "Invisible Battlegrounds: The COVID-19 Chapter in U.S.-China Relations," serves as the introduction to the book. Zheng Wang, the editor of the book, provides an overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S.-China relations. This chapter presents the main findings and recommendations from each section of the book and highlights their relevance and significance to the current state of bilateral relations and global governance.

Chapter 2, "U.S.-China Health Relations During COVID-19: Insights from Past Collaborations and Future Considerations," reviews the history of U.S.-China health cooperation since the 2003 SARS pandemic. Joan Kaufman and Michael Gallo further analyze how geopolitical tensions led to reduced staffing in CDC program offices, consequently hindering collaboration and data sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic.



In Chapter 3, “Contested Narratives: The COVID-19 Origins Debate and Its Implications for U.S.-China Relations,” Yanzhong Huang and Lucy Best unpack the conflicting narratives in both countries regarding the origins of COVID-19 and explore how these narratives have been intertwined with domestic politics on both sides, undermining trust and causing a breakdown in communication and cooperation between the two nations.

Chapter 4, “COVID-19: Catalyzing US-China Supply Chain Realignment,” examines the impact of COVID-19 on the U.S.-China supply chain, analyzing how the pandemic not only further strained the bilateral relationship but also accelerated selective decoupling. Bo Zhengyuan demonstrates how the deepening distrust between the world’s two largest economies during the pandemic prompted both governments to regard each other as unsuitable partners for hosting critical supply chains.

In Chapter 5, “Reconnecting Students and Academics in Post-Pandemic US-China Relations,” Margaret Lewis navigates through the evolving People-to-People (P2P) ties between the U.S. and China amidst and following the COVID-19 pandemic. The “Zero COVID” policy adopted by China, coupled with already escalating tensions between the two nations during the pandemic, erected formidable barriers to P2P interactions, severely impacting facets such as academic exchanges and cultural interactions. The chapter also provides recommendations for rejuvenating connections and interactions between the citizens of the two countries.

The upcoming two chapters primarily utilize public opinion surveys to dissect the repercussions of COVID-19 on the mutual perceptions between Americans and Chinese. In Chapter 6, “COVID-19, Anti-Asian Racism, and U.S.-China Relations,” D.G. Kim utilizes public opinion polls and original survey data to trace the direct linkage between the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalation of anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. The discussion further explores how this rising tide of animosity has influenced the emergence of hawkish foreign policy discourses in China, thereby shaping the racialized perceptions and interactions between the two powers.

In Chapter 7, “America Through the Eyes of Chinese Youth During COVID-19,” Mallie Prytherch unpacks the significant shift in the perception of the U.S. among Chinese youth, particularly those studying at China’s esteemed universities, Peking and Tsinghua, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing a dual-method approach, incorporating

both surveys and interviews, the chapter uncovers a trifecta of trends among these students: a reevaluation of aspirations to live or work abroad, attributed to escalating anti-Asian sentiment and critiques of the U.S. public health system; growing disillusionment with the “American Dream” and its underlying values; and strengthened support for the Chinese government.

Chapter 8, “The Pandemic and the China-U.S. ‘Echo Chamber’ Effect,” explores how COVID-19 has markedly influenced both nations’ strategic assessments and perceptions of power. Da Wei and Li Haixuan dissect two prevalent viewpoints: the Chinese perception of “East Rising, West Declining” and the U.S. perspective of “China Peaks.” These oversimplified, yet compelling, narratives provide a lens through which each country perceives the other, notably shaped by disinformation and psychologically impacted assessments during the pandemic.

The book concludes with an Afterword, “The Pathways to a U.S.-China Post-COVID-19 Reconciliation,” written by the editor of the book. If COVID-19 is likened to a war-like experience, can reconciliation between the U.S. and China occur, and if so, what could facilitate this reconciliation? The Afterword explores potential avenues and strategies for reconciliation between the two nations and presents various thoughtful and actionable recommendations from the contributing authors of the book.

This book project has been significantly informed by a track two online dialogue project titled “Luce Dialogue on U.S.-China Relations During and After the Pandemic” (CPCS 2023), funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. Over the past three years during the COVID-19 period, more than 60 leading scholars from both countries have participated in a series of online dialogues over many topics of the bilateral relations. These dialogues, aimed at fostering open and frank communication between the policy communities of both countries, have promoted an in-depth understanding of various pandemic-related issues. Furthermore, the dialogues have enabled the creation of working relationships among participating scholars, enriching perspectives and understanding of each other’s contexts and perceptions. They have not only facilitated a profound understanding of various issues related to the pandemic but also served as a channel of communication at a time when in-person meetings were impossible.

We hope that the dialogues and discussions contained within these pages serve as a substantive resource, nurturing a deeper understanding

and fostering ongoing dialogue about U.S.-China relations in the future. I cordially invite you to explore the chapters that follow.

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# US-China Health Relations During COVID-19: Insights from Past Collaborations and Future Considerations

*Joan Kaufman and Michael Gallo*

## BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the coronavirus, COVID-19, first in China in late 2019 and then in the U.S. in early 2020 put further strain on an already frayed U.S.-China bilateral relationship. The relationship further worsened as accusations flew back and forth over the next three years about the origins of the outbreak. Yet if the world is to deal with future pandemics and other global health crises, such as those related to climate change, zoonotic spillover, and emerging infectious diseases, it is essential that the two nations, the world's two biggest economies, work together on global preparedness and global response. Richard Haass, the outgoing president of the Council on Foreign Relations, noted in a 2020 talk on

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the global pandemic that there is a gap between global challenges and global arrangements (Haass 2020) and this gap is nowhere more evident than in the dire state of collaboration between the U.S. and China on global health.

It wasn't always so. China and the United States (U.S.) have enjoyed several decades of collaboration and cooperation in the realm of public health ever since the two countries normalized diplomatic relations in 1979. In fact, much of the long-term, robust public health infrastructure that China now has was established through initiatives that were financed and directly supported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), alongside U.S. philanthropic organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation, the China Medical Board, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Ford Foundation, and others. This long history of successful technical and academic exchanges between scientists and the building of institutional partnerships across both sides of the Pacific, together with multilateral and trilateral cooperation runs counter to the dominant geopolitical narrative that has come to characterize U.S.-China relations in recent years. In fact, against the backdrop of the sharp deterioration in bilateral ties between the world's two largest economies, cooperation in public health has remained a significant priority issue for both Beijing and Washington, with the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrating the urgency for improving global cooperation on public health issues, especially emerging infectious diseases. In the aftermath of the 2003 SARS epidemic, China made tremendous investments into developing its public health infrastructure by working closely with the U.S. and the international community. As China and the U.S. transition to a post-COVID-19 reality, drawing on the lessons from successful prior collaborative efforts in public health could help move toward at least a partial reset of cooperative efforts and inform policy decisions about future directions for cooperation on global health security.

For most of the last 40 years the U.S. and China have collaborated on health challenges at the government level. This collaboration was most robust during the two decades of the 1990s and early 2000s but came to a near halt during the Trump presidency and has yet to be revived. The strong collaboration after the SARS pandemic of 2003 put in place a variety of institutional mechanisms that should have remained when COVID-19 emerged in 2019 and may have prevented much of the global havoc that ensued. While some collaborative mechanisms through non-governmental channels and university partnerships have remained, these

too have been challenged by a worsening geopolitical environment and perception of Chinese security threats related to science and technology.

This chapter briefly reviews the history of U.S.-China health cooperation in the last 40 years with a focus on lessons learned, especially over the last twenty years since SARS, that can be applied going forward to avert the serious consequences that ensued with COVID-19, including better prevention of global spread and working together to share effective interventions in the future.

## HISTORY OF U.S.-CHINA PUBLIC HEALTH COLLABORATION

The U.S.-China public health relationship has been described by scholars such as Huang (2021) and Seligsohn (2021) as being divided into three distinct phases: (1) relationship-building from 1979 to 2001/2002; (2) building long-term public health infrastructure from 2002/2003 to 2016; and (3) the worsening of relations from 2017 through the present day. Phase two was the period of greatest bilateral collaboration and Phase 3 has been characterized by the breakdown of the bilateral partnership that negatively influenced the COVID-19 response and which remains today.

China established full diplomatic relations with the U.S. in 1979. The U.S. and China then signed a Protocol for Cooperation in the Science and Technology of Medicine and Public Health in June 1979, and the U.S. CDC began providing assistance to Chinese health authorities in the 1980s. Early collaboration led to a groundbreaking CDC study in northern China from 1993 to 1995 that demonstrated the role of folic acid in preventing neural tube defects (Berry et al. 1999) as well as exchanges of medical experts in many fields.

Following the SARS pandemic in 2003, collaboration was strengthened. In 2005, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between several technical agencies and ministries on both sides, such as the U.S. CDC, Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and National Institute of Health (NIH) and the China CDC, Ministry Of Health, and the State Food and Drug Administration. This MOU served to greatly expand the scope of collaboration between the respective institutions. The collaborative program enshrined under the MOU aimed to: “enhance capacity in surveillance, laboratory testing, diagnosis, treatment, epidemiological investigation, biomedical research, and control of

emerging infectious diseases; exchange of technical experts and materials used to enhance the preparedness and the rapid response to emerging infectious disease threats; disseminate effective public health and clinical practices information regarding emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases and sharing of research findings; and promote strategic research on prevention and control of infectious diseases to strengthen capacity in evidence-based decision and policymaking” (U.S. Department of State 2010, p. 2).

The SARS epidemic that began in China in 2003 and the subsequent global spread demonstrated that novel infectious diseases do not respect national borders and can pose a serious threat to any country around the world. This initiated a phase of building long-term infrastructure for public health to prevent another lapse in the initial response within China, which included both mischaracterization of the disease (initially identified as avian influenza), as well as lapses in transparency, public information, and data sharing. The international community, including the World Health Organization, encouraged the Chinese government to acknowledge its responsibility for the global pandemic, which it did, and then provided assistance to improve China’s ability to identify and address future emerging infectious disease threats. The U.S. elevated public health cooperation with China to the top of its agenda and took several major steps in the immediate aftermath of SARS to jointly combat infectious disease. Following and because of the lessons learned from SARS, China announced its own major effort to combat HIV/AIDS (Kaufman 2010) and as part of the new U.S.-China collaboration following SARS, the U.S. established the “China-U.S. Cooperation-Global AIDS Program,” or “GAP,” a partnership that helped to set up national and local HIV control and prevention programs throughout the country (see below). A Health Attaché was appointed by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing for the first time, signally a new phase in U.S.-China health diplomacy.

New cooperative agreements were signed, training programs were created to leverage collective expertise, and public-private partnerships increased connections between public health experts in both countries. With the requisite structures put in place for collaboration and greater economic integration between the U.S. and China, this phase has been labeled as the “golden age” of public health cooperation, where the two countries worked in conjunction on all of the major infectious disease outbreaks of this time, including H1N1 swine flu, H5N1 and H7N9 avian



influenzas, Middle East Respiratory Virus (MERS—a corona virus in the same family as SARS and COVID-19) and Ebola virus (Bouey 2020). The U.S. CDC and the Chinese National Influenza Center (CNIC) initiated Cooperative Agreements in 2004 with the goal of building China’s infectious disease surveillance capacity. Over a 10-year period through 2014, the U.S. CDC and the CNIC successfully collaborated to develop technical expertise, improve the quality of the influenza surveillance system, strengthen the analysis of epidemiological data, and promote international collaboration and cooperation (Shu et al. 2019).

These agreements helped China’s national influenza surveillance and response systems to be rapidly expanded, its network laboratories to increase their capabilities for virus isolation and nucleic acid detection techniques and strengthened the analysis and dissemination of epidemiologic data. The CNIC would eventually go on to become the 6th World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Influenza, establishing it as a critical component of the global influenza surveillance and response system. Moreover, China’s real time computerized local level surveillance system for “atypical” pneumonia, set up after SARS with U.S. assistance was a major achievement and has provided the capacity for early detection and intervention for many new viral threats in the intervening years (Kaufman 2009).

In 2004, the U.S. CDC began working with the Chinese Field Epidemiology Training Program (CFETP) to develop the next generation of public health leaders and epidemiologists in China. Modeled off the CDC’s Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) but owned and operated by the counterpart country’s ministry of health, the CFETP includes specialized trainings and technical collaborations to provide the necessary skills and education to effectively investigate and respond to disease outbreaks. The CFETP has trained nearly 20 different cohorts of Chinese public health officials who have gone on to hold key managerial positions with China’s various public health agencies, including six directors and deputy directors within the China CDC. CFETP-trained epidemiologists have conducted more than 2000 outbreak investigations throughout urban and rural China, examining a myriad of infectious diseases including HIV/AIDS, human and avian influenzas, and typhoid (TEPHINET 2021; U.S. CDC 2020).

The U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogues were initiated in 2006 by George Bush and President Hu Jintao, strengthened during the Obama administration, and continued through the early years of Xi

Jinping's administration but discontinued by President Trump in 2017. Focusing initially on economic matters (Economic Dialogues), top leaders in both countries met twice a year in the early years, alternating locations in each country. In 2008 the dialogue was upgraded to include a broader range of issues of concern to the bilateral relationship (renamed the Strategic and Economic Dialogues). Jointly managed by the U.S. Treasuries and State Departments, the S&E dialogues continued for eight more years. The strategic track consisted of four pillars: bilateral relations (people-to-people exchanges); international security issues; global issues (health, development, energy, global institutions); regional security and stability issues. Climate change, clean energy and the environment had their own separate dialogues. Senior ministerial level leaders from both countries met regularly to discuss and launch projects on topics of mutual bilateral concern, including health (Georgetown University 2017; Barron et al. 2021; Wikipedia, n.d.).

This “whole of government” approach was an effort to consolidate agreements and press for the advancement of issues and interests in bilateral US-China relations” (Barron et al. 2021). It engaged U.S. and Chinese counterparts on numerous issues, including health collaboration, and spun off additional academic and other programs and exchanges. At its height, in 2013–2014, public health collaboration was a major feature of the dialogues and collaboration, including working together on the Ebola crisis in West Africa and the subsequent establishment of an African CDC at the African Union in Ethiopia (Barron et al. 2021). The U.S. and China coordinated the response to Ebola in 2014, sending medical teams and supplies and using existing relationships to contain the outbreak. The cooperation continued to grow, with both sides recognizing the global threat of infectious disease, culminating in a joint project to establish an Africa CDC that officially launched in January 2017, shortly before the S&ED was shuttered.

At the height of collaboration, there were robust relationships between the main public health institutions in China with those in the U.S.: CDC, USAID, and NIH. In June 2002, the Secretary of Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Minister of Health of China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on “China–US Cooperation on HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control.” The “China-U.S. Cooperation-Global AIDS Program,” or “GAP” program was established as one of the first efforts of the new MOU. It was a partnership between the U.S. CDC and China's Ministry of Health

to address China's HIV/AIDS epidemic. GAP was implemented jointly by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC) and the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) (Bulterys 2019). The bilateral cooperation program was officially launched in Beijing in March 2004 coinciding with the nationwide scale-up of China's National Free Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) Program (Zhang et al. 2007), a belated response to the catastrophic HIV epidemic among paid blood donors and their families among poor villagers in central China (Kaufman 2010). In 2006, the collaboration was integrated into the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the overarching framework for the U.S. government's response to the global HIV/AIDS epidemic (Fauci and Eisinger 2018). Under the PEPFAR umbrella, U.S.-China collaboration on HIV/AIDS was expanded to include collaboration with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID/PEPFAR budgets for activities in China in 2006 were 9.8 million USD, peaking to 10.3 million USD in 2009. Although USAID ended its China programming in 2012, technical collaboration between the China and U.S. CDC through the GAP continued. The GAP program was part of broader U.S.-China cooperation on health, which also included the U.S. National Institutes of Health through many collaborative research grants on HIV and other infectious diseases and noncommunicable diseases.

Collaborations on technical issues included HIV surveillance which was then integrated into China's own infectious disease monitoring systems. GAP supported the establishment or strengthening of 649 national or provincial sentinel surveillance sites in 15 provinces. Moreover many of the public health decision-making tools supported by GAP have been integrated into routine public health operations in China: evidence-based decision-making; strengthening systems and capacity at national, provincial, and local levels; prioritizing high-risk geographic areas and populations; developing innovative approaches for scale-up; answering important scientific questions that can be most effectively answered in China but also with global implications for the HIV response; and increasing China's engagement with the global public health community and sharing critical lessons learned (Bulterys 2019).

Up to 2016, the U.S. CDC maintained a presence in China. In the period between 2010 and 2015 several American staff were also assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing as technical advisors, as well as approximately 30 locally hired staff providing technical, program management,

and administrative support to the collaborations. Staff focused on HIV/AIDS represented approximately one third of this complement of China-based experts, and the capabilities of these staff were complemented by U.S. CDC Atlanta-based technical experts who traveled to China to provide assistance in specific technical areas as requested by the Chinese government.

The CDC's program in China, previously home to up to ten American specialists and dozens of local staff, was drawn down to three Americans and a small cohort of local staff in the years directly preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of the COVID-19 outbreak, many of the previously established cooperation mechanisms between the U.S. and China had already been reduced or eliminated under the Trump administration.

Outside of the bilateral government collaboration on health issues between the U.S. and China, several non-governmental partnerships also contributed significantly to global health collaboration, and many continue. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) established an office in China in the early 2000s and through partnerships with China's Ministry of Health and Ministry of Science and Technology has supported capacity building in important areas such as vaccine development, the development and testing of novel drugs, safety and manufacturing of medical products, and numerous projects related to the control of specific infectious diseases like HIV, Tuberculosis (TB), and malaria. Gates Foundation has supported both public and private sector partners to provide vaccines, medicines, and health products in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs), providing funding and technical support for research and manufacturing, clinical trials, market access, compliance, and commercialization, as well as strengthening China's own regulatory capacity and certification mechanisms so that they can enter the global public market through international aid and bulk procurement. BMGF has also played a major role in sharing China's medical and other (agricultural) know how and products with Africa. More recently, the BMGF has been working with China on "One Health," an important global initiative linking animal and human health for the identification and control of emerging infectious diseases (Zheng 2023).

The Rockefeller Foundation and its offshoot, the China Medical Board (established as an independent charity by RF a century ago) have supported medical education and health systems improvement in China for over a century, and in recent decades, CMB has contributed to the

training of physicians, epidemiologists, and more recently to the training of experts in health policy and administration (Zi and Bullock 2014). The Ford Foundation provided important assistance to build an NGO community that has worked with the Chinese Ministry of Health and CDC on the HIV/AIDS response and to link the Chinese HIV/AIDS NGO community to regional and global transnational NGO networks (Kaufman 2019).

## THE DETERIORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Although the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic may have appeared to be the tipping point of mistrust and fragmented coordination between the U.S. and China on public health, collaboration had already been deteriorating for several years. The 2005 MOU on Emerging and Re-Emerging Infectious Disease that had underpinned the “golden age” of collaboration was regularly renewed but was left to expire in 2017 amid political tensions and gridlock over negotiation on the terms. The following year was the year that the U.S. greatly reduced staff of key public health agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the CDC, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and also wended down operations of the GAP program. This rollback was partly due to the escalating trade war but also explainable by the fact that China’s need for a high level of cooperation had declined because of China’s own capabilities which had been strengthened by earlier collaborative efforts. The 1979 Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement that led to the 2005 MOU was set to expire in August of 2023 and has so far been renewed twice in six month increments. However if not renewed going forward it will remove the most important bilateral superstructure from which all collaboration in health and technology has been based (Seligsohn 2023).

Not long after the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in China, almost all U.S. staff and experts operating across the various health agencies were evacuated out of the country, further exacerbating the shortage of trained U.S. public health professionals that could have assisted in the tracking, investigation, and containment of the novel coronavirus. Prior staff reductions had removed a medical epidemiologist who was advising Chinese health officials as part of the CFETP, training the field epidemiologists who would be eventually deployed to the virus epicenter. Even if the evacuations did not occur, the greater presence of U.S. public health staff may not have made a difference in the early virus investigation, as

there were already restrictions on sharing biological samples. In 2018, the Chinese government had failed to share samples of the H7N9 avian influenza virus with their U.S. counterparts despite repeated requests even though they had consistently done so in the past.

As part of the U.S.-China trade war, in 2018 the Trump administration imposed tariffs on many Chinese goods, including health products such as masks, gloves, goggles, and thermometers, which inhibited the U.S. ability to import important critical PPE during the first weeks and months of the pandemic. Although tariffs on some products were temporarily reduced, staff shortages made regulatory efforts such as supply chain inspections difficult early in the pandemic when FDA-regulated products including surgical masks, PPE, and other medical equipment eventually were being imported to the U.S. at unprecedented rates. These concerns illustrated the U.S. outsized dependence on China for PPE and other products and exposed the limitations within its own supply chain (Shirk and Huang 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a clear opportunity for the two countries to put aside their differences and find a middle ground to combat a common enemy, however the situation rapidly devolved into one where collaboration became nearly impossible. Each side attempted to leverage the actions and inactions to blame the other and to retreat from good global governance (in the case of the U.S.) and to assert a new model of global leadership in the resulting void (in the case of China). While health cooperation was previously a relatively uncontroversial subject with ample interest in joint efforts, the frosty relations, prohibitive travel restrictions, and a breakdown in bilateral communication stymied the ability of experts from both countries to work with their counterparts on the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues.

Despite the tenuous relationship, some public health collaboration success stories continued. Modeled off the U.S. CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report and developed in close conjunction with the U.S. CDC staff in Beijing, the China CDC Weekly published its inaugural health bulletin just weeks before the first COVID-19 cases began emerging in Wuhan. This demonstrated the importance of timely dissemination of epidemiological information to an audience of domestic public health professionals and for communicating China's public health condition to the international community of scientists and policymakers.

But the bad relationship contributed to missed opportunities for collaboration that could have changed the trajectory of the global

pandemic. For example, in early 2020 the U.S. became one of the first countries to impose entry restrictions on individuals traveling from China, drawing sharp criticism from the Chinese government. The U.S. also initially offered assistance to China, including donating nearly 18 tons of medical supplies in February 2020 and offering technical expertise to assist the China CDC in characterizing the outbreak. At first, President Trump spoke highly of the Chinese response only to turn instead shortly thereafter to using highly inflammatory rhetoric by referring to COVID-19 as the “China Virus” or “Kung Flu” and eventually targeting his attacks against the WHO for praising China in the same way he had once done.

In July 2020, The Trump administration notified the Secretary General of the UN that it intended to withdraw the U.S. from the World Health Organization, criticizing WHO’s response to the COVID-19 outbreak, referencing its belief in undue influence by China in the organization’s delay in acknowledging evidence of human-to-human transmission and declaring COVID-19 a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” concern. The hostility toward the WHO not only undermined other important benefits of U.S. membership, such as participation in global influenza early warning activities and viral sharing, but further antagonized global partners working together to address the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the U.S. had gained access to Wuhan in the early days of the pandemic through its own participation in a WHO health team.

In January 2021, the WHO sent a mission of 10 internationally respected scientists to Wuhan to investigate the origins of the pandemic, working together with Chinese scientists and epidemiologists. Their conclusions that the pandemic most likely resulted from a zoonotic spillover at the Huanan live animal market corresponded closely with China’s own narrative and the opinion of many global leading scientists (Worobey 2022). However, as part of the U.S.’s growing criticism of China and interest in deflecting blame from the mishandling of its own raging epidemic, the conclusions of the WHO mission were represented as evidence of a cover up by China, which controlled access to data and site visits by the WHO group. The Trump administration offered an alternative origin theory—that a lab leak occurred at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), a leading WHO affiliated lab that also received funding from the NIH for collaborative research on bat viruses that were the source of the 2003 SARS pandemic.

The public criticism of the WHO mission to China and the purported cover up led to a full-scale attack of the National Institutes of Health's collaborative research program with the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Two main targets were the Ecohealth Alliance, a well-respected organization working with WIV with NIH funding to study the potential of bat viruses to spillover into humans, and Anthony Fauci, the longtime director of the NIAID who became the U.S. most senior health advisor to President Trump, and later to President Biden. Fauci was accused of covering up NIH knowledge of dangerous research at the Wuhan lab, an accusation without any scientific merit. The issue of COVID-19 origins and WHO and NIH complicity in a cover up became embroiled in U.S. partisan politics and distracted from genuine collaborative scientific inquiry into those origins that still remains unknown. Moreover, despite Taiwan's own success in containing the spread of COVID-19, China refused to allow Taiwan to attend WHO emergency meetings and technical briefings, alienating U.S. government supporters of Taiwan. In May 2022, China mounted a diplomatic offensive to block Taiwan's bid to attend the annual assembly of the World Health Organization, drawing further ire from the U.S. which supported its participation.

Both China and the U.S. donated large quantities of COVID-19 vaccines to many other countries, through bilateral donations but also through multilateral initiatives such as COVAX. This "vaccine diplomacy" was largely tied to geopolitical competition for influence in various regions of the world. The major recipients of U.S. mRNA vaccine donations were Pakistan (42.6 million), Bangladesh (38.4 million), Philippines (24.7 million), and Indonesia (23.7 million). China's major recipients of its less powerful vaccine were Cambodia (11 million), Myanmar (11 million), Laos (8.5 million), Nepal (8 million), all Southeast Asia neighbors and major Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partners. China declined the U.S.'s offer of donations of the more effective mRNA vaccines even after the highly contagious Omicron variant began spreading in late 2022 after the lifting of the "zero covid policy" (Kaufman, personal communication 2023), resulting in many deaths among the elderly. And its own local manufacture of the mRNA vaccines has stalled partly due to intellectual property rights protection by U.S. and European manufacturers but also to regulatory delays in China.

BioNTech partnered with Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical to commercialize their mRNA vaccine via licensing and distribution throughout Greater China, receiving special import authorization from the Health



Bureau of Macau in February 2021 and approval in Hong Kong as early as January 2021. However, foreign mRNA vaccines never received regulatory approval in the mainland, except for a very limited number of doses meant to vaccinate foreigners living in China in late 2022. There were reports of plans to use the BioNTech vaccine as a booster shot on top of China's domestic vaccines that had already been administered to much of the population, but final regulatory approval stalled. The lack of availability of higher efficacy mRNA to the general public in the mainland inevitably led to many more Chinese deaths after COVID-19 restrictions lifted in December 2022. Since mRNA vaccines like BioNTech were available in both Macau and Hong Kong at that time, many mainland residents rushed to the two Special Administrative Regions to get vaccinated during the massive surge in cases that followed the lifting of restrictions. And noted above, China refused the U.S.'s offer of donated mRNA vaccines in late 2022.

Few probably would have expected the U.S. and China to come together in a meaningful way to address COVID-19-related inequities, but in July 2022 they did just that. Belatedly, (missing the chance to deliver maximum impact) the U.S. and China both agreed to waive patent rights for COVID-19 vaccines for the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Least Developed Countries (LDCs) at the WTO's 12th Ministerial Conference. The WTO's TRIPS Agreement on waiving patent rights for COVID-19 vaccines to expedite access and local production for LDCs is an example of the U.S. and China coming to a multilateral agreement on the issue of intellectual property rights which remains a source of conflict between the two.

## KEY ELEMENTS FROM EFFECTIVE FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

This long history of collaboration between the U.S. and China reveals many important lessons for working together in the future on common global health challenges. China and the U.S. have an obvious alignment of strategic interests when it comes to controlling infectious disease outbreaks, however this factor alone is not enough to ensure that fruitful collaborations can survive the fluctuations in bilateral ties. We suggest a few important takeaways from the fruitful collaboration in the past that should frame the approach going forward.

### *Leadership*

Having strong leadership commitments from the heads of technical agencies (e.g., both CDCs) and backing from high-level political leaders provides an essential legitimizing force and renewed energy to undertake new initiatives. In the absence of direct dialogue between each country's respective political and public health leadership, such as occurred during the Strategic and Economic Dialogues, there may be a perceived lack of support that results in hesitancy in proposing projects and data sharing, even when it is not of a sensitive nature. Even while a number of non-governmental track 2 dialogues on health have continued or have been proposed, the disjuncture between geopolitics and technical needs suggests only limited action on recommendations will follow without strong signaling from top political leaders. However, there have been some promising signs that the top brass at both CDCs were beginning to thaw the chilly relations. In January 2022, the annual Directors Meeting between the Chinese and US CDCs, which had been paused since 2017, resumed with a marked change in tone, with Dr. George F. Gao, the director of China CDC, speaking about the remarkable results the two agencies have achieved in public health as long-term partners and Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the director of U.S. CDC, calling for the strengthening of bilateral practical collaborations (China CDC 2022).

### *Presence on the Ground*

During the height of collaboration, the U.S. CDC office in China played a crucial role in jointly identifying and investigating new disease outbreaks like avian flu together with the corps of CDC trained field epidemiologists in China. The importance of on the ground investigative teams for early warning of disease outbreaks is crucial for early action. The CDC's premier EIS program which has been on the forefront of responding to global health outbreaks should maintain its collaborative investigative processes with China CDC.

### *Sharing Viral Samples, Including Genomes*

Continuing the collection and sharing of viral samples that began with the influenza program, can lead to the early development of vaccines for global use, especially in the case of a severe new strain of influenza or

an outbreak of a new emerging infectious disease like COVID-19. At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, the viral genome structure was shared online, leading to the unprecedented rapid development of many effective global and Chinese vaccines within a year, saving countless lives.

With our era of emerging pathogens and the spillover of animal viruses to humans, there is the need to expand virus sample sharing more widely to include animal viruses. A recent article identified 102 virus species from 13 different viral families with potential for zoonotic spillover from wild animals commonly eaten as delicacies in China, 21 of which were deemed as high risk to humans because of spillover in the past (Cohen 2022). Robust collaboration on One Health, especially in hot spots, is therefore urgently needed and initiatives such as those being spearheaded by the BMGF should be strengthened and expanded. In the past, important collaboration on such animal viruses took place through NIH and other collaborative research mechanisms. However, the accusations surrounding NIH's support for the Ecohealth Alliance and its work with the Wuhan Institute for Virology linked to the lab leak theory of COVID-19 origins has put a halt to this type of productive collaborative research (Quammen 2023). In June 2022, the China CDC and U.S. CDC hosted a teleconference on One Health for the first time where they put forward suggestions and a preliminary plan for cooperation priorities (China CDC 2023). And the U.S. rejoined the WHO in January 2021, and has been actively participating in the initiative to strengthen compliance with the International Health Regulations and the WHO's Convention on pandemic preparedness and prevention (World Health Organization 2022).

### *Collaborative Research*

Collaborative research between Chinese and U.S. Scientists on multisite clinical trials have led to major global health improvement, including the early study linking neural tube defects to lack of folic acid, the PREP trials on HIV, and many more. China has a well-educated, well-funded, and sophisticated science community of leading researchers on vaccine and new drug development and collaboration with global scientists through mechanisms like the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, the TB alliance, CEPI, and other global partnerships have led to advances for the international community.

### *Long Term Capacity Building and Training Programs*

Collaborations that have an explicit focus on long-term capacity development and sustainability could help to bolster commitments over a multi-year time horizon, as opposed to shorter term collaborations whose successes, impacts, and lessons learned could easily go overlooked.

Training programs that involve in-person exchanges and field research in both countries help to build reservoirs of mutual respect and good will, while helping to facilitate more candid, informal discussions that are part of the spirit of healthy collaboration. Programs like the NIH's Fogarty Program have trained numerous Chinese doctors and health researchers over the past decades and those strong people-to-people relationships remain and should be revived for important collaborative research on common health problems. Having mutually well-defined priorities and a shared mission and values surrounding evidence-based research and policy decision-making will hopefully help to mitigate some of the politicization of public health work.

### *Data Sharing*

Data sharing is essential for addressing global threats like emerging infectious diseases, as so sorely demonstrated by the early failings in both the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics (Kaufman 2020). Through establishing realistic consensus and clear standards on data sharing agreements, China and the U.S. can protect their legitimate national security interests without inhibiting essential scientific communication and knowledge exchanges across borders.

### *Conclusions and Recommendations*

Collaboration between the U.S. and China in public health has been a major positive feature of the bilateral relationship over the past four decades and has the potential to create positive impacts in other areas, setting an example of how to manage differences and still drive constructive progress toward mutually beneficial outcomes. Although collaborative efforts suffered major setbacks in the years leading up to and more intensely during the COVID-19 pandemic, extensive ties between public health and academic institutions remain and a history of successful

initiatives have helped to buttress ties between the two countries in this area.

The U.S. should not let the S&T agreement signed first in 1979 lapse (Seligsohn 2023). A six month extension was agreed to at the last minute in August 2023 and again in late February 2024 (VOA 2024), but renewal of the agreement is still not certain at this time because of concerns about research data restrictions and military use (Matthews 2023). Despite difficult relations, this core agreement provides an overarching mechanism for collaboration on global health should relations improve. Reviving previous agreements on viral sample sharing, collaborating on One Health initiatives, and joint investigations of disease outbreaks are urgently needed. The U.S. public health agencies that opened offices in China during the height of collaboration, such as the CDC, FDA, and HHS should take action to restaff key technical and advisory positions. Agencies' heads and high-level political leadership can make public commitments to demonstrate their prioritization of collaboration on emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. Projects that focus on long-term capacity development with sustainable funding will help to support new knowledge exchange, while potentially enabling timely dissemination of vital new public health information.

As two of the world's most prominent global health donors, there are important ways the two countries should be working together to support global health in collaboration with the WHO, other bilateral actors, and global actors like BMGF. As with the joint establishment of the African CDC which leveraged each country's respective strength in management, technical capability, and experiences with development assistance for health, the two countries could collaborate on supporting the newly created African Medicines Agency, which is intended to become the continent's new regulatory body for medicines and medical devices.

With easier travel to China now resuming in the post-COVID-19 period, technical exchanges and joint ventures between U.S. and Chinese scientists and public health officials can resume through field research, trainings, and conferences. Renewing agreements and MOUs that support collaborative activities should be prioritized to ensure that relations do not further devolve. If the U.S. and China move toward operating in increasing isolation from one another and do not find solutions to responsibly managing their overall relationship, the world as a whole will be much less prepared to deal with emerging health threats

and crises. Being able to effectively compartmentalize public health cooperation in order to insulate it from flaring geopolitical tensions would help to pragmatically return public health collaboration to an apolitical endeavor that is rooted in objective, evidence-based research and policy decision-making. Despite the threat of increased securitization of infectious disease research, some forms of cooperation are necessary not just for each country to manage their own strategic interests but is a requisite for revamping the existing global health architecture to better meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

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# Contested Narratives: The COVID-19 Origins Debate and Its Implications for U.S.-China Relations

*Yanzhong Huang and Lucy Best*

## INTRODUCTION

More than four years since the onset of COVID-19, the world appears to have rapidly come to terms with the virus, particularly after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an end to its status as a global health emergency in May 2023. Mentions of COVID-19 now primarily serve as reminders of its waning impact, often framed in the context of a post-COVID-19 recovery or as a pivot toward preparation for potential future pandemics.

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One pandemic-related issue that has retained political salience, particularly in the context of the U.S.-China relations, is the debate over the origins of COVID-19. The origins issue centers on where and how the virus came from. While almost all the rest of the world agreed that the virus emerged in Wuhan, China, China began to deny being the origin point of the outbreak in March 2020. Similarly, while there was an initial near-consensus within the scientific community that SARS-CoV-2 likely emerged from a zoonotic spillover, public sentiments and political agendas in both U.S. and China have, at various times, leaned toward theories that implicate the other side being the initiator of an accidental or deliberate release of the virus. Amid existing geopolitical tensions, such finger-pointing and politically driven accusations have only encouraged the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Consequently, what should primarily be a scientific inquiry has been overshadowed by politics, with both sides advancing unsubstantiated theories for domestic political gain.

This chapter examines the politicization of the debate over the origins issue, exploring its molding by U.S.-China relations and its subsequent impact on bilateral ties. It scrutinizes the divergent narratives on both sides, illuminating how they have undermined mutual trust and resulted in communication breakdowns that hinder cooperation between the two nations.

## THE RISE OF THE FRINGE THEORIES

Since the novel coronavirus first appeared in Wuhan, the location of China's only biosafety level 4 (BSF-4) lab designed to handle the world's most dangerous pathogens, many were quick to draw a connection between the two. On January 30, 2020, U.S. Senator Tom Cotton tweeted about a potential link between the virus and the lab at Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) (Cotton 2020). He subsequently clarified in later tweets, distinguishing between the idea of an engineered virus and other scenarios, such as a lab accident. A day after Cotton's tweet, a paper authored by Indian scientists, posted on the preprint website bioRxiv, hinted that the virus might be genetically engineered (Pradhan et al. 2020).

Almost the same time, theories began circulating on Chinese social media suggesting the virus had U.S. origins. Such theories either associated the virus with the spike in pneumonia cases due to vaping in the U.S.

or linked it to illnesses among foreign soldiers during the Military World Games that took place in Wuhan in October 2019. A widely circulated screenshot in China alleged that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had confirmed that the virus’s origins were in the U.S. This claim, however, stemmed from a misinterpretation of a CNN headline dated February 27, which read, “CDC confirms first coronavirus case of ‘unknown’ origin in U.S.”

Such theories, though, were largely marginalized, lacking endorsement from prominent intellectuals or government officials on both sides. The prevailing view among Chinese and international scientists was that the outbreak resulted from a zoonotic infection—transmitted from wild animals to humans. A near-consensus formed around bats being the natural reservoir for the virus. There was also speculation that pangolins, considered a delicacy in China, might have acted as the intermediate host, transmitting the novel virus to humans.

In a February 2020 letter published in *The Lancet*, public health scientists denounced “conspiracy theories” suggesting that COVID-19 originated from a lab in Wuhan (Calisher et al. 2020). Major publications, including the *Washington Post*, initially labeled Senator Cotton’s claim as a conspiracy theory (see, e.g., Firozi 2020). Cui Tiankai, Chinese ambassador to the U.S., described the allegations of a man-made virus “absolutely crazy,” thereby indicating the virus was not engineered in either China or the U.S. (Quinn 2020).

Chinese state-run newspapers and major online platforms like Tencent and Netease initially published articles and interviews aimed at dispelling these rumors or conspiracy theories, indicating that attributing the U.S. as the virus’s origin was not the dominant propaganda narrative at that time. Notably, up until late February, China seemed to accept the label of being the starting place of the outbreak. The government initially did not dispute the use of the term “Wuhan virus,” and the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan was officially identified as a potential point of origin for SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for COVID-19.

## DISPUTING CHINA AS THE PANDEMIC’S ORIGIN

On February 27, 2020, Dr. Zhong Nanshan, a prominent figure in China’s response to COVID-19, made a surprising statement at a government-sponsored press conference. He said that “given the new developments overseas, the disease that was first detected in China

does not necessarily mean that it originated here” (Xiao and Le 2020). However, Zhong did not offer any evidence to support this claim, nor did he elaborate the “new developments” he mentioned. The next day, Zhang Wenhong, a respected infectious disease expert based in Shanghai known for his candor, refuted Zhong’s assertion in an exclusive interview with the state-run *China Daily* (Kuo 2020).

By March 2020, the spread of COVID-19 was close to being stabilized in China, while the U.S. emerged as the new epicenter, recording more cases than any other country. The divergent paths presented China with an opportunity to promote a narrative of authoritarian superiority over liberal democracy. However, this narrative would be compromised if China continued to be viewed as the pandemic’s origin, especially given the government’s early missteps in handling the outbreak. Indeed, from the beginning of the pandemic, the Chinese government faced significant international scrutiny for failing to disclose accurate information on the case counts and transmissibility of the virus, scrutiny that was only intensified with the emergence of the lab leak theory. Almost simultaneously, China’s social media was flooded with posts and articles suggesting the U.S. as the pandemic’s starting point (Shih 2020). On March 4, foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian leveraged Dr. Zhong Nanshan’s earlier comments to argue that China’s role as the origin had never been conclusively proven. “We must jointly oppose the ‘information virus’ and ‘political virus,’” Zhao stated. “Certain media outlets, with no factual basis, hastily labeled it the ‘Chinese virus,’ attempting to blame China for the global crisis. Such actions are deeply malicious” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020).

In the meantime, the virus’s origins became a political focal point in the U.S. As the country grappled with rising COVID-19 cases and deaths, the Trump administration, under criticism for its handling of the pandemic, frequently pointed to China as a primary culprit. Key U.S. officials accentuated this connection. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo often referred to the virus as “Wuhan,” despite the WHO officially naming the disease COVID-19. In response, China expressed strong disapproval, labeling Pompeo’s naming convention a “despicable practice” (Bowden 2020).

The tit-for-tat escalated when, on March 13, Zhao Lijian took to Twitter, floating a conspiracy theory that the U.S. Army could have introduced the virus to Wuhan. He further insinuated that a biosafety incident at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) in Maryland, leading to its shutdown in August 2019,

might be the real cause of the outbreak. In response, President Trump ramped up his rhetoric. While he had initially referred to SARS-CoV-2 as a “foreign virus,” he began increasingly using the term “Chinese virus” (Yam 2020). This shift became especially evident on March 19 when, during a press briefing, it was observed that he had manually changed “Corona” to “Chinese” in his prepared notes (Coleman 2020).

Trump’s persistent and intentional use of the term “Chinese virus” drew widespread condemnation, being labeled as racist and xenophobic by both U.S. and Chinese media. However, this rhetoric inadvertently also fueled nationalistic sentiments in China, bolstering support for the official narrative that absolved China of any responsibility for the outbreak. Both Chinese social and state media were inundated with purported “evidence” of outbreaks predating China’s in various countries, including the U.S., Japan, France, Italy, Spain, and Brazil (China Daily 2020). One Chinese scholar confided in a private WeChat exchange, “I suspect 90 percent of those in rural areas or small cities are convinced the virus originated in the United States.” Surprisingly, even a significant number of Chinese elites, primarily residing in major urban cities, succumbed to these conspiracy theories. Often, respected academics from premier Chinese universities or think tanks eagerly shared social media posts promoting the idea of China being uninvolved in the virus’s origin. Meanwhile, the Chinese government continued to employ obfuscation to deny the pandemic emanated in China. In March 2023, when questioned about the U.S. COVID-19 Origin Act of 2023—which referred to China as a probable starting point of the pandemic—the foreign ministry spokesperson deflected by citing “global concerns” about U.S. biological labs, including Fort Detrick and the University of North Carolina, insinuating that the U.S. might be the actual source of the outbreak (Liu 2023).

### DISPUTING THE ETIOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF THE PANDEMIC

The debate over the virus’s origins encompasses not just its geographic emergence but also its etiological inception. The enigma surrounding the outbreak’s cause has given rise to various theories. Initially, the consensus among scientists was that the virus likely emanated from natural exposure to an animal carrying SARS-CoV-2 or a similar predecessor. While

the zoonosis hypothesis remains predominant in explaining how the pandemic started, other theories include:

1. The possibility of an engineered virus, which postulates that SARS-CoV-2 was deliberately manipulated for research or other purposes in a laboratory setting.
2. The lab leak theory, suggesting a biosafety lapse resulted in the virus's escape from a research facility.
3. The cold-chain transmission theory, posited mainly by Chinese health authorities, proposing that the virus transitioned to humans via frozen goods, possibly from international imports.

In late April 2020, as international pressures for investigating the origins of the pandemic built up, Australia became the first country to publicly demand such scrutiny. The sentiment quickly gained global traction. On May 19, more than 130 WHO member states rallied behind a landmark resolution, urging the WHO director general to work with other organizations and countries “to identify the zoonotic source of the virus and the route of introduction to the human population” (World Health Organization 2020).

Amid mounting international pressure, China acquiesced to a WHO investigative mission. However, this endeavor found itself caught between Beijing, which sought to preserve its pandemic narrative, and Washington, which was looking for scapegoats for its own mismanagement of the crisis. In July, Trump announced the U.S. would withdraw from WHO, which he accused of siding with China and hiding the true nature of the outbreak. Mike Pompeo was skeptical of the WHO probe's transparency, anticipating a potential “whitewash” (Reuters 2020). China responded by framing the U.S. as a more probable outbreak origin. A government newspaper linked the timing of the U.S. decision to withdraw from the WHO to the dispatch of the WHO advance team to China, suggesting that the U.S. did so to avoid an international investigation (Fan 2020). China's foreign ministry urged on August 4 that the U.S. “fully clarify” its “militarization of biological activities overseas” (Xinhua 2020).

Trump's move also further diminished U.S. influence over both the WHO and China, enabling China to gain more leverage over the WHO in the origins probe. During the selection of scientists for the mission, it was alleged that the WHO rejected nominees from the U.S. government.

The terms of reference agreed upon by the WHO and China effectively reduced the investigation to a joint study, in which the WHO-led team lacked the mandate and access required to conduct a thorough and independent investigation (Huang 2021a). In January 2021, after extended diplomatic wrangling, an international research team arrived in Wuhan. On February 9, preliminary findings from the joint WHO-China study were disclosed, which was followed by an official release of the report on March 30 (The World Health Organization 2021). The report backed the natural outbreak theory and recognized the potential of transmission via imported frozen food, but dismissed the lab escape hypothesis.

Instead of fostering mutual understanding, the joint study widened the rift between the U.S. and China. China viewed the report as a vindication, believing it conclusively refuted the theory that COVID-19 was a result of a lab accident in Wuhan. The Chinese team leader emphasized the lab theory's dismissal, suggesting future investigations would veer away from this angle barring new evidence (Chen et al. 2021). China would later invoke this report, contending the WHO had settled the matter, negating any further inquiry within its borders.

Conversely, U.S. officials critiqued the study for its limited scope and dependence on Chinese-provided data. U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan conveyed significant reservations regarding the study's methodology and conclusions (The White House 2021). Detractors opined that the report did not take the lab leak theory seriously enough, especially given restricted access to the WIV. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus subsequently stated that all theories merited further study (Sample 2021).

### THE LAB LEAK THEORY GAINS STEAM

Of all the proposed hypotheses, the lab leak theory has proven to be the most contentious. Advocates for this theory in the U.S. cite a set of circumstantial evidence linking the outbreak to the WIV. They noted that Dr. Shi Zhengli, a virologist often nicknamed "Batwoman" due to her extensive research on bat coronaviruses, was the central figure behind the lab leak (Yang et al. 2020). They also referred to past lapses in lab safety protocols in Chinese research facilities as further evidence supporting the theory (Huang 2020).

While China persistently denies the plausibility of a lab escape in Wuhan, the Trump administration officially endorsed it in May 2020,



claiming there was “enormous evidence” that the virus originated from the BSL-4 lab in the city (Sanger 2020). However, the theory turned toxic for democrats. With only months until the presidential election, they perceived Trump’s backing of the lab leak hypothesis as a ploy by the administration to divert attention from its failings in managing the spread of COVID-19 (Stolberg and Mueller 2023).

In late July, the *Wall Street Journal* featured an opinion piece by Jamie Metzl, a researcher at the Atlantic Council. The article leveraged China’s cover-ups during the outbreak to advocate the lab leak theory as a more plausible explanation compared to the dominant thesis that the virus had jumped to humans from animals in the wild or wet markets (Metzl 2020). Despite such articles challenging the so-called “enforced consensus,” few U.S. scientists publicly supported the lab leak hypothesis (O’Neal 2021). Some U.S. officials resisted further investigation of the hypothesis, concerned about unveiling the government’s role in funding Dr. Shi’s bat research in Wuhan (Huang 2021b). Indeed, proponents of the lab leak theory, many of them Republican politicians, accused the National Institute of Health (NIH) of funding risky coronavirus experiments that might have precipitated the pandemic. They also alleged that top NIH officials, including Anthony Fauci and Francis Collins, attempted to quell scientific discussions that could reveal this connection (Cohen 2023). For most of the pandemic’s first year, the lab leak theory was primarily championed by right-wing media and political figures like Trump.

The election of Joe Biden opened a political window for the lab leak hypothesis to receive a closer look. In May 2021, 18 prominent scientists published a letter in *Science*, contending that “[t]heories of accidental release from lab and zoonotic spillover both remain viable,” and calling for a thorough review of whether the pandemic had originated from a lab leak or by natural spillover (Bloom et al. 2021). The *Science* letter opened the floodgates to accept the lab leak theory as a legitimate hypothesis on the origins of the pandemic. Mainstream media outlets began to give the lab leak scenario a fresh airing. An article in *The Washington Post* carried the headline, “Timeline: How the Wuhan lab leak theory suddenly became credible” (Kessler 2021). That same month, President Biden ordered a comprehensive, 90-day intelligence review of the origins of the pandemic, including the possibility of a lab leak.

China met these developments with denial and defiance. During a June 2021 phone conversation with China’s top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, in June

2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken sought cooperation and transparency over the origins of the COVID-19. However, Yang's reply was dismissive. Accusing the U.S. of spreading the "absurd story" about the lab escape theory, Yang urged the U.S. to "respect facts and science" and "refrain from politicizing the issue" (Daly et al. 2021).

While refusing to work with the U.S. in the origins probe, Chinese diplomats began advancing their own lab leak narrative. They highlighted the U.S. reluctance to disclose information about its biodefence program, suggesting that such hesitancy was indicative of a "guilty conscience" (Huang 2021c). Commenting on Biden's announcement of the intelligence review, Zhao asked reprovingly, "What secrets are hidden in the suspicion-shrouded Fort Detrick and the over 200 U.S. bio-labs all over the world?" (Campbell 2021).

In the wake of Zhao's remarks, Beijing formally submitted a letter to the WHO director general, reiterating that a leak from the Wuhan lab was highly implausible. The letter further pointed the finger at the U.S.: "If certain parties continue to believe that a lab leak cannot be dismissed, then, in the light of fairness and impartiality, they should also investigate the Fort Detrick base in the U.S. and the University of North Carolina" (Xinhua 2021). The letter was accompanied by a separate joint letter signed by over 25 million Chinese netizens to the WHO, demanding an investigation into Fort Detrick lab. In the same month, Chinese state broadcaster CGTN released results from a survey it conducted on the Weibo platform. It claimed that 96.5 percent of Chinese netizens called for an investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 virus in the U.S. (CGTN 2021).

Beijing resorted to obfuscation, in part due to the heightened stakes surrounding the origins issue. In June, former president Trump invoked the lab leak theory and demanded that China pay \$10 trillion in "reparations" to U.S. for the damage caused by COVID-19 (Zitser 2021). That same month, a Hill-HarrisX survey revealed that 83 percent of voters would support U.S. action against China if evidence supported that COVID-19 originated in a Wuhan lab (The Hill 2021).

In October, the U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC) unveiled its full declassified assessment on the origins of the pandemic. The report concluded that the virus was not developed as a biological weapon and stated, with low confidence, that the virus probably was not genetically engineered. The report considered both natural zoonosis and the lab leak as plausible hypotheses. However, it conceded that without new

information, intelligence agencies would be unable to provide a more definitive judgment on whether the virus emerged from animal-to-human transmission or a lab leak (National Intelligence Council 2021).

By 2023, the lab leak theory had evolved from a fringe conspiracy theory to a widely accepted hypothesis across the U.S. political spectrum. An Economist/YouGov poll suggests that 66 percent of Americans, including 53 percent of Democrats and 85 percent of Republicans, say it is definitely or probably true that the virus causing COVID-19 emerged from a laboratory in China. This marks a notable shift from May 2020 when 54 percent thought the virus had its origins in a Chinese laboratory (Sanders and Frankovic 2023). In February 2023, dissatisfied with the NIC's assessment of COVID-19 origins, House Republicans crated a new congressional panel to launch an investigation into the origins of the pandemic (Richards 2023). The same month, the U.S. Department of Energy updated its earlier stance on the origins of SARS-CoV-2, concluding "with low confidence" that a lab leak is the mostly likely source. Shortly thereafter, the FBI announced that it had come to the same findings "with moderate confidence" (Rabinowitz 2023).

While the NIC's review appeared to be politically neutral, it criticized China for hindering investigations into origins of the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, Beijing lashed out against the report, dismissing it as "political and false" (Agence France-Presse 2021). To counter, it referenced the 2021 WHO-China joint study to argue a lab leak was extremely unlikely. However, according to George Gao, the former director of China CDC, the government did conduct some kind of formal investigation into the WIV. This suggests that Beijing might have taken the theory more seriously than their official statements indicated (Sudworth and Maybin 2023). In the meantime, Beijing asked Washington to "immediately halt its anti-science, nonsensical farce." A *People's Daily* editorial from March 2023 stated:

The continuous politicization, instrumentalization, and weaponization of the origins issue by the U.S. only hinder global scientific cooperation in tracing the source. It divides global efforts to unite against the pandemic and undermines global health governance mechanisms. We urge the U.S. to respect science and facts, stop the political manipulation of framing and smearing other countries, address promptly the legitimate concerns of the international community, and provide a responsible explanation to the people of the world. (Zhong 2023)

By urging the U.S. to “provide a responsible explanation,” Beijing was implicitly requesting Washington to disclose details about Fort Detrick and the biological labs it operates globally (BBC Chinese News 2023). Such demands only fueled conspiracy theories within China. A video that misleadingly portrayed a financial analyst’s speech as a testimony to the European Parliament gained significant traction. In it, he misinterpreted early coronavirus research and unrelated patents to falsely claim that U.S. scientists created the viruses responsible for SARS and COVID-19 as part of a scheme to boost vaccine profits (Jaramillo 2023). Additional fodder for such conspiracy theories came from Russia’s claims about Ukraine developing biological weapons with U.S. aid and a Taiwanese newspaper report suggesting U.S. demands for Taiwan’s involvement in bio-weapon development (Chappell and Yousef 2022; Hioe 2023).

While the lab leak hypothesis has achieved these markers of prominence, ongoing scientific research continues to support natural zoonosis theory. The latter was bolstered by a new study of genetic samples from China, which seems to link the virus that caused COVID-19 to raccoon dogs (Mallapaty 2023). The findings were considered the “strongest evidence yet that an animal started the pandemic” (Wu 2023). Nonetheless, such discoveries have not undermined the foothold the lab leak theory has established in the U.S.-China relationship. In May 2023, the office of U.S. Senator Marco Rubio released a 328-page report, compiling what it termed “a mountain of circumstantial evidence” suggesting the pandemic came from a lab leak in Wuhan (The Office of U.S. Senator Marco Rubio 2023).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

Unraveling the origins of a major disease outbreak is anything but easy. It took researchers 13 years after the 2002–2003 SARS epidemic to definitively conclude that bats were the original hosts of the virus, which was then transmitted to humans through an intermediate host, possibly the civet (Cyranoski 2017). Even though the probe into the origins of SARS was primarily conducted by Chinese scientists, it did not face the same level of politicization as the investigation into COVID-19 would later encounter. China did not question the narrative that SARS originated in Guangdong province, and despite months of cover-up and inaction by China, the U.S. government did not exploit the situation for political advantage. This unfolded in an era when the U.S. sought to engage

China, and China aspired to integrate into the outside world. Both countries were able to compartmentalize the impact of strategic competition in favor of expanded cooperation in public health. Indeed, the SARS crisis motivated both countries to collaborate on addressing a broad spectrum of global health issues, from HIV/AIDS to international public health emergencies. This led to the period between 2002 and 2016 being regarded as “the golden age of cooperation” in public health (Huang 2021d).

The dynamics changed drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the U.S. increasingly perceived China as its biggest geopolitical threat, China considered the U.S. as the primary obstacle to its global ascendancy. This escalating strategic rivalry and deep-seated mutual distrust poisoned the environment for U.S.-China cooperation during the pandemic. In early 2020, Beijing did not respond to repeated offers from the U.S. to send experts to China to help with the outbreak (Geimann 2020). Driven by geopolitical competition, both sides felt compelled to politicize the origins probe. China viewed the probe as a challenge to the narrative touting its “institutional advantages” (*tizhi youshi*) and asserting its global leadership once it emerged as an early victor in the battle against the pandemic. This global ambition prompted Beijing to reconcile the tensions between the new pandemic narrative and China’s role as ground zero for a catastrophic outbreak. In the U.S., the belief that China was the origin of a devastating pandemic, that it had misled the world by withholding critical disease-related information, and that it had attempted to manipulate the narrative of the outbreak for strategic gains, reinforced concerns about China’s threat to global health security and the rules-based international order.

The investigation into the origins of the virus was further compounded by the domestic politics in both countries. In China, the campaign against COVID-19 involved amplified efforts to prioritize power and control over effective governance and even science (Wu 2023). A transparent, independent, and science-based international investigation is at odds with the authoritarian secrecy of the political system and challenges one of Beijing’s core interests: the perpetual rule of the Communist Party. As Beijing feels increasingly insecure, it has less incentive than ever to allow a timely, transparent, and science-based investigation of the WIV. On the U.S. side, blaming the Wuhan lab was part of a broader strategy to deflect blame. The lab leak theory did not receive official support until the Trump administration sought a scapegoat for its denial and mishandling of the

COVID-19 pandemic. It was initially unpopular among scientists and Democrats, partly because it was linked to Republican politicians. Paradoxically, the resurgence of the theory under the Biden administration has exacerbated the politicization of the origins investigation. Trapped in a political tug-of-war between the U.S. and China, a comprehensive and independent investigation became even less likely.

The disagreement over the origins of COVID-19 significantly undermined the mutual trust essential for a constructive bilateral relationship, as evidenced by the barrage of accusations exchanged by officials from both sides. While the Trump administration highlighted China as the origin of COVID-19, Beijing felt compelled to create a counter-narrative to the prevailing thesis that the virus originated in Wuhan. Chinese officials, diplomats, and state media insinuated, without concrete evidence, that the virus might have been introduced to China by the U.S. Although the U.S. might frame its criticism as a counter to Chinese disinformation (Bump 2020), China perceived U.S. accusations as baseless and driven by ulterior motives. Instead of fostering trust and confidence, each nation seemed intent on viewing the other as the transgressor. Consequently, conspiracy theories flourished in both countries. In China, anecdotal data suggests a large segment of the populace believes the virus was engineered in the U.S., possibly with military involvement.

The blame game between the U.S. and China over the pandemic's origins, exacerbated by the widespread disinformation and deliberate obfuscation, not only reflects the ongoing geopolitical rivalry between the two nations but also contributes to the downward spiral in the bilateral relations. While the U.S. advocated for a transparent, scientific investigation, China interpreted such demands as thinly veiled accusations, deepening the trust deficit. This mistrust impeded the WHO's investigative efforts and further intensified the U.S.-China rivalry. From the U.S. standpoint, China's lack of transparency and cooperation in the investigation reinforced the belief that China is not a reliable or responsible global player. Conversely, China viewed the U.S. focus on the lab leak theory and its economic and technological wars on China as evidence of U.S. determination to thwart China's ascent, resorting to rumors and slander.

Finally, the lab leak theory—regardless of its validity as a line of inquiry—stokes anti-American sentiments in China and fuels anti-Asian sentiments in the U.S. This only further erodes public support for cooperative endeavors between the two nations. Negative perceptions between the two countries are already pervasive. A significant majority of U.S.

adults (83 percent) harbor unfavorable views of China, with 77 percent believing that China disregards the interests of nations like the U.S. This sentiment is reciprocated in China: a 2021 survey of over 2,000 Chinese respondents revealed that 75 percent held negative opinions of the U.S. (Liu et al. 2023).

Foreign policies mirror this antagonistic public sentiment. Fueled by misinformation and disinformation campaigns and obfuscation tactics, the mutual accusations regarding COVID-19 have further undermined the public's desire for collaboration in both countries. In the U.S., Congress has essentially made China's cooperation in the pandemic origins probe a prerequisite for cooperation in other important areas of public health. Consequently, the partnership between U.S. research institutions and the WIV quickly became a lightning rod. In June 2023, the U.S. suspended federal funding to the Wuhan lab, citing the lab's failure to provide essential documents pertaining to alleged biosafety protocol violations (Reuters 2023). This move is probably the first instance where the U.S. government has actually halted funding to a research institution due to suspected breaches of grant biosafety protocols. However, this decision may inadvertently push China toward greater autonomy in compliance, thus diminishing Washington's influence in this realm (Wong 2023).

The U.S. move also casts a shadow over other U.S.-China research collaborations. Concerns about potential accusations of illicit activities might deter U.S.-China scientific partnerships, even in areas perceived as less contentious, such as public health infrastructure development. It is worth noting that U.S.-China collaboration is less common in the healthcare and biotechnology sectors compared to fields like telecom, nanoscience, and energy (Hao and Hua 2023).

## CONCLUSION

The quest to uncover the origins of COVID-19 is of critical importance. Victims of the disease and their families deserve an explanation on how the pandemic started, and establishing its genesis is pivotal for implementing targeted and effective measures against similar threats in the future. However, this quest has transcended the realm of pure scientific inquiry, becoming deeply enmeshed in the intricate web of U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry and internal politics in both nations. To the U.S., China's perceived lack of transparency surrounding the pandemic's beginnings has bolstered the credibility of the lab leak theory and reinforced a

narrative of mistrust and skepticism toward China's role in the pandemic. Conversely, China views the U.S. accusations and the emphasis on the lab leak theory as efforts to contain its rise and tarnish its international image. Amid this storm of allegations and conspiracy theories, the two countries are ensnared in a vortex of mutual suspicion, misinformation/disinformation, and diplomatic wrangling. This issue only stands to grow more volatile as the U.S. approaches the 2024 presidential election cycle. With presumptive Republican nominee Trump staking out tough-on-China campaign promises, Biden will come under intense pressure to adopt similar measures to avoid looking "soft" on China. These dynamics in the political environment are likely to make any public health cooperation on COVID-19's origins a non-starter in the near term.

While the politicization of the origins issue clouds the path to understanding the pandemic's genesis, the ensuing lack of mutual trust also erodes what was formerly the bedrock of U.S.-China cooperation, particularly in vital areas like public health. Bilateral collaboration, especially in critical sectors like healthcare, biotechnology, and scientific research, are at risk. This rift between the world's two major powers imperils the global response to pressing challenges, including pandemic preparedness and climate change.

In sum, the politicization of the quest to determine COVID-19's origins has exacted a heavy toll on U.S.-China relations. For the sake of global health security, it is imperative that both nations find a way to separate scientific inquiry from political animus, reigniting a collaborative spirit that the world so desperately needs.

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# COVID-19: Catalyzing U.S.-China Supply Chain Realignments

*Bo Zhengyuan*

## INTRODUCTION

From consumer electronics to footwear, and now automobiles, the intertwined supply chains between the US and China have been a crucial pillar of the bilateral relationship. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted this relationship, leading to changes with potentially long-lasting effects. This chapter examines the changes to the US-China supply chain relationship that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic to shed light on the well-being of the pair's political and economic ties. Reviewing a multitude of economic data and policy documents shows an inward-looking policy direction aimed at boosting supply chain security through relying less on the other. This policy goal, along with rising bilateral tensions, has been the main driving force behind both countries' increased efforts toward selective decoupling in several sectors. Even though elements of a selective supply chain decoupling between the US and China were predisposed before COVID-19, the pandemic

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provided the political context needed to kickstart such a supply chain movement.

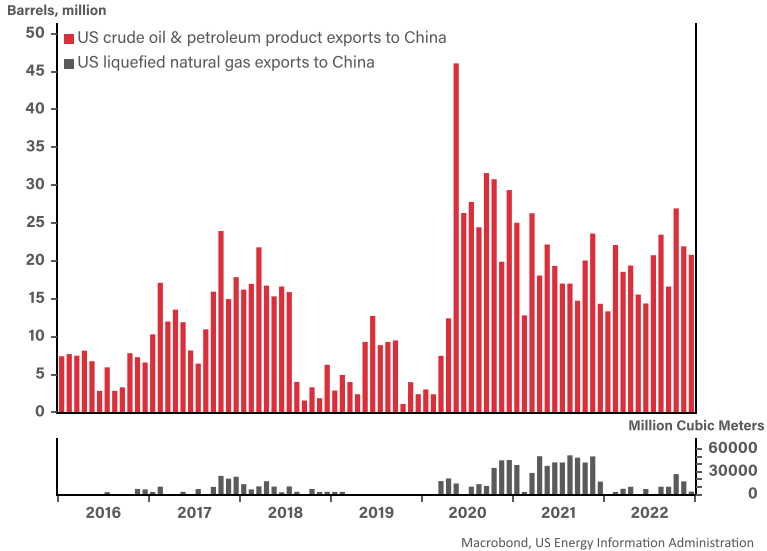
The trend of selective decoupling has now been felt across multiple sectors. American companies are rethinking their future investment plans for China, while Chinese counterparts are expanding production abroad to continue servicing US and Western clients. In particular, Apple's supply chain shift away from China provided a vivid example of how the pandemic has negatively impacted the bilateral supply chain and how global companies are forced into making adjustments to compartmentalize their supply chains for the two markets. Last but not least, the contentious trend of the US-China relationship will continue reinforcing both governments' policy tendency to rely less on the other. Equally, the weakened economic relationship may, in return, make the bilateral relationship more vulnerable to political headwinds.

US-China bilateral trade in goods in 2022 stood tall at a record-breaking USD 690 billion (US Bureau of Census 2023). Much of the pair's respective supply chains have remained interlinked and mutually dependent on each other. Trade in energy commodities, manufacturing, and agricultural products has grown resiliently even amid pandemic-related demand shocks. In particular, since 2020, China have booked significant increases in energy and agricultural imports from the US during the COVID-19 pandemic, partially thanks to the purchasing commitment under the US-China Phase-1 Trade Agreement (USTR 2020). To date, China remains the largest market for US agriculture exports, with approximately half of all its related exports consumed by the populous country (USDA 2023). Additionally, US natural gas exports to China doubled almost every year during COVID-19, while US crude oil exports to the country jumped from 71 million barrels in 2019 to 230 million barrels in 2022 (Fig. 4.1).

However, momentum grew during COVID-19 for heightened efforts toward selective decoupling in supply chains for critical sectors. This trend accelerated amid concerns over the long-term geopolitical relationship, China's policy orientation, and regional security. China's share of total US trade fluctuated significantly during the pandemic (Fig. 4.2).

Bilateral trade between the two countries dropped substantially during China's initial lockdown in 2020 before quickly rebounding as it stabilized industrial production. Despite the high bilateral trade value, China's share of total US trade began declining in 2022 due to supply chain disruptions under strict COVID-19 control measures. By the end of





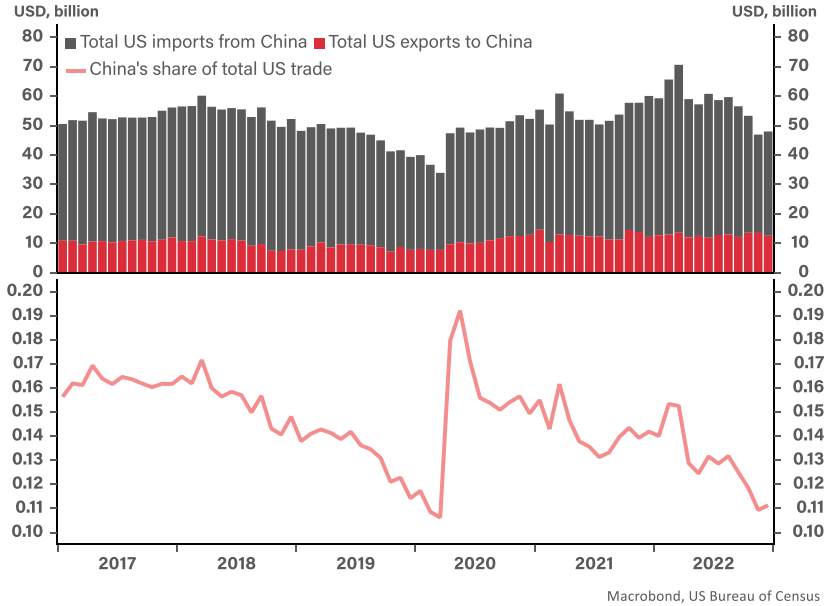
**Fig. 4.1** US-China energy supply chain bonded during COVID-19

2023, China, for first time since 2008, has dropped to the third largest source of US imports (Fig. 4.3).

Three factors drove bilateral supply chain adjustments during COVID-19. First, China's experience with pandemic-related social and economic disruptions convinced policymakers that improving supply chain self-sufficiency was a critical priority for national security. Second, China's COVID-19 control measures in 2022 caused severe production disruptions globally, leading investors to reevaluate China as a reliable center for global supply chains. Third, escalating bilateral tensions and geopolitical concerns led to a raft of restrictive policies in the US aimed at reducing reliance on China for critical sector supply chains.

### SUPPLY CHAIN SECURITY EQUALS NATIONAL SECURITY

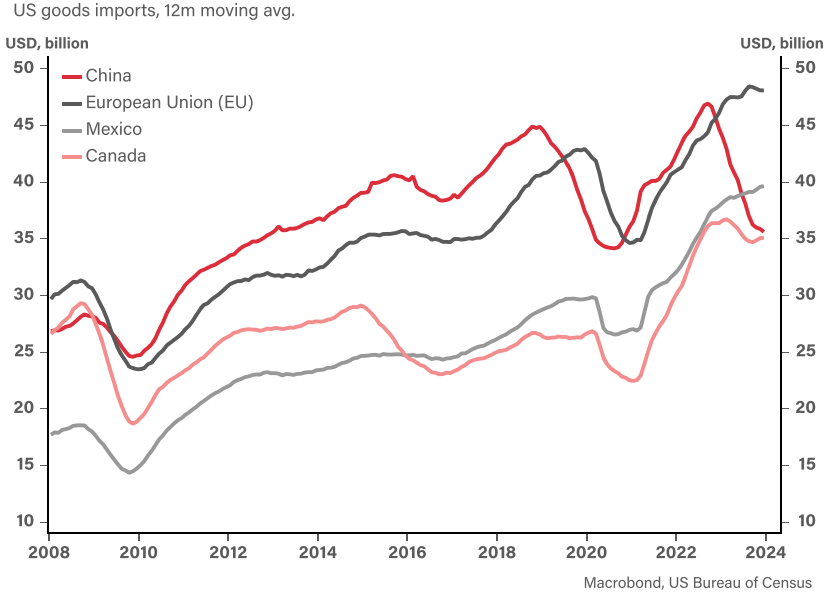
The initial COVID-19 outbreak elevated China's long-term thinking about supply chain self-reliance. Within two months of the nationwide shutdown in 2020, a medical supply shock emerged. China struggled to provide for its own people despite being the world's largest mask producer



**Fig. 4.2** Bilateral trade fluctuated during COVID-19 and now trends downward

and exporter. In early February, the country could only produce six million N95 masks a day, falling far short of skyrocketing demand. Similarly, demand for medical ventilators in Q1 2020 had already surpassed total demand for 2019.

Before COVID-19, China relied on foreign companies such as Maquet for over 60% of its ECMO (Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation) supply, a critical medical equipment for treating severe respiratory distress. At the peak of the 2020 outbreak in Wuhan, the city needed more than 5,000 ventilators every day against a daily national production capacity of just 600 devices. Imports of medical supplies and other commodities fell significantly, causing China's total foreign trade to slump 17% year-over-year in February 2020. Beijing has taken some very extreme measures to navigate through the emergency. Authorities ordered state-owned enterprises (SOE) to shift production lines to make medical supplies.



**Fig. 4.3** China fell to the third largest source of US imports

China's national oil company, Sinopec, quickly pulled together production lines for mask fabrics while state-owned construction companies built makeshift hospitals in a matter of days (Xinhua News Agency 2020).

While China contained the initial outbreak in Wuhan, the pandemic significantly impacted the country's outbound supply chain. The city was home to many leading automakers and over 500 parts manufacturers who could not ship cars for several months during the lockdown. As the virus spread rapidly in other parts of the world, China again felt the impact on its supply chain. Pandemic disruptions affected the supplies of raw materials, energy commodities, and agricultural products as Beijing watched on closely.

The social and economic disruptions of the 2020 outbreak provided compelling evidence to Chinese leaders about the vulnerability of the country's supply chain under extreme scenarios. Following the initial success of domestic COVID-19 controls, President Xi introduced the "dual circulation" concept that emphasized the need for cyclical adjustments to the domestic economy (Reuters 2020). Since then, supply chain

resilience has become a key feature of almost every major government policy. November 2020 saw China's chief economic policymaker, Liu He, draft a 5,000-word thesis on the meaning of "dual cycling." Liu wrote that the COVID-19 pandemic had accelerated the threat to globalization and presented significant challenges to the global supply chain. He added that China must improve domestic economic cycling further amid increased interconnectedness with international circulation (Government of the People's Republic of China 2020).

In March 2021, China released its Fourteenth Five-Year Plan (14th FYP). The top planning document made supply chain self-reliance a top priority for China's future development, which was, of course, also a reaction to supply chain disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fujian Provincial People's Government 2021). In 2021, Beijing kick-started a campaign to foster a special cohort of companies known as "little giants" to boost supply chain resilience. They received preferential policies and subsidies to strengthen market control or make up for deficiencies across various industry nodes. The "little giants" include China's cutting-edge developers of medical devices, pharmaceutical ingredients, microelectronics, and advanced manufacturing (South China Morning Post 2021).

China never planned to scale back ties with the global supply chain. The country wrested control of the 2020 COVID-19 wave earlier than the West, with very few cases seen for the remainder of the year while the virus was wreaking havoc across Western countries. China was one of the few countries to maintain functional social and industrial norms that year, with many global companies expanding their China operations in 2020 and 2021 as a result (Fig. 4.4).

Tesla serves as a prime example of this trend. The Shanghai Gigafactory began operations in the second half of 2019, delivering its first batch of 15 Model 3 electric cars on December 31 2019. At the start of 2020, the factory had annual production of around 150,000 cars. By the end of 2021, this number had increased fourfold to about 750,000 vehicles (Pandaily 2022). In 2021, Tesla delivered 320,000 cars to Chinese customers, meaning that over half of its Shanghai production went to other markets (Tesla 2022).

China's early success in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic led to a shift in Beijing's views toward the West. In his opening remarks at the China International Import Expo in early November 2021, President Xi proudly proclaimed China the main defender of global supply

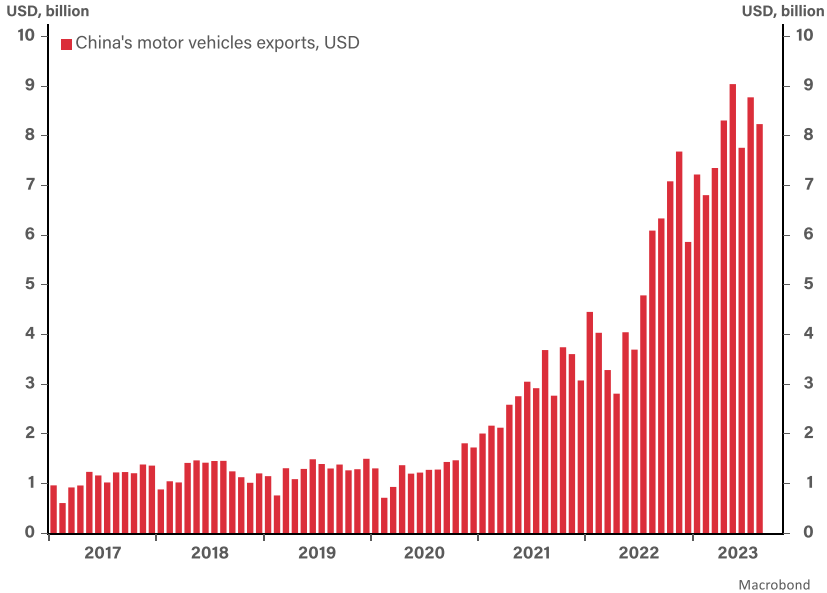


Fig. 4.4 China became the global hub for motor vehicle exports

chain stability (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021). This period also facilitated the political train of thought that “the East is rising, and the West is declining” (South China Morning Post 2021). The phrase reflected China’s belief that the US and its allies’ failure to quickly control COVID-19 and safeguard their industrial activities might present another strategic opportunity for China.

### US MEASURES TO PULL SENSITIVE SUPPLY CHAINS AWAY FROM CHINA

Of course, China’s rhetoric did not go down well in Washington. COVID-19 was a Keisaku slap for US policymaker, forcing them to consider the future of the US-China supply chain from a national security standing point. Furthermore, the 2020 election cycle in the US certainly made China a prime target for political point-scoring. COVID-19 also nullified the two countries’ phase-one trade agreement, the result of a three-year trade war. China never fully met its procurement obligations,

citing COVID-19's impact, while the much-anticipated phase-two negotiations sank to the bottom of the Pacific after Trump lost his re-election bid.

The Biden administration arrived with a clear-eyed vision of Beijing's ambition and the urgency to take back control of the US supply chain. Shortly after President Biden took office, he signed an Executive Order in February 2021 requiring several cabinet departments to conduct a review of domestic supply chain security. In June 2021, the White House released its 100-day supply chain report covering several major industrial sectors, including semiconductors, large-capacity batteries, critical minerals, and pharmaceutical ingredients (The White House 2021).

The review's findings highlighted the US overreliance on China for almost all these critical supply chains and hence served as a blueprint for a series of policy measures targeting supply chain dependence on China in these sectors. The White House has since drafted multiple flagship policy pieces to curtail US supply chain dependence on China in these areas.

In March 2022, the US Department of Commerce initiated an investigation into eight companies that manufacture solar panels and parts in Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, including major Chinese players such as BYD, Jinko, New East Solar, and Trina Solar, intending to determine whether Chinese firms were violating US trade laws by circumventing tariffs (US Department of Commerce 2022a). In June 2022, President Biden waived tariffs on solar panels (The White House 2022). This move meant that even if these companies are found to be shipping Chinese components to Southeast Asia, performing minimal processing there, and then shipping PV modules to the US to circumvent the tariffs.

The US Department of Commerce issued a determination on the investigation August 2023 that Chinese companies, including BYD, Trina Solar, and New East Solar were circumventing US tariffs via Southeast Asia. The US commerce department considers shipping cells and wafer to these Southeast Asia countries for assembly as circumventing US tariffs. After President Biden's tariff waiver expires in June 2024, the US will start collecting additional tariffs on exports of these companies to the US from Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, processing China-sourced polysilicon materials, then assembling wafer and cells into modules and exporting to the US does not constitute circumventing US tariffs. In other words, if companies expand their upstream manufacturing capacity in Southeast Asia, they will face lower tariffs when exporting to the US. This would incentivize

Chinese companies in the solar product supply chain to shift more of their production outside of China if they intend to sell in the US market (Fig. 4.5).

In June 2022, the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) began enforcing the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA). The law mandates the CBP to assume items shipped from Xinjiang to the US from certain entities are made with forced labor, with a particular focus on polysilicon, apparel, and agricultural products (US Department of Homeland Security 2022). Xinjiang produces over half of China's polysilicon, a crucial raw material for solar panels (Fig. 4.6).

The UFLPA impacted not only the solar industry but also cotton. Xinjiang produces over 90% of China's cotton, now banned from entering the US unless importers can navigate a cumbersome process to ensure their China supplier is not associated with forced labor. Despite the increased scrutiny on Chinese cotton and apparel, the US still imported 3.4% more clothing from China in 2022 by value compared to 2021.

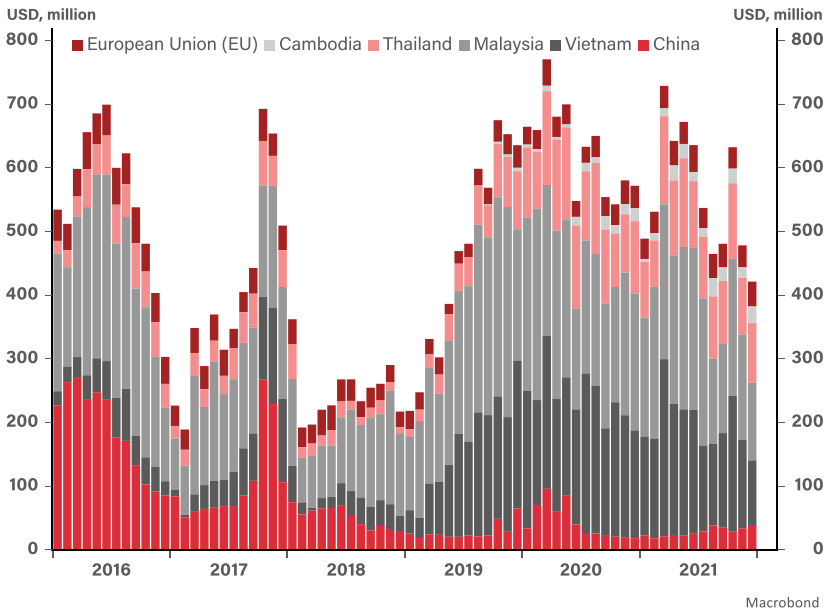
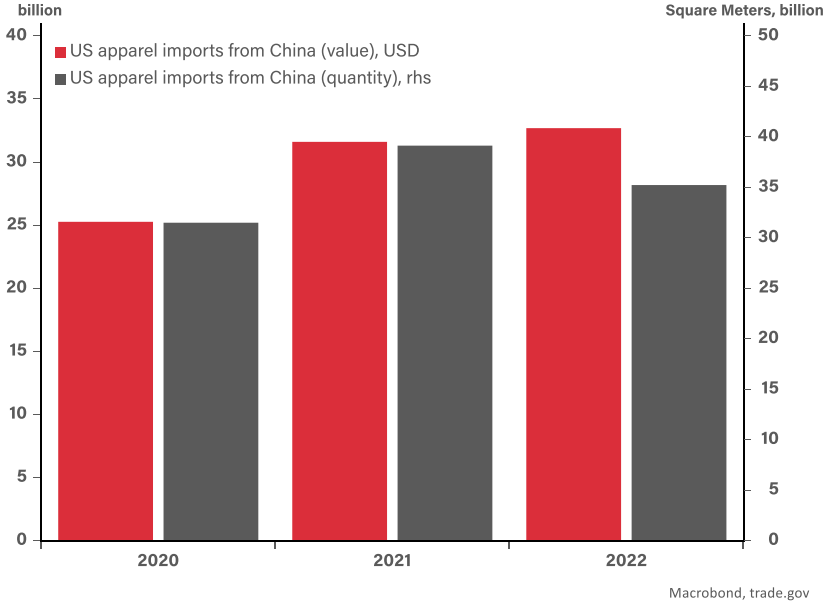


Fig. 4.5 US imports of certain solar products



**Fig. 4.6** The US is importing less apparel from China

However, this only tells half the story. When measured by volume, US imports of apparel and textiles from China fell 10% annually in 2022. Like their solar counterparts, Chinese apparel and footwear makers have shifted production south. Shenzhou International, the largest apparel and footwear contract manufacturer in China, as well as Nike's number one supplier, has moved half of its capacity to factories in Vietnam and Cambodia.

In August 2022, President Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) into law. This flagship renewable energy subsidies package includes USD 7,500 per car credit for electric vehicle (EV) makers. The legislation places restrictions on China sourcing in several ways. Firstly, a vehicle is only eligible for half of the total credit (USD 3,750) if its battery components are manufactured or assembled in North America. Secondly, eligibility for the other half depends on the vehicle containing critical minerals extracted or processed in the US or countries with which the US has a free trade agreement. Specifically, after 2023, 40% of an EV



battery's minerals and 50% of its components must come from the US or a free trade agreement country (Phillips et al. 2022).

Finally, starting in 2025, an EV cannot qualify for the clean vehicle credit if its battery contains critical minerals extracted, processed, or recycled by a foreign entity of concern, including China. These restrictions have led Chinese EV battery makers like CATL and BYD to announce plans for facilities outside China (Reuters 2023). The world's largest lithium battery producer, Fujian-based CATL, has even partnered with Ford to establish a new site in Michigan.

It is important to note that the US treatment of Chinese solar companies, or even the broader renewable energy sector, cannot simply be characterized as supply chain decoupling. Instead, various Chinese companies have decided to take a greater part of their supply chain to the US. For instance, since 2023, JA Solar announced a USD 60 million investment to set up a PV panel production line in Arizona; Longi has announced a USD 600 million joint venture with Invenergy for a new production line with a 5GW production capacity in Ohio. Additionally, Jinko Solar plans to expand production in Florida with a USD 52 million investment. With punitive measures on Chinese exports, the US government has found some success in transplanting the Chinese supply chain to its soil.

The semiconductor industry is perhaps the most heavily impacted by US restrictions. Since the Trump Administration, the US has sanctioned numerous Chinese companies, denying them access to advanced US technology and semiconductor products. The Biden Administration inherited the semiconductor export control regime from its predecessor and sharpened these tools further down the road. The Trump Administration suspended advanced semiconductor exports to Chinese companies like Huawei, ZTE, and SMIC. His administration also convinced Dutch company, ASML, to halt supplying Extreme Ultra Lithography machines, critical for semiconductor manufacturing, to China. While President Biden sanctioned fewer Chinese tech companies than his predecessor, the administration expanded the types of semiconductor technologies covered by US export controls (Table 4.1).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Biden Administration scaled up semiconductor technology export controls to China from technologies associated in the making of 10 nm chips to 14 nm chips, while adding advanced memory chips to the export ban list (US Department of Commerce 2022b). In early 2023, the US successfully convinced the

**Table 4.1** Chinese entities added to export control list (US Commerce Department 2023)

Year	# entities added
2018	44
2019	117
2020	220
2021	80
2022	68

Netherlands and Japan to impose tighter restrictions on semiconductor manufacturing equipment sales to China. Both countries have now issued their own regulations restricting the exports of advanced semiconductor manufacturing technologies to China.

Beyond semiconductors, the US has implemented new export controls on biotech, AI, and quantum computing, resulting in a sharp decline in US exports of advanced tech to China across various categories. To further add to these limitations, the Biden Administration has issued an outbound investment restriction on US investment flows into the advanced semiconductor, quantum computing, and dual-use AI technology in China in September 2023. Data since the pandemic and the intensifying sanctions show a hoarding effect among Chinese companies. Imports of integrated circuits increased significantly until the export ban took effect in October 2022 (Fig. 4.7).

In 2023, the Chinese government issued several rules to strengthen its own export control. In July, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce imposed export controls on gallium and germanium, raw materials used in semiconductors. Chinese companies must now obtain government licenses before exporting them to foreign entities. To be fair, COVID-19 did not create these export controls and incentives for both governments to hold critical supply chains domestically. US export controls and the political urgency in the US to re-onshore its supply chain predate the pandemic. However, COVID-19 provided an acrimonious political context that justified the movement politically.

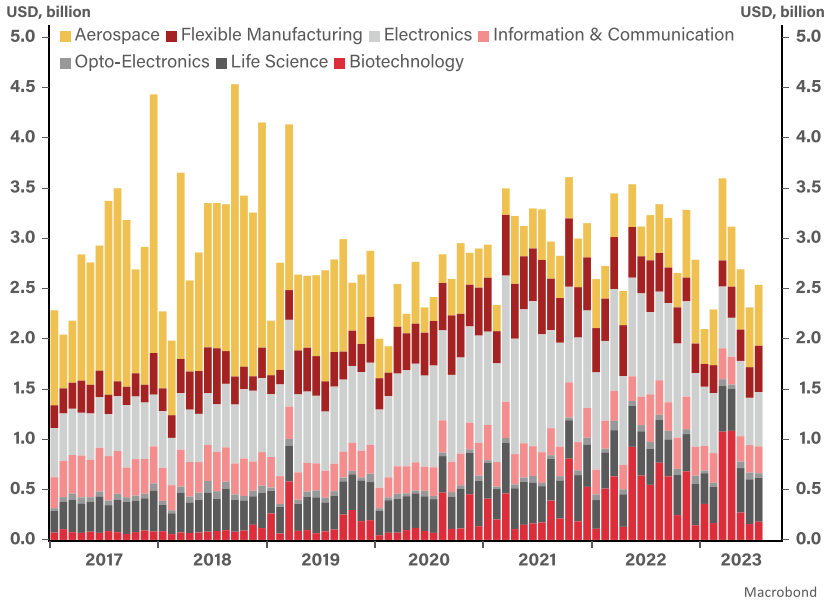


Fig. 4.7 US advanced technology product exports to China

## CHINA'S COVID-19 CONTROL MEASURES MADE EVERYTHING WORSE IN 2022

While the US's adoption of restrictive policies raised pessimism among global businesses with entrenched supply chains in China, Beijing's COVID-19 control measures in 2022 gave investors even more reasons to leave. Outbreaks became increasingly difficult to control in practice, resulting in a significant impact on industrial production. China's zero-COVID policy meant local authorities had to keep tightening controls, inflicting greater pain on daily socioeconomic activities whenever cases started to spiral.

After experiencing quick surges in domestic cases, multiple cities in China entered lockdowns from February 2022. The Yangtze River Delta, China's largest trade portal, had navigated 2020 and 2021 with little economic cost. However, major cities in the region, such as Shanghai, Suzhou, and Ningbo, entered intensive lockdowns in 2022. Zhengzhou, central China's manufacturing hub, had to endure repeated extensive

periods of lockdown. The Port of Shanghai, the world's largest shipping hub by volume of commodity shipments since 2010, saw export capacity reduced by 40% during two months of lockdown (Fig. 4.8).

At the same time, US-China tensions only continued to grow during COVID-19. After war broke out in Ukraine, the world became sensitive to the geopolitical scenario around the Taiwan Straits. For China, the US and the West grew more vocal in their support of Taiwan—perceived as dancing around China's political redlines. Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan resulted in the suspension of many dialogue mechanisms between the two countries. Beijing responded with launch unprecedented military exercises near the island. In the eyes of many global businesses, this left China more agitated and isolated. At that point, with much of the country forcibly under lockdown, China had reversed its status from an exporter of certainty to a sheer exporter of uncertainty. China's latest trade data also reflected a weakened supply chain relationship pre-and post-COVID-19. The US share of China's total exports fell 2.5 percentage points from

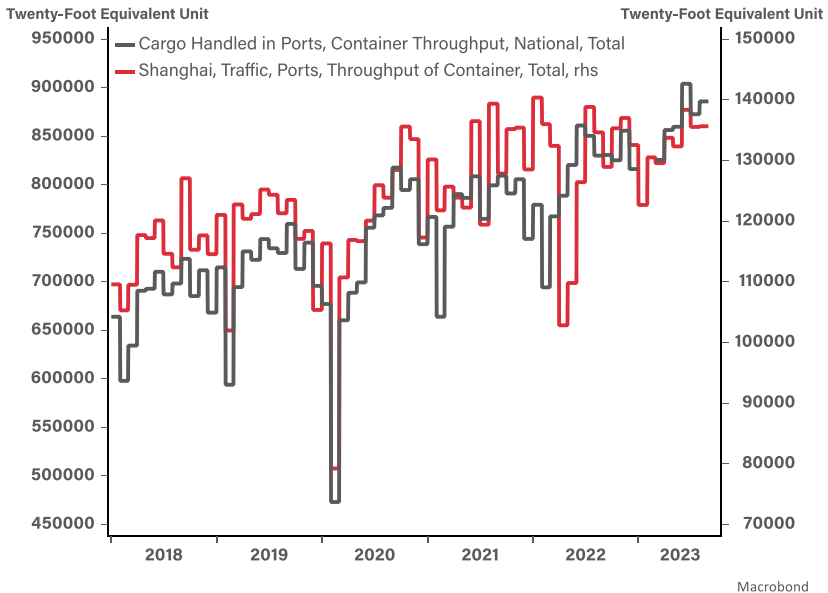


Fig. 4.8 Zero-Covid dragged China's port handling in Q2 2022

17.5% to 15% between 2020 and 2023. This figure was 19.3% back in 2018 (Fig. 4.9).

China reopened in a quick and disorderly fashion in late 2022, hoping to turn the page on COVID-19 and the socioeconomic mess it left. Chinese officials have been interacting with foreign business representatives with unprecedented frequency since the turn of the year. Yet the gesture of kindness is unlikely to reverse the diversification trend. Beijing will find it challenging to prevent the outflow of foreign business-enabled jobs, given that many large global companies have already downsized their China supply chain to mitigate the risk.

The two governments did commit greater efforts in of 2023 to resume engagement with each other. This included visits by multiple senior US officials to China, such as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen. Officials in the US and European countries have coined a new word, “de-risking,” to replace the phrase “selective decoupling” in an effort to ensure that the vast majority of

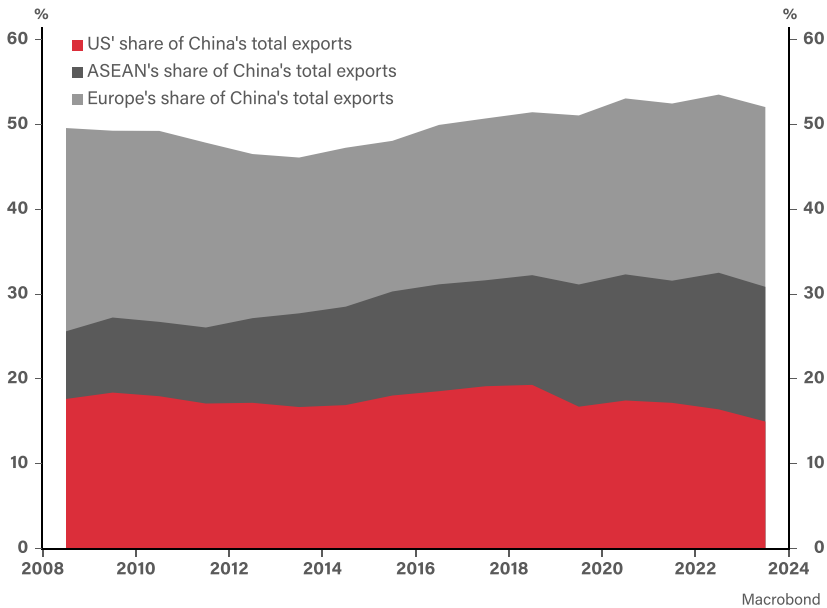


Fig. 4.9 The US share of China’s total exports fell during COVID-19

trade with China does not entail risk. Unfortunately, none of these arguments can reconcile with the fact that decoupling has already taken place to some extent.

Nearly half of respondents to a 2022 member survey from the US-China Business Council thought China's COVID-19 control measures, such as factory lockdowns and related requirements, had adversely affected US companies' operations to a significant extent. They indicated this would negatively impact future investment plans in China (US-China Business Council 2022, p. 3). Just under three-quarters of respondents believed that COVID-19 control measures had an interaction effect in further complicating the bilateral relationship and raising geopolitical concerns. The logic is simple: the derailment of official and civil engagement since COVID-19 made it much harder to engage in dialogue and reach a consensus.

A 2023 report from the American Chamber of Commerce China (AmCham China) noted that 24% of respondent companies have started or made plans to move their supply chain out of China (American Chamber of Commerce in China 2023). Members also cited worsening US-China relations as the most crucial driver behind supply chain movement.

### CASE STUDY: APPLE

Perhaps there is no company more representative than Apple when it comes to the movement of a bilateral supply chain. A case study on supply chain adjustments by Apple during the COVID-19 pandemic presents convincing evidence of how companies have aligned supply chain decisions under the expectation of a selective supply chain decoupling. The iPhone maker used to rely on China to manufacture almost all electronic products, but this status was weakened during the COVID-19 pandemic. In its fiscal 2021 (September 2020 to September 2021) annual supplier statistics, published in October 2022, mainland China's share has decreased within Apple's global supply chain.

To be fair, mainland China still plays host to the most Apple suppliers globally. In FY2021, Apple had 191 suppliers worldwide. Among them, 150 suppliers had facilities in mainland China while 39 of them were mainland Chinese companies. But there are clear signs of diversification. Apple suppliers have been establishing more facilities outside the mainland. In FY2021, 116 suppliers served Apple by producing in multiple

countries, up from 96 in FY2020. Meanwhile, a mere 58 suppliers had facilities only in mainland China, down from 80 in FY2020 (Fig. 4.10).

The US and Taiwan have experienced the largest increase in share of Apple suppliers. In FY2021, 51 Apple suppliers had facilities in the US, up from 25 in FY2020. Similarly, 45 Apple suppliers had facilities in Taiwan in FY2021, up from 26 in FY2020. Outside mainland China, Asia is hosting more Apple suppliers. The number of suppliers with facilities in the region increased to 116 in FY2021, up from 102 in FY2020 and 99 in FY2019. Countries receiving this boost include Vietnam and India. In FY2021, Vietnam hosted 26 Apple suppliers, while India had 11, compared to 14 and 7, respectively, in FY2019. Apple has great ambitions for these two countries. Some speculate that 25% of iPhones and 65% of MacBooks will be produced in India and Vietnam, respectively, by 2025 (TechCrunch 2022) (Fig. 4.11).

To cope with Apple's supply chain adjustment, mainland Chinese suppliers have begun expanding their overseas production to serve Apple

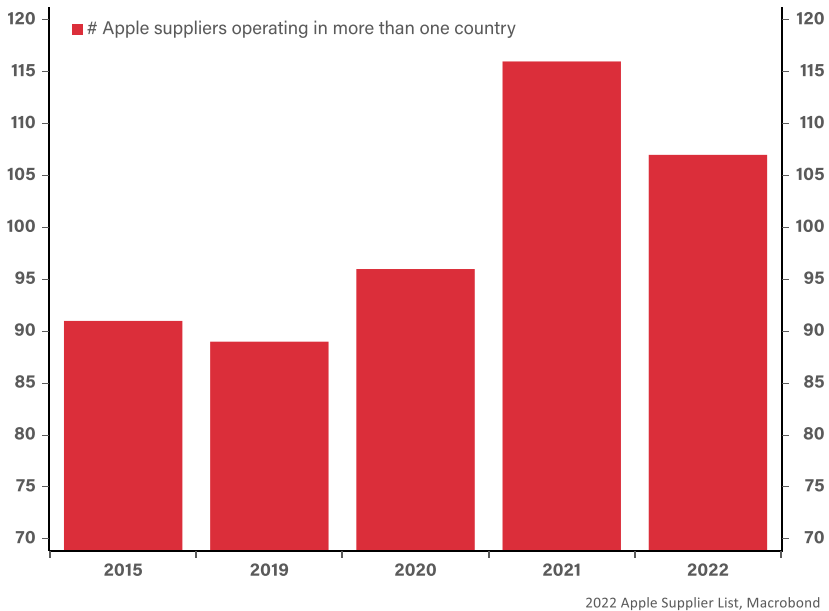


Fig. 4.10 More Apple suppliers are operating in multiple countries

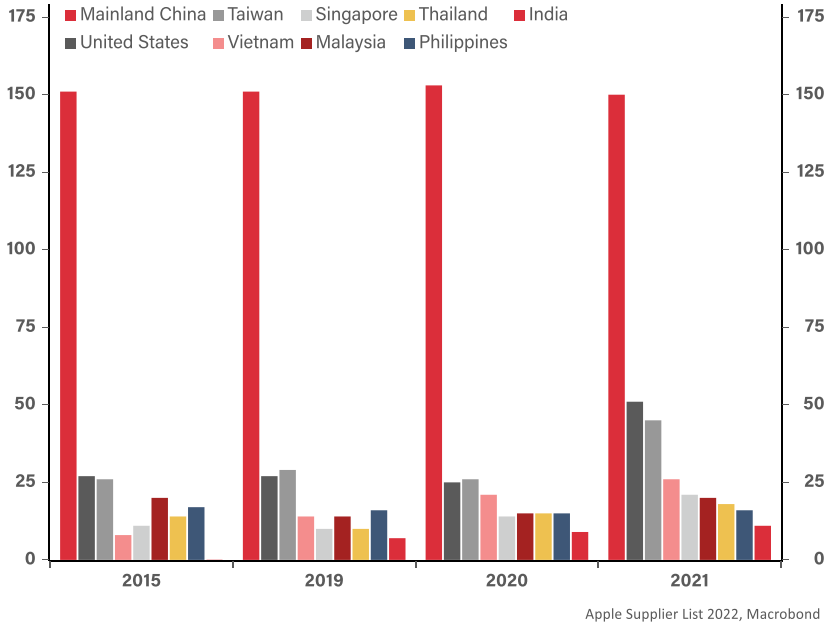


Fig. 4.11 Number of Apple suppliers by region

from outside China. In FY2019, only five mainland Chinese suppliers had production capacity overseas. This number has more than doubled as of FY2021, with a dozen mainland Chinese suppliers serving Apple from outside the country. Lingyi Tech, a precision parts supplier based in Guangdong, has served Apple from facilities in mainland China, Brazil, India, and Vietnam since 2020. Lens Technology, which provides camera lenses and parts to Apple, also started operating in Vietnam in 2020. Shenzhen's Everwin Precision Technology, added to Apple's supplier list in March 2021, reportedly started producing precision parts in Vietnam from November 2021. Another of Apple's battery suppliers, Desay Battery Technology, also began production at its Vietnamese facilities in 2022.

Mainland Chinese suppliers follow Apple because of their dependence on the company's business. Luxshare Precision, one of Apple's top precision part suppliers in mainland China, generated 74% of its



FY2021 revenue from the company. Similarly, in FY2021, Lens Technology collected 66% of its income from Apple, while GoerTek, which provides Apple with audio components, relied on the company for over 40% of its takings. This dependence makes it hard for mainland suppliers to deviate from Apple's movements.

US sanctions on China have affected some Apple suppliers, including Nanchang-based O-Film Tech, a supplier of touchscreen technologies. In July 2020, the Trump administration added O-Film to the Entity List due to suspected human rights violations, thereby restricting US technology exports to the company. In practice, the export restrictions imposed on O-Film did not impede its ability to sell to US customers. Nonetheless, Apple still terminated its business relationship with this supplier. Subsequently, Wingtech Technology acquired O-Film's production lines for Apple for RMB 2.4 billion, with Apple adding it as a supplier in FY2021. By the time the Biden administration lifted sanctions on O-Film in June 2022, the firm's revenue had plummeted by over half—from USD 7.4 billion in FY2020 to USD 3.6 billion in FY2021.

Yangtze Memory Technologies Corporation (YMTC) is another casualty of US sanctions. Apple had been in negotiations with YMTC to add the latter as a memory chip supplier from 2018 onward. In 2022, YMTC was reportedly close to a deal with Apple. However, YMTC's state backing ultimately led members of US Congress to openly oppose its inclusion in Apple's supply chain, citing national security concerns. In October 2022, the US Department of Commerce sanctioned YMTC. Concurrent with the sanctions, Apple reportedly abandoned including YMTC as a supplier.

## CONCLUSION

In retrospect, the COVID-19 crisis has fundamentally underscored distrust and rivalry as the zeitgeist of US-China relations. In the three short years between 2020 and 2023, the US escalated semiconductor export restrictions to China and imposed a regional ban on products affiliated with Xinjiang. In particular, the Biden administration has conditioned domestic industrial subsidies on companies limiting their supply chain reliance on China. On the other hand, in 2022, China's extensive COVID-19 control measures have disrupted the global supply chain, undermining its credentials as a resilient hub—a status the country had earned through similar control measures.

China's experience with COVID-19 and the deteriorating US-China relations have prompted the government to prioritize supply chain self-control and security to a whole new level. During the 2023 annual Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, President Xi openly named the "US-led Western containment, circumvention, and suppression of China's development" for the first time and outlined six phrases that characterize China's foreign policy doctrine. These phrases included "stay calm," "maintain composure," "seek progress while keeping stability," "be proactive," "unite as one," and "prepare to struggle" (沉着冷静、保持定力, 稳中求进、积极作为, 团结一致、敢于斗争). They are being interpreted in the supply chain context as evidence that China has decided to engage in a "struggle" with the US and "proactively" accelerate the development of a decoupling-resilient domestic supply chain and is seen as an acknowledgment that China will have to endure some selective decoupling with the US.

The trajectory of the political relationship has mobilized companies to adjust supply chain reliance on China. Today, companies in both countries are still searching for a new equilibrium for their economic relationship. It will take some time for the full effects of the supply chain movement to unfold and for observers to provide a more accurate depiction of the scale of this supply chain movement. A significant portion of the restrictive trade policies discussed in this chapter have only recently entered their implementation phase. More companies are expected to complete their supply chain buildup outside of China through 2025. Trade and investment data between 2023 and 2025 may paint a grimmer picture on the bilateral economic ties and possibly amid shakier ground for US-China relations.

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## Reconnecting Students and Academics in Post-pandemic U.S.-China Relations

*Margaret K. Lewis*

People-to-People (P2P) ties between the United States and People's Republic of China (PRC or China) were already rocky prior to the emergence of COVID-19. The spike in bilateral tensions, both because of and coinciding with the pandemic, combined with China's isolation under its "Zero COVID" policy to create a nearly impenetrable barrier between the countries.

Today, public health risks have largely abated, but political risks have not. People in the United States and China are seeking ways to reinvigorate ties while mitigating concerns about vulnerabilities when citizens from each country visit the other.

P2P ties encompass a broad range of activities from cultural exchanges to sporting events, such as the pivotal "ping-pong diplomacy" of the early 1970s (National Committee on United States-China Relations). This chapter addresses connections in the academic realm, focused on the physical movement of students and academics (i.e., professors and

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other people engaged in scholarly research) between the United States and China.

Academic P2P connections are distinct from what the U.S. State Department describes as “people-to-people diplomacy” (or simply “people’s diplomacy”): “[W]hen diplomats meet directly with the citizens of their host country, rather than just with official representatives” (National Museum of American Diplomacy). The Oxford International Encyclopedia of Peace provides a more expansive description of “people-to-people diplomacy” as when “people from all parts of society are encouraged to act as individuals or as group bridge builders across historical, cultural, and political divides” (Yamen 2010).

The point here is to assess where we stand at the start of 2024 regarding the movement between the United States and China of students and academics—not how diplomats are reaching beyond official channels to connect directly with the citizenry of foreign countries. Government support is important for academic ties, as demonstrated by the Fulbright Program that around the world “has given more than 400,000 students, scholars, teachers, artists, and scientists the opportunity to study, teach and conduct research, exchange ideas, and contribute to finding solutions to shared international concerns” (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs). The actors of concern here, however, are non-governmental members of academia who are reaching across the Pacific Ocean.

This chapter sets the backdrop of academic relations prior to the pandemic. It next addresses the period from the pandemic’s outbreak to China’s end of its “Zero COVID” policy in late 2022. Finally, it examines efforts to rekindle academic connections despite the risks involved and, as with other chapters in this volume, offers a few policy recommendations for both governments.

## PRE-PANDEMIC TIES

Debates rage today whether, and if so to what extent, a heavily intertwined PRC and United States should move toward “decoupling.” In the early days of the PRC, the United States and the PRC were quite simply uncoupled. While a handful of Americans lived in the PRC following its establishment in 1949 (Rittenberg and Bennett 2001), for decades the two countries were almost entirely disconnected with the bonds maintained by the diasporic community in the United States with heritage

ties to China being a rare force that prevented a complete cleavage. Students and professors from China who were in the United States at the founding of the PRC found themselves in a fraught situation. Eric Fish writes, “Regardless of their political sympathies, the day China became communist was the day that all of its students abroad did as well, in many American eyes” (Fish 2020).

Academic connections were halted through the 1960s. Then a law professor at the University of California Berkeley, Jerome A. Cohen recalled his writing in the 1960s of “letters to both Chairman Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai in the hope they might make an exception and invite me to Beijing” (Cohen 2017). President Nixon’s historic trip to China in 1972 marked a dramatic turn in U.S.-China relations and paved the way for academic access: “Three months [after Nixon’s February 1972 visit], thanks to the Chinese Academy of Sciences, several colleagues, including my wife Joan Lebold Cohen—a student of Chinese art—and I spent a month in China.”

Jerry Cohen was far from the only American who was eager to visit China. Funders like the Ford Foundation had already invested heavily in Chinese studies within the United States:

The Foundation’s involvement with China began in the early 1950s with efforts to develop Chinese studies in American universities. Our purpose was to increase understanding of China. We reasoned that a nation accounting for almost one-quarter of humankind could not be ignored by an institution that had as its goals the advancement of human welfare and the establishment of world peace. During the 1950s and 1960s, Foundation support for Chinese studies totaled more than \$30 million, mostly in the United States but also in Europe, India, and Japan. (Ford Foundation 1988)

The opening to visitors in the 1970s meant a shift from the remote study of China to an approach that included routinized visits. The Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People’s Republic of China was founded in the 1960s but only gained momentum after Nixon’s visit. In 1986, the Committee opened a Beijing office under the sponsorship of the Chinese Academy of Sciences to “facilitate[] programs to help coordinate placement of students and scholars in China” (Berkshire Press 2009).



The 1980s brought a deepening of academic ties with, for example, Johns Hopkins University and Nanjing University in 1986 welcoming an inaugural class of sixty students from China and abroad to the Hopkins-Nanjing Center (Hopkins-Nanjing Center). To this day, this unique immersive environment houses Chinese and foreign students together as the Chinese students take classes in English from foreign (largely American) professors and the foreign (again, largely American) students are taught in Chinese by Chinese professors.

The flow of Americans to China largely paused following June 4, 1989, but some programs like the Hopkins-Nanjing Center continued: “After the Tiananmen massacre, the United States imposed limited sanctions on China—such as suspending arms sales—but President Bush said he wanted to safeguard the educational and cultural exchanges that had been established. ‘The Hopkins program is just the kind of thing the president had in mind,’ a State Department official said” (Baltimore Sun 1989). In the United States, the Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992 created a path for over 54,000 PRC-national students to obtain permanent residency (Zhang 2021).

Academic ties grew rapidly in the 1990s with the establishment of new programs like Princeton-in-Beijing that began with 87 students in 1993 (Princeton University 2021) and a general shift of Chinese language learning from Taiwan to China, as seen in the 1997 move of the Inter-University Program for Chinese Language Studies from Taipei to Tsinghua University in Beijing (Inter-University Program). On the flip side, by 2001 there were more than 63,000 Chinese students in the United States (Fish 2020).

The number of Chinese students in the United States far exceeded the reverse. In 2009, however, President Obama announced the “100,000 Strong” initiative to increase the number of Americans studying in China (U.S. Department of State 2009). The Obama administration followed this in 2015 with the “1 Million Strong” initiative that aimed to bring the total number of students learning Mandarin Chinese in the United States to one million by 2020 (Allen-Ebrahimian 2015). Neither of these initiatives hit their targets, and both were abandoned. In the 2019–2020 academic year, only 2,481 U.S. students studied in China (USA Study Abroad). In contrast, the number of Chinese students studying in the United States grew from approximately 60,000 in 2000 to a high of 372,532 in the 2019–2020 academic year, though two decades of rapid growth was leveling off (Silver 2021).

While far short of the Obama administration's ambitious goals, the decade before the pandemic did see the creation of large-scale joint academic institutions in China that included both Chinese and foreign students, such as the degree-granting entities of NYU Shanghai in 2012 by New York University and East China Normal University (NYU Shanghai) and Duke Kunshan in 2013 by Duke University and Wuhan University (Duke Kunshan). In 2016, the Rhodes-Scholarship-inspired Schwarzman Scholars program housed at Tsinghua University welcomed an inaugural class of 111 scholars "composed of students from 32 countries and 75 universities with 44% from the United States, 21% from China, and 35% from the rest of the world" (Schwarzman Scholars 2016).

Yet the years leading up to the pandemic also brought increasing concerns about a tightening political atmosphere in China, as epitomized by the 2016 PRC Law on the Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organizations in Mainland China (ChinaFile 2017). The Law sharply limited activities of foreign NGOs and signaled a broader trend in the Chinese government's efforts to limit international engagement that it viewed as problematic (Kellogg 2020). I recall the last U.S.-China Legal Experts Dialogue in October 2015 (U.S. Department of State 2015), at which the then draft law was a focus of the American side's concerns. It was clear that the Chinese government was reining in not only NGOs but also domestic and foreign academics who engaged with civil society. This was a sharp departure from the prior comparatively open atmosphere for collaboration, for instance, among academics, lawyers, human rights advocates, and judges on sensitive issues like the death penalty (Lewis 2011). In 2016, the American Bar Association's Rule of Law Initiative, which worked on the death penalty and a host of other legal issues, closed its Beijing office (Weiss 2017).

A 2016 U.S. Government Accountability Office report addressed concerns about the space for academic freedom at China-sited entities, finding that members of these entities "generally indicated that they experienced academic freedom" but flagging internet censorship and other concerns: "Administrators, faculty, and students also cited examples of self-censorship, where certain sensitive political topics—such as Tiananmen Square or China's relationship with Taiwan—were avoided in class, and of constraints faced by Chinese students in particular" (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2016).

In 2017, the Asia Society hosted a conversation on these issues (Asia Society 2017a). Orville Schell, director of Asia Society’s Center on U.S.-China Relations, reflected on the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) intensifying ideological oversight: “I think if you look back and compare it to the 80s, even to the 90s after 1989 as China slowly began to open up again and to liberalize in many ways, you would have to say there has been a chill and the fact that it has extended even to universities and academic exchanges, which were once considered sort of free and clear is I think very regrettable and worth noting” (Asia Society 2017b).

Greater scrutiny of the space for American-sponsored academic entities in China was paired with intense attention to Chinese-sponsored ones in the United States. A 2023 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report detailed how the more than 100 Confucius Institutes—Chinese government-funded language and culture centers—on American campuses in the late 2000s and 2010s had dwindled to only seven Confucius Institutes (National Academies 2023). Broader political pressure combined with congressional action that barred institutions receiving Department of Defense (DOD) critical language flagship funding for Chinese from hosting a Confucius Institute: “While this provision allowed for a waiver process—and several affected colleges and universities applied for waivers in 2018 and 2019—DOD did not issue any waivers” (National Academies 2023).

The pandemic also coincided with the U.S. government’s increased focus on individual academics with ties to China. The 2019 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) publication titled, “China: The Risk to Academia,” recognized the value of foreign students and professors but warned that the United States’ open academic environment “also puts academia at risk for exploitation by foreign actors who do not follow our rules or share our values,” and that “the Chinese government uses some Chinese students—mostly post-graduate students and post-doctorate researchers studying science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)—and professors to operate as non-traditional collectors of intellectual property” (FBI 2019).

The U.S. Department of Justice’s “China Initiative,” in effect from 2018 to 2022, used criminal charges to protect a broad definition of national security, with a focus on preventing intellectual property from being siphoned off to entities linked to the PRC government (Lewis 2020a). That many of the people charged under the Initiative were of

Chinese descent—including the high-profile case of Massachusetts Institute of Technology Professor Gang Chen that the government abandoned when the investigation failed to show any crimes (Barry and Benner 2022)—created a chilling effect that did not end with the Initiative’s retirement (Xie et al. 2022).

The Beijing-directed erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong in the lead-up to the pandemic exacerbated concerns about academic connections with China. In July 2020, the Trump administration announced that the U.S. government would end the Fulbright exchange program with both mainland China and Hong Kong (White House 2020). And, while not ascribed to political reasons, in January 2020, the Peace Corps ended its China program (Schmitz 2020), with the remaining 139 Peace Corps China volunteers evacuated by early February due to the pandemic (Peace Corps 2020). This evacuation was but one facet of the scramble to assist Americans to leave China in the early days of COVID-19 (Jordan and Bosman 2020).

## PANDEMIC-ERA TIES

The pandemic’s onset brought the flow of people between the United States and China to a screeching halt. This left Chinese students in the United States questioning whether to stay. If they sought to return to China, they faced the formidable challenges of a dearth of flights combined with the time, cost, and stress of entry testing and quarantine procedures.

Students in China who had been accepted into American universities for the 2020–2021 academic year had to navigate whether they could, and should, physically enter the United States, as well as whether any portion of their academic program would be in person even if they made it to campus. In July 2020, the U.S. government announced that foreign students would not be allowed entry if they were only taking online courses (Svrluga 2020). After a period of uncertainty (Rauhala 2020), foreign students already in the United States were, however, allowed to stay even if taking more online courses than federal law permitted before the pandemic (Lederman 2022).

Not only did the vastly higher COVID-19 infection numbers in the United States present health risks compared to the relative safety of China’s quickly implemented “Zero Covid” policy, people of Chinese heritage in the United States also faced a sharp rise in discrimination and

even hate crimes. Data on hate crimes is difficult to gather and analyze. With that caution, one study found that “hate crime against Asian Americans temporarily surged after March 16, 2020, when the blaming labels including ‘Kung flu’ or ‘Chinese Virus’ were used publicly. However, the significant spike after March 16, 2020, in anti-Asian American hate crime was not sustained over the follow-up time period available for analysis” (Han et al. 2023).

In a 2022 report—issued a year following enactment of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act—the U.S. government recognized the lack of data and the challenge of underreporting both by law enforcement agencies and victims. Nonetheless, even with those limitations, it reported, “Hate crimes in the United States rose in 2020 to the highest level in 12 years, with a significant increase in numbers of anti-Asian and anti-Black hate crimes” (U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2022). According to an April 2023 report by Columbia University and the Committee of 100 based on a poll of 6,481 respondents over the age of 18 who self-identified as a person of Chinese ethnic origin who lived in the United States:

Nearly three out of four Chinese Americans experienced racial discrimination in the past 12 months, with two in three staying vigilant due to worries about safety related to hate crimes or harassment, nearly half reporting being treated with less respect than other people, and over a quarter experiencing bias or hate incidents such as being physically intimidated or assaulted, having their property vandalized or damaged, and being called names or [called] racial slurs. (Gao et al. 2023)

With all these dynamics in play, the number of Chinese students in the United States dropped to 317,299 in the 2020–2021 academic year (Silver 2021). Across the Pacific, the numbers plummeted: there were only 382 American university students in China for the 2020–2021 academic year (Xie 2022). American students were evacuated at the pandemic’s outset and programs pivoted to online learning (Hopkins-Nanjing 2020). Three evacuated American students wrote in September 2021 of their frustration when trying to return to China: “[F]or foreign students like us looking to return to China, critical X1/X2 student visas have all but disappeared. Despite [Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying’s] objections [to the U.S.’s denial of over 500 Chinese

applicants' student visas], this lack of reciprocity is the true barrier to people-to-people exchange” (McAndrews et al. 2021).

It was also nearly impossible for non-PRC-citizen academics to visit China, though a handful found channels. For example, Silvia Lindtner, an associate professor at the University of Michigan, was able to enter China as a visiting scholar at NYU Shanghai (Wang and Lindtner 2022). Scott Kennedy—a senior adviser and Trustee Chair in Chinese Business and Economics at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and former professor at Indiana University—teamed up with Wang Jisi—founding president of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies and Boya Chair Professor Emeritus at Peking University—to find mutual pathways for visits in China and the United States (Kennedy and Wang 2023). Most academics, however, were limited to remote connections, with some like the U.S.-China Dialogue series open for public viewing (US-China Dialogue).

In 2022 as life in the United States moved from a pandemic mindset to existence with COVID-19 as endemic, people in China remained under tight restrictions. An October 2022 press release by the U.S. Embassy in Beijing encouraged that the “United States Welcomes Chinese Students” as part of a four-city China Education Expo, noting that “since May of last year the United States has issued well over 155,000 visas to Chinese students and scholars” (U.S. Embassy 2022). Looking at flows from the United States to China, however, Ambassador Nicholas Burns told POLITICO in April 2023:

Students are part of the ballast of this relationship. As recently as 10 years ago, there were 14,000–15,000 American students in China on an annual basis. There are now only about 350 American students in China. And that’s because of Covid—student visas were not available to American students. A lot of the university exchange programs had to shut down for these last three years. We don’t have the people-to-people connections right now that we’ve had in the past. (Kine 2023)

## POST-PANDEMIC TIES

China’s “Zero COVID” policy came under increasing strain in late 2022 due to economic repercussions and broad societal discontent with the draconian enforcement measures (Wong 2022). In early December, the government announced a sudden and dramatic relaxation (Che et al.

2022). China resumed issuance of all types of visas in March 2023 (Cash and Yu 2023).

That China and the United States are now both issuing visas does not, however, mean a resurgence in academic connections. The health risks have abated, but other risks remain. For Chinese students and academics considering time in the United States, common reasons cited for hesitation include “gun violence, rising anti-Asian racism, rocky U.S.-China relations, a slowing Chinese economy, higher global rankings for Chinese universities, and friendlier immigration policies in many other countries” (Chen 2023).

For American students and academics considering time in China, programs have only begun to reopen and, even if opportunities to visit China unexpectedly rebound, there are questions about demand (ChinaFile 2021). Chinese language learning in American universities has declined since a 2013 peak (USC 2021). As a point of optimism, although a 2021 American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) survey on the status of Chinese studies in the United States found that “[i]nstitutional support for China research and education is perceived by all respondents to have declined in recent years; external funding, in particular, has been reduced[,]” the survey also uncovered that “[i]nterest in China studies remains strong. Despite recent political tension and a reported decline in the number of students learning the Chinese language on campuses, both undergraduate and graduate course offerings on China increased in number over the past five years” (ACLS 2021).

Underneath these general trends are complicated personal decisions about the risks and rewards of investing in studying the other country, including whether to spend time there. For some Americans the travel question has been decided for them because the PRC government’s refusal to issue a visa is clearly linked to the government’s disapproval of the applicant’s research (Wong 2011). In the reverse, for example, visa denials for some Chinese are because the U.S. government considers problematic their affiliation with academic institutions seen as supporting China’s “military-civil fusion strategy” (Anderson 2023).

For those who can obtain visas—and have the funds for airfares that remain above pre-pandemic levels—there are questions about bidirectional risk. Incidents known to this author of lengthy questioning of American academics upon arrival in China in the early period after borders opened (and at least one entry denial) raise concerns about what comfort a visa provides. Moreover, although neither was an academic or American,

wariness about arbitrary detention remains following the nearly three-year detention and criminal trials of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig—without even basic procedural protections for the accused—in what was widely viewed outside China as retaliation for Canada’s detaining of PRC-citizen Meng Wanzhou (Paas-Lang 2021).

In addition to the risk of wrongful detention, the U.S. State Department warned in a March 2023 travel advisory of China’s use of exit bans (U.S. State Department 2023). At the time of writing in early 2024, the U.S. State Department website continued to caution, “Reconsider travel to Mainland China due to the arbitrary enforcement of local laws, including in relation to exit bans, and the risk of wrongful detentions” (U.S. State Department 2024). In late 2022, “John Kamm, who chairs the San Francisco-based Dui Hua Foundation, estimate[d] as many as 30 U.S. citizens are unable to leave China due to exit bans, on top of up to 200 detained in the country on what Dui Hua calls arbitrary grounds” (Areddy and Spegele 2022). The probability that an American academic with a valid PRC visa will be denied entry, detained after entry, or denied exit after entry are very low, but the personal cost if any of these actions occur can be very high.

For U.S.-based academics who visit China, echoes of the China Initiative have also been present upon their return to the United States. Asian American Scholar Forum (AASF) issued a press release in February 2023 “raising concerns after hearing about multiple incidents of Chinese American scientists, academics, and scholars being harassed or interrogated at ports of entry” (AASF 2023). While numbers are not available, anecdotal reports circulating in academic circles underscore that these concerns also apply to PRC-citizen scientists, academics, and scholars. Once inside the United States, Wang Jisi expressed wariness regarding personal safety both of general violent crime in the United States and of incidents targeted at people of Chinese descent, though he thankfully reported not experiencing any threats during his stay (Kennedy and Wang 2023). Lack of data makes it impossible to estimate risks accurately and, even if risks are generally quantifiable, the many factors that impact individual risk make decisions to travel between the United States and China intensively personal.

What then shall be done? In their April 2023 joint report, Kennedy and Wang call for the United States and China “to commit as a foundational policy to restoring direct connections across the entire span



of the two societies” (Kennedy and Wang 2023). Their fifth and final recommendation directly addresses academia:

**Both governments should commit to the full resumption of in-person scholarly ties, including students, university professors and administrators, think tank experts, scholarly publication editors, and foundation leaders.** Many of these steps can be taken immediately or within a few months. At the same time, the two governments should create a Track 1.5 dialogue, involving both government officials and representatives of their respective scholarly communities, to discuss several elements of scholarly engagement. Potential issues include: (1) expanding opportunities for study abroad programs and language training; (2) fostering the integrity of transnational research, including the funding of research, collection of data, protection of intellectual property, and review process of scholarly publications; (3) strengthening norms related to field research and access to written materials, including archives; and (4) ensuring the safety and legal protections of members of the scholarly community when traveling between the two countries.

These would all be welcome steps. Indeed, Kennedy and Wang went on to organize a July 2023 meeting in Beijing with Chinese and American academics as the next stage in their project (Institute of International and Strategic Studies 2023). Reviving the Fulbright program with mainland China and Hong Kong would be a clear way to kickstart the first issue, even if the program returns in a limited and cautious form. Most pressing, however, is to address the fourth issue, upon which all the others depend: any of the ties that require in-person experiences in the other country hinge on addressing personal safety as well as the legal protections when a country takes actions against an individual deemed to be a threat to the country’s security. There is no way to fully immunize against the risks of in-person connectivity other than to stop it. There are, however, steps that can mitigate risk short of adopting a “Zero Travel” policy.

While in San Francisco for APEC in November 2023, Xi Jinping announced, “China is ready to invite 50,000 young Americans to China on exchange and study programs in the next five years to increase exchanges between the two peoples, especially between the youth” (Xinhua 2023). On the flip side, in December 2023, Ambassador Burns encouraged, “Chinese are the largest foreign student group at our universities. They’re welcome in this country... 292,000 students here now. We’ve just issued 94,000 student visas over the last five months for

a new batch of students to come, and so the door is relatively open but not completely” (Council on Foreign Relations 2023). Such statements at the highest levels supporting exchanges are a necessary but insufficient step.

To truly build confidence for academic exchanges, especially beyond “study abroad” programs, both the U.S. and PRC governments should vocally and repeatedly provide assurances that, if an academic has complied with all visa-application procedures (e.g., full disclosure of the conference, guest teaching, research, or other activities) and remains within those parameters, they will not be interfered with upon entry or during their stay. The entire governmental structures in both countries then need to back this up to give the assurances credibility. That the visa-issuing entities in each country are distinct from (and not always having fully aligned interests with) the entities tasked with law enforcement and national security creates uncertainty about how much comfort a visa provides for an issue-free visit. Writing at the beginning of 2024, the modest yet increasingly regular bidirectional flow of academics is providing some reassurance that routinized exchange is possible. The concern that geopolitical tensions could flair and have externalities on academics, however, remains a dark cloud.

Moreover, China should increase transparency of legal proceedings involving foreign nationals because the denial of basic consular oversight in violation of unambiguous agreements with other countries has severely undermined confidence that foreign nationals who are pulled into the security system will receive even minimal protections (Clarke 2021; Reed 2022). In the United States, although the criminal process is vastly more transparent, the U.S. government still has tremendous power to search and question people—especially when entering the country (ACLU)—and to restrict access to information, especially when national security is at issue. Working in collaboration with organizations like the ACLU and AASF that have expressed well-founded concerns about government overreach can help shape fairer and more effective procedures, as well as demonstrate to the world that the United States takes seriously the values in its Constitution and of fundamental international human rights.

In the United States, the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) is clarifying and streamlining research security requirements (OSTP 2023). This is a crucial piece in a broader push to delineate legitimate national security concerns, define conflicts of commitment,

and more generally provide students and academics with a clearer understanding of what kinds of connections with China could lead to administrative or criminal penalties. Parallel efforts by the Chinese government would be welcome as a way for China-based students and academics to likewise have more explicit guidance regarding what kind of ties with the United States will not trigger negative repercussions on their careers, or worse. It would be surprising indeed if the Chinese government provided such clarity, but signals short of direct statements are a step in the right direction.

In addition to spelling out the zone of permitted connections, academics need to not be overburdened with cumbersome and time-consuming compliance procedures that stifle even allowed activities. This is an acute issue in China. An Executive Dean at Renmin University, Wang Wen, advised in a May 2023 speech on attracting global talent that China should transition from a pre-approval system for intellectual exchanges to a post-reporting one because the former impedes academic exchanges (Liu et al. 2023).

Even with enhanced guidance on the permitted zone of activities, there will be times when academics—or their academic institution’s general counsel’s office—will have questions about what side of the line a contemplated activity falls. One possibility for addressing these gray-zone proposals is to create a process akin to the U.S. Security and Exchange Commission’s “no-action letters” (SEC) whereby researchers involved in areas that raise concerns about potential legal violations (e.g., regarding export control laws, which have serious criminal penalties) could get comfort from the government prior to engaging in travel or other activities with China-based partners. Specifically, the letter could document that, so long as the requesting person remains within their described project scope, the government would not recommend that enforcement actions be taken against the requester based on the facts and representations described in the submission. The current self-assessment of compliance creates risk for the individual and academic institution and, thus, could lean toward over-compliance that limits valuable interactions abroad.

Beyond enhancing clarity on allowed activities and compliance procedures, people getting on planes need guidance regarding how to conduct themselves when in the foreign country. Pre-departure briefings should include regularly updated information on best practices for protecting personal and proprietary information in line with the laws of the visited

country, as well as how to mitigate safety concerns. It should also be developed with experts on interventions to reduce prejudice and discrimination so that materials do not fuel negative views of people based on their national origin, heritage, or ethnicity. The more that the government not only listens to but also actively involves impacted communities—ranging from Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) advocacy groups to professional associations of academics in STEM fields—the greater the hope of formulating policies that effectively address security threats while creating an atmosphere that welcomes valuable collaboration across borders.

### THE COST OF LOST TIES

In spring 2023, the WHO determined that “COVID-19 is now an established and ongoing health issue which no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern” (World Health Organization 2023). U.S.-China P2P relations are likewise now an established and ongoing health issue: not to physical health, but rather to that of the bilateral relationship. The blow to the relationship’s health has already been costly. This is not to say that connections should have no bounds. Some costs are worthwhile to protect other interests. As noted above, research security requirements are needed to safeguard national security, but they should be delineated thoughtfully and with robust participation of various stakeholders.

Some costs of lost ties are fairly easily quantifiable, such as the direct hit to American universities measured by reduced tuition dollars due to a drop in the number of Chinese students. Yet much of what is lost is intangible and with costs likely to be felt far into the future as prior connections are prone to wither without ongoing maintenance and new ties are only being sparsely forged. This portends fewer insights into each other’s countries—insights that have long fed into policymaking channels. In a January 2024 piece, Rory Truex, a political science professor at Princeton University, reflected on his extensive time in China as compared with the situation today: “At a time of heightened competition with Beijing, our education system is not generating enough American citizens with Chinese language ability, meaningful lived experiences in China and deep area knowledge.” He wisely concluded, “In this moment of U.S.-China competition, we must do more than invest in weapons and semiconductors. We must invest in understanding” (Truex 2024).

Diminished ties can also deplete empathy, which as Professor Alex Wang points out, “This is particularly true these days, as the field of China analysis increasingly includes people with less direct experience with China, and as global views of China turn increasingly negative” (Wang 2023). He is quick to clarify his use of “empathy” not as suggesting “bias and the absence of empathy for objectivity” but rather as “openness to the idea that someone else’s reality might be configured in way that is different from your own but still legitimate. An empathetic orientation does not preclude critique” (Wang 2023).

Indeed, I have spent much of my career critiquing China’s human rights record (Lewis 2020b). My time in China, including extensive ties with academics there, has been critical for enriching my understanding of not only the human rights situation in China as a descriptive matter but also analytically why the party-state has made certain choices, and why those choices have elicited various responses from the citizenry. While heeding the advice of Professor Wang to be empathic to the reality of others, I have on many occasions ultimately reached the conclusion that the Chinese government’s human rights reality is *not* legitimate when viewed against the standards of fundamental international human rights, a view held by some Chinese academics as well (Biao 2022). First-hand insights from connections with people in China illuminate the internal logic for that reality and reduce the risk that foreign academics will impose underinformed views from afar.

Certainly, access to China does not mean unfettered access to people and information therein. The repressive chill under Xi Jinping’s leadership has enhanced longstanding barriers to Chinese academics being able to freely express their personal views without fear of blowback. Professor Odd Arne Westad wrote in June 2023 of the formidable challenges of understanding elite decision-making in Beijing and the broader atmosphere that “[p]eople in China are not yet experiencing the degree of fear and secrecy that they did under Mao, but they are getting there” (Westad 2023). Writing this chapter in early 2024, it is uncertain whether the degree of repression will plateau, become even more severe, or perhaps have times of relaxation even if not a general trend toward reopening. Though far from perfect, observations that come from being physically present in China are important for our understanding and, thankfully, my experience as well as that of other American academics who have visited China post-pandemic attest that spaces for frank discussions can still be carved out behind closed doors.

I greatly missed these spaces for intimate conversations during the pandemic. When I emailed a Chinese professor friend in May 2023 with news that my first post-pandemic trip to China had been canceled because of a postponed conference, she responded, “I am looking forward to having you with us in China.” I finally made it back to Beijing in January 2024 for an academic conference as part of the University of Pennsylvania’s Project on the Future of U.S.-China Relations. The trip was short, structured, and subdued. But at least it was one more small step toward reconnecting academics in post-pandemic U.S.-China relations. And I look forward to being in China again soon.

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## COVID-19, Anti-Asian Racism, and U.S.-China Relations

*D.G. Kim*

What role does race—expressed as racialized identities, resentment, and worldviews—play in shaping mutual perceptions and foreign policy views between the United States and China today? Did the dramatic growth and increased visibility of anti-Asian violence in American society during the pandemic serve to add a more explicit *racial* overtone to the deteriorating great power relationship? In this chapter, I utilize cross-national public opinion surveys and foreign policy discourse analyses to trace the link between COVID-19, anti-Asian racism, and policy views and discuss implications of this behavioral feedback loop for contemporary Sino-American relations.

Specifically, I first find with an American national survey fielded during the early stage of the pandemic a significant interconnection between the American public anxiety over the virus, negative sentiments toward Chinese and Asians, and support for a hardline China policy. This preliminary evidence indicates how heightened concern about COVID-19—which had already become deeply politicized through the U.S.-China

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blame game over its origin—shaped American mass support for punitive action against China and more importantly, how broader anti-Asian sentiment was strongly associated with their views on the virus and China. Next, I examine what effects this political salience of anti-Asian racism in America has exerted on China’s foreign policy discourses that increasingly subscribe to its own nativist and nationalist rhetoric. Whether understood as the manifestation of America’s dysfunctional democracy or racially motivated foreign policy toward China, anti-Asian racism has appeared perfectly congruent with the Chinese view that China and its people, since the ‘century of national humiliation’, continue to be victimized by dominant Western powers.<sup>1</sup> Turning to evidence from an original national survey in China, I then find how the Chinese public’s own racialized identity and animus translate to their support for the nation’s more assertive foreign policy measures. Taken together, the findings indicate the far-reaching transnational implications of domestic anti-Asian racism during the pandemic, highlighting how it contributes to the *interactive* emergence of hawkish foreign policy views and discourses between the United States and China.

Toward the end of the chapter, I derive broad implications of my findings for both American and Chinese policymakers who aspire for a peaceful management of the great power rivalry. I first suggest that American and Chinese leaders should refrain from employing foreign policy narratives that appeal to the sense of identity difference and exceptionalism in their assessment and public discussion of U.S.-China relations. I argue that such identity narratives bring the risk of encouraging domestic racism and anti-minority violence, emboldening the other country’s own exclusionary identity and worldview, and finally, fueling U.S.-China security dilemmas through strategic misperceptions. In the next section, I discuss the link between COVID-19, anti-Asian racism, and U.S.-China relations before moving on to introduce my research design and key results. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of my findings and policy recommendations.

### COVID-19 AND THE RACIAL POLITICS OF U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY

“You will never turn into a Westerner,” remarked China’s former foreign minister Wang Yi during his meeting with South Korean and Japanese officials in July 2023, immediately capturing the attention of China

watchers around the world. Calling for greater cooperation between China and its neighbors, united by a sense of “strategic autonomy” from the West, Wang Yi addressed his fellow Asian guests, stating “One needs to know where one’s roots are...China, Japan, Korea—if we can join hands and cooperate, it would not only serve the interests of our three countries but also fulfill the wishes of our peoples, and together we can prosper, revitalize East Asia and enrich the world” (Xu 2023).

Since the pandemic, appealing to such racialized sentiments<sup>2</sup> has become increasingly popular among both American and Chinese leaders. In the United States, President Trump ignited the controversy over his reference to COVID-19 as “Chinese virus” while the mass media and other political elites insisted on using the racially charged label to highlight the association between the virus and China. Research shows that such racially inflammatory elite messages have strong “emboldening effects” on the public’s prejudiced attitudes and behavior against marginalized groups in society (Newman et al. 2019; Siegel et al. 2019). Reports on surging anti-Asian hate incidents during the pandemic (e.g., Jeung et al. 2021) suggest that American elites’ strategic racial rhetoric might have stoked mass xenophobic and discriminatory behavior toward Chinese and broader Asian communities in the United States (Reny and Barreto 2022; see also Adida et al. 2020). Using observational data, another recent study finds that negative sentiment toward Asians in American society has indeed noticeably increased after the onset of the pandemic (Nam et al. 2022). In the midst of the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Chinese political rhetoric has, in other words, brought the century-long “yellow peril” anti-Asian racial trope back to the forefront of American politics.<sup>3</sup>

As Michael Omi and Howard Winant illustrate in the context of American race relations, race can also turn out to be the ideological weapon of the weak—who often react to perceived discrimination with a heightened sense of collective victimization, racialized identity, and resentment (Omi and Winant 2014, p. 108). From the Chinese perspective, humiliation has long defined the way foreign powers and “Westerners” treated China in the history of modern international relations, dating all the way back to the British incursion of Qing China and the First Opium War in 1839. As a central element of popular nationalism in China today, this “victim mentality” has endured a decades-long process of internalization and shaped the way Chinese view the world and interpret the actions of foreign powers (Gries 2004; Wang 2008; Callahan 2012). As a



result, anti-Asian violence during the pandemic and the revitalized discussion of America's yellow peril syndrome (see, e.g., Li and Nicholson 2021) would have further consolidated the view that China and its people continue to be victimized by dominant Western powers in international politics. Faced with an American President invoking the "Chinese virus" label and the vivid images of helpless victims of anti-Asian hate crimes in America, both the Chinese elites and masses—from China's young "wolf warrior diplomats" and the government-run media to millions of Chinese netizens<sup>4</sup>—have paid increased attention to anti-Asian racism, its intimate connection with America's views and historical relations with Asian powers, and perhaps more importantly, their perceived status as part of a subordinate and stigmatized racial group. *The Economist*, at the height of the pandemic, thus aptly observed that Chinese public discourse since the pandemic has been dominated by "resentment of a West" that attempts to "demonize" and "scapegoat" China during the health crisis (The Economist 2020). Another commentator also laments that "American and Chinese political hawks view the pandemic as the perfect opportunity for actualizing some long-standing ideological fixations," with the Chinese side preoccupied with what they perceive as America's "ethnocentric assault on all Chinese, regardless of nationality" (Wong 2020).

To summarize, anti-Asian racial violence in the United States during the pandemic has not only revealed the persistence of anti-Asian animus and its role in shaping American views toward China, but also convinced the Chinese that the world is still dominated by the same "white" countries responsible for China's national humiliation. Since the pandemic, this feedback loop between mutual racial resentment, identity, and hawkish nationalism between the two great powers, facilitated by both opportunistic elites and bottom-up pressures in each society, has become an important element of U.S.-China rivalry today. The future course of the great power relationship—whether the two continue viewing each other as a racial *Other* and eventually an existential threat to be eliminated—thus at least partly depends on our efforts to correctly understand how this vicious behavioral circle works and prevent it from exacerbating U.S.-China security dilemmas.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter I draw on multi-method examination of public opinion and political discourses in the United States and China to examine the abovementioned relationships between COVID-19, racial attitudes, and mutual perceptions and foreign policy views between the two countries. For the analysis of American and Chinese public opinion, I turn to evidence from original national surveys in both countries during the pandemic. For the analysis of societal-level foreign policy views and discourses, I introduce empirical patterns from the state media coverage in China and toward the end of this chapter, American election campaign messages on China. Taken together, these findings provide preliminary evidence for my argument that (1) first, during the pandemic, Americans' negative views of people of Chinese and Asian origin were closely associated with their response to the virus and support for hardline policy action against China and (2) that the Chinese elites and public have responded to anti-Asian racism with their own nativist and racialized view of the United States and international politics in general. After examining this intricate yet increasingly salient feedback loop between American and Chinese perspectives on race, policy, and the great power rivalry, in the next section I derive practical suggestions for policymakers tasked with formulating measures to prevent misperceptions and unintended conflicts between the two countries.

In partnership with Lucid Theorem, my main U.S. survey was administered during the early phase of the pandemic in February 2020 on a national sample of 923 American adults balanced on age, gender, race, region, and partisanship. To replicate my findings, the second survey was fielded in May 2020, again through Lucid, on 1,852 American adults with roughly the same demographic characteristics. I then subset both survey data to responses by self-identified white Americans for my main analyses below.<sup>5</sup> For both surveys, I added a scale measuring the perceived adverse effect of COVID-19 on the respondents: "How worried are you about the Novel Coronavirus?" (1 = Not worried at all—5 = Extremely worried) for the February survey and "Have you experienced financial hardship due to the current Coronavirus pandemic?" (1 = None at all—5 = A great deal) for the May survey. I then assessed the participants' foreign policy preference toward China by constructing a four-item China policy questionnaire adapted from Myrick (2021). The scale asked about the extent to which the American public find it acceptable to

employ economic sanction, covert military action, and use of military force against China. Finally, to capture racial attitudes, I included a new validated measure of anti-Asian sentiment (the Asian American resentment scale) and alternative measures of racial group favorability and racial stereotypes.<sup>6</sup>

For the China survey, I worked with a local survey firm in March 2022 to recruit a total of 2,007 Chinese adults across the country who were well balanced on age and gender and with diverse economic backgrounds and varying levels of political knowledge. To measure Chinese foreign policy views, I constructed a comparable scale of *hawkish US policy* based on levels of approval of more militaristic and assertive policy measures. To assess racial attitudes, I first included the standard racial feeling thermometer scale to construct a scale of *anti-white sentiment*. Participants expressed their favorability of four different racial groups—whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians—with a continuous scale ranging from 0 (“Unfavorable, cold feeling”) to 100 (“Favorable, warm feeling”). I then subtracted target out-group (i.e., whites) from in-group (i.e., Asians) ratings to calculate scores for anti-white sentiment—how unfavorably Chinese view whites vis-à-vis the baseline in-group category. I additionally build on the widely utilized white identity scale (Jardina 2019) to construct a measure of *Asian identity*, replacing the term “white” with “Asian” in its original scale items. The scale captures three central elements of racial identity—how strongly individuals identify with a racial group, feel positively toward the group, and maintain a sense of belonging and commonality. I then calculated composite scores by averaging responses to these three question items such that a higher score indicates a stronger attachment to Asian identity.

## KEY FINDINGS

First, observational evidence from American national surveys suggests that the public’s anxiety over the pandemic was significantly associated with heightened mass support for more confrontational foreign policy measures against China and that this relationship was partially mediated by negative views toward people of Chinese and Asian origin. In Table 6.1, I present results from a series of regression models that probe this interconnection between American anxiety over the virus, racial attitudes, and China policy preference. As shown in Model (1), a unit increase in reported anxiety about COVID-19 significantly predicted

approximately four percentage point increase in American public support for punitive China measures. Models (2)-(5) further demonstrate that the more one was worried about the virus, the less likely the respondent was to view Asian and Chinese Americans favorably, as captured by the measures of anti-Asian racial resentment and feelings and negative stereotypes toward Asians and Chinese in American society.

The rest of the models, next, show that it was specifically attitudes and feelings toward Asian and Chinese people and no other minority

**Table 6.1** Associations between COVID-19 anxiety, anti-Asian/Chinese sentiment, and support for hawkish China policy among the American public (February 2020 survey)

	<i>Hawkish China Policy</i>	<i>AAR</i>	<i>Favor: AA</i>	<i>Stereo: AA</i>	<i>Stereo: CA</i>	<i>Hawkish China Policy</i>			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
<b>COVID</b>	<b>0.04***</b> (0.01)	<b>0.06***</b> (0.01)	<b>-0.01*</b> (0.004)	<b>0.01***</b> (0.004)	<b>0.01***</b> (0.004)				
<b>AAR</b>						<b>0.08***</b> (0.01)			
<b>SR</b>						<b>0.03**</b> (0.01)			
<b>Stereo: AA</b>							<b>0.05***</b> (0.01)		
<b>Stereo: CA</b>								<b>0.07***</b> (0.01)	
<b>Stereo: BA</b>							<b>0.02</b> (0.02)	<b>0.01</b> (0.01)	
<b>Stereo: HA</b>							<b>-0.02</b> (0.02)	<b>-0.03</b> (0.02)	
<b>Favor: AA</b>									<b>-0.03</b> (0.01)
<b>Favor: BA</b>									<b>-0.02</b> (0.02)
<b>Favor: HA</b>									<b>-0.005</b> (0.02)
<b>Republican</b>	<b>0.12***</b> (0.02)	<b>0.11***</b> (0.02)	<b>-0.04***</b> (0.01)	<b>0.01</b> (0.01)	<b>0.02</b> (0.01)	<b>0.09***</b> (0.02)	<b>0.13***</b> (0.02)	<b>0.13***</b> (0.02)	<b>0.12***</b> (0.02)
<b>Ideology</b>	<b>0.03**</b> (0.01)	<b>0.01</b> (0.01)	<b>-0.002</b> (0.005)	<b>0.01*</b> (0.004)	<b>0.01**</b> (0.004)	<b>0.01</b> (0.01)	<b>0.02*</b> (0.01)	<b>0.02*</b> (0.01)	<b>0.02*</b> (0.01)
<i>N</i>	638	638	638	638	638	674	674	674	674
<i>Adj. R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.19	0.15	0.05	0.06	0.08	0.27	0.19	0.21	0.19

*Note* The table shows coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) from ordinary least squares regression models. All independent variables are standardized, and dependent variables are recoded to range from 0 to 1. All models control for party identification (baseline = Democrat), ideology (1 = “Very liberal”—7 = “Very conservative”), income, age, gender, and education. For party identification, results for the “Independent” dummy are all statistically insignificant and now shown here. Significant results are highlighted in light gray. COVID = “How worried are you about the Novel Coronavirus?”; AAR = Asian American Resentment; SR = Symbolic Racism; Stereo = Stereotype; AA = Asian American; BA = Black/African American; HA = Hispanic/Latino American; Favor = Favorability; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

groups that significantly predicted the China policy preferences of the white American respondents. For example, controlling for the widely used measure of anti-black racial resentment or symbolic racism (Kinder and Sanders 1996) in Model (6) does not reduce the effect of anti-Asian sentiment and for Models (7)-(8), negative stereotypes against Asian and Chinese Americans but not toward other minorities were strongly associated with China policy opinion. While not shown in a separate table, I replicate these findings with the follow-up survey fielded in May 2020 that employed an alternative measure of perceived negative impact from the pandemic. The more one felt financially disturbed by the pandemic, as in the previous survey, the more likely the respondent was to view Asians in negative light and support assertiveness vis-à-vis China. Although we are here based on correlational data, a causal mediation analysis also reveals that for both surveys, higher levels of anti-Asian sentiment significantly mediated the effect of COVID-19 on American public support for hawkish China policies.

Racialized views toward Asians during the pandemic, in other words, played an important role in shaping how Americans responded to the pandemic with its contested origin from China and subsequently approved firmer—including military—action against the foreign rival. Next, the growing visibility and politicization of anti-Asian racism in America during the pandemic, as manifested in the dramatic rise of anti-Asian violence across the country (Jeung and Lee 2021), have also brought important consequences on the bilateral relationship by shaping China's own foreign policy discourses and preferences. As reported in my previous study (Kim 2022), I find that there has been a dramatic growth in the volume of Chinese state media coverage of issues related to anti-Asian racism, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. A closer examination of the contents of these reports reveal two dominant themes and rhetoric running through these top-down narratives: On the one hand, the Chinese official media have attributed growing anti-Asian violence to racially motivated American foreign policy toward China. For example, a *Global Times* article quotes an op-ed written by an Asian American activist: "Today, as Washington cynically promotes Yellow Peril as a strategy to pass major legislation at home and retain America supremacy abroad, Asian American and Pacific Islanders face increased surveillance, harassment, and attacks" (Kim 2022, p. 118). The other prominent theme interprets anti-Asian violence as demonstrating the inherent limitations of American democracy and the hypocrisy

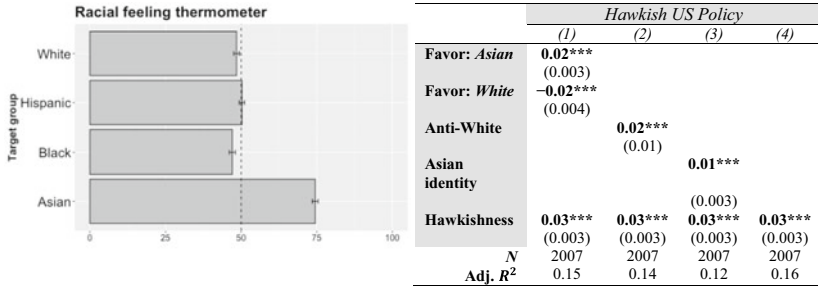
of U.S. foreign policy. A People's Daily article, for example, contends that "Without solving its own domestic problems, the U.S. is increasingly interfering in China's internal affairs in the name of human rights and democracy." Citing remarks by Chinese officials, the article then directs attention to the "poor racial record" in America, marked by "discrimination and brutality against African Americans and bullying of Asian Americans" (Kim 2022, p. 65).

Evidence on Chinese public opinion from my original survey in March 2022 further suggests that Chinese views on race also matters for shaping the country's foreign policy preferences. The left panel in Table 6.2 displays the distribution of Chinese feelings toward various racial groups. Most importantly, I find that the Chinese respondents feel overwhelmingly more favorably toward Asians ( $M = 74.5$ ,  $SD = 0.22$ ) than toward whites ( $M = 48.5$ ,  $SD = 0.22$ ), Blacks ( $M = 47.1$ ,  $SD = 0.23$ ), and Hispanics ( $M = 50.0$ ,  $SD = 0.20$ ). This result suggests the presence of strong racial in-group favoritism among the Chinese public—they express starkly divergent views toward different racial groups, favoring Asians overwhelmingly over the other racial outgroups. The regression table in the right panel then shows that these racial attitudes have noticeable and independent effects on what the Chinese public want their government to do vis-à-vis the United States. While controlling for baseline hawkishness across all models, more favorable views of Asians and less favorable views of whites were significantly predictive of Chinese support for hawkish foreign policy. In short, the Chinese public not only exhibit a remarkably high level of Asian racial identity and racial in-group favoritism but also readily translate such racialized sentiments to their more confident foreign policy outlooks. Reported in another study (Kim 2022), findings from an experiment embedded in the same survey also suggest that Chinese foreign policy narratives that denounce anti-Asian racism in America significantly boost the Chinese public's anti-white sentiment and Asian racial identity, both of which in turn are strongly associated with higher levels of support for foreign policy assertiveness.

## DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I examined anti-Asian racism and hawkish China opinion in the United States following the onset of the global pandemic and its lasting implications for continued Sino-American great power rivalry. Utilizing an original national survey fielded during the initial phase of

**Table 6.2** Distribution of racial group favorability and associations between racial attitudes and support for hawkish U.S. policy among the Chinese public (March 2022 survey)



*Note* The left panel shows mean favorability ratings (higher values = warmer feelings) for different racial groups as perceived by Chinese citizens. The right panel displays coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) from ordinary least squares regression models. All independent variables are standardized, and the dependent variable is recoded to range from 0 to 1. All models control for demographic controls. Favor = Favorability; Anti-White = Anti-White sentiment; Hawkishness = Military Assertiveness; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001

the pandemic, I first find evidence for the close connection between the American public anxiety over the virus, negative sentiments toward Chinese and Asian people, and support for a hardline China policy. While the design of the survey does not allow the identification of causal directions between these factors, the evidence clearly shows how heightened concern about COVID-19—which had already become deeply politicized through the U.S.-China blame game over its origin—shaped American mass support for military action against China and more importantly, how broader anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments were strongly associated with both attitudes. The relationships are robust to controlling for party identification, ideology, and potential confounders such as generalized ethnocentrism, and it is specifically attitudes toward Asian and Chinese Americans but no other minorities that significantly predict support for hawkish China policies. In another study, I experimentally test whether information about COVID-19 and its alleged Chinese origin significantly boosts the public’s anti-Asian sentiment (Kim 2023). Taken together with the findings of this chapter, existing survey evidence suggests that racialized views toward Chinese and broader Asians—often lumped together under the long-standing “model minority” and “yellow peril” racial

tropes—have played an important role in shaping how Americans have coped with the pandemic and responded to perceived threat from China.

The implication of these findings for U.S.-China relations becomes more evident when we examine how the growing salience and visibility of anti-Asian racism in America exert a strong influence on China's foreign policy discourses that increasingly subscribe to its own nativist and nationalist rhetoric. Since 2020, the Chinese state media have published hundreds of news reports and opinion pieces that attribute growing anti-Asian violence in the United States to what they perceive as racially motivated American policy toward China and inherent limitations of American democracy. As Peter Gries and Zheng Wang have shown, anti-foreign sentiments have gradually become a key element and driver of China's popular nationalism since the end of the Cold War.<sup>7</sup> The pandemic politics, against this background, has added a more explicit *racial* overtone to the anti-foreign sentiments undergirding Chinese foreign policy discourses. With “the white powers of Europe and America” identified as the perpetrator for China's continued humiliation and victimization (Dikötter 2015, p. 125), racialized resentment and identity have become important to how China views the United States and American foreign policy and defines its own identity and standing in the world. The view that China and its people continue to be victimized by the racially prejudiced Western powers, in turn, has far-reaching effects on the landscape of China's own racial thinking and foreign policy preferences. Turning to evidence from an original national survey in China, I find that Chinese foreign policy narratives that explicitly link anti-Asian racism to American foreign policy significantly boost the Chinese public's anti-White sentiment and Asian racial identity which in turn strongly predict mass support for military action against the United States and its regional allies. Not only have the Chinese public come to embrace a noticeably high level of Asian racial identity and anti-White sentiment but they also readily translate such racial attitudes to more confident and hawkish foreign policy views.

Now I conclude the chapter by drawing lessons and policy recommendations for contemporary U.S.-China relations, calling for greater awareness of state leaders and publics about the connection between interstate rivalry, political rhetoric, and racialized violence. In the context of the ever-deepening U.S.-Soviet security competition in the 1950s, John Herz argued that we should collectively work toward a more rational foreign policy “through a kind of psychoanalysis in the international



field where lifting one factor into the realm of the conscious might become part of the healing process” (Herz 1959, p. 249). By lifting the underexamined factor of race and identity into the analysis of current Sino-American relations, my discussion in this chapter therefore suggests following policy recommendations for both American and Chinese leaders who aspire for a peaceful management of the great power rivalry:

1. **Both American and Chinese leaders should refrain from using foreign policy narratives that appeal to the sense of *identity difference* and *exceptionalism* in their assessment and public discussion of the bilateral relationship.** Foreign policy narratives with identity appeals—whether more or less racialized (e.g., “Kung Flu,” “You’ll never turn into a Westerner”) or ostensibly non-racial (e.g., “defend the West and the free world,”<sup>8</sup> “China’s Community of Common Destiny”<sup>9</sup>)—pose the risk of stimulating exclusionary, nativist, and racialized resentment and violence against the other country and people associated with it.
2. **Both American and Chinese leaders should beware of the societal and political downstream consequences of identity appeals in foreign policy narratives,** which may have the effects of (1) inciting domestic discrimination and violence against minorities, (2) emboldening the other country’s own exclusionary identity and worldview, and (3) exacerbating inter-state security dilemmas through inflated threat perception and miscalculation of the other side’s strategic intention.<sup>10</sup>

The first step toward fully embracing these lessons is to acknowledge the power and agency of political elites in shaping how countries view each other and whether people draw more exclusionary and essentialized identity divisions vis-à-vis the foreign rival. In my analysis of televised political campaign advertisements in all levels—Congressional, gubernatorial, and presidential—of U.S. elections from 2006 to 2018 that specifically discussed China as a major issue, I find that American political elites, across the party line, rely heavily on the strategy of evoking economic and cultural anxiety during their campaigns, blaming China as a threat to American economy and security. As shown in Table 6.3, a sentiment analysis further demonstrates the role of negative emotional appeals in shaping the overall tone of America’s China rhetoric. Compared to the

rest of the political advertisements, China-related messages were significantly more likely to express and deliver negative emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness to the receiving public. Among the negative emotions, anger in particular has been the predominant source of emotional appeals in these discourses, consistently shaping the tone of election campaign messages on China for the past decades. As Antoine Banks aptly shows in his work on American race politics, elite messages that evoke anger have the effect of making racial resentment more salient to American voters and their policy opinion (Banks 2016). In other words, even without the explicitly racialized identity rhetoric in both American and Chinese foreign policy discourses we have observed since the pandemic, we have to pay more attention to the broader societal and political costs of foreign policy narratives that stoke angry responses and zero-sum thinking among the masses.

International politics today is characterized by the resurgence of ethno-racial nationalisms, populist elites, and resentment between groups both within and across borders. Deepening Sino-American tensions in particular are articulated increasingly in terms of exclusionary identities—be they ideological, civilizational, and noticeably since the pandemic, racial. Are China and the United States, trapped in the spiral of mutually reinforcing identity politics, destined for another *war without mercy* in the Asia-Pacific?<sup>11</sup> Similarly, as in the late nineteenth century when the

**Table 6.3** Emotional appeals in political campaign advertisements on China across all U.S. elections, 2006–2018

<i>Years</i>	<i>China Ads</i>	<i>Non-China Ads</i>
	<i>% Anger</i>	<i>% Anger</i>
2006	57.14	44.04
2010	75.00	48.36
2012	73.68	53.90
2014	70.21	50.30
2016	60.82	52.16
2018	72.60	48.25
<b>Total</b>	<b>70.83</b>	<b>49.52</b>

*Note* The table shows results from a sentiment analysis of all texts extracted from televised election campaign advertisements on China across all US elections from 2006 to 2018. *Data source* Wesleyan Media Project

first appearance of anti-Asian racism in American society led up to the notorious Chinese exclusion acts, will the Chinese respond to America's racial dilemma with their own racialized worldview and hawkish nationalism?<sup>12</sup> To break this tragic, vicious circle of race, identity, and great power conflict in international politics would require more scientific and evidence-based policy discourses on the issue and greater awareness of political elites and masses alike. The present study therefore calls for renewed scholarship on the normative and practical discussion of how inter-state conflict shape and interact with costly behavioral pathologies, including racialized violence, at the individual and societal level—what scholars have begun to identify as the “first image reversed” approach in International Relations (Kertzer and Tingley 2018; Pomeroy 2022, 2023; see also Bustamante 2023).<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. For seminal works on China's century of humiliation narrative, see Gries (2004) and Wang (2008).
2. It is here important to note that not all racialized (or what some call racialist) views amount to racism—whose very definition is still debated among philosophers of race (see James and Burgos 2023). Blum (2002), for example, laments that the concept of racism is invoked and “used so expansively as to refer to virtually anything regarded as wrong in the area of race.” In fact, I propose that one of the major challenges for the study of race in IR is to build a theory of race that clarifies the definitions, sources, and implications of “race”, “racism”, and “racialization”—all of which are basically global in nature and thus merit IR theorizing (for recent efforts, see Mercer 2023, Maass 2023, Brown 2024, and also Johnston and Kim 2024).
3. For the history and critical analysis of the yellow peril syndrome in America, see, e.g., Tchen and Yeats (2014) and Wu (2002).
4. On China's ‘wolf warrior’ diplomats, see Smith (2021). On the role of the state media in Chinese foreign policy, see, e.g., Wang and Wang (2014). For a study on the political attitudes of Chinese elites and netizens, see Weiss (2019).
5. Empirical results remain unchanged for respondents who identified themselves as black, Latino or Hispanic.

6. For the validation and application of the Asian American resentment (AAR) scale, see Kim (2022) and Kim (2023).
7. Gries (2004) and Wang (2008).
8. A related identity rhetoric or “meme” that frequently appears in American foreign policy discourses is the “Rules-Based Order (RBO)”. For a critical analysis of how such identity narratives feed into the U.S.-China security dilemma, see Breuer and Johnston (2019).
9. For a review of the concept of the “Community of Common Destiny,” see Smith (2018).
10. For pioneering research on the interconnection between exceptionalism, identity politics, and U.S.-China security dilemma, see Breuer and Johnston (2019) and Johnston (2018).
11. John Dower famously described the Pacific War between Japan and the United States as a war without mercy that was marked by unprecedented degrees of racial hatred and mutually exclusive and reinforcing racial identities between the two great powers. See Dower (1986).
12. For a comprehensive and critical analysis of the Chinese exclusion acts, the role of racism, and their implications for Sino-American relations in the late nineteenth century, see Ngai (2021).
13. Pomeroy (2022) also uses the term “behavioral realism” to describe a systematic study of the link between structural—realist—pressures of international politics (e.g., the balance of power) and domestic behavioral pathologies (e.g., threat inflation). Bustamante (2023) specifically calls for bridging the emerging literature on race and racism with structural Waltzian approaches in IR.

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# America Through the Eyes of Chinese Youth During COVID-19

*Mallie Prytherch*

In addition to the health and economic repercussions discussed elsewhere in this book, the COVID-19 pandemic also weakened cultural exchange and interpersonal connections between the U.S. and China. In this chapter, I outline the methods and results of a study that I conducted on the ground in China from February to April of 2022, during the Zero-COVID policies. It focuses on the views toward America of a select group of Chinese youth: those attending the top two elite colleges in China—Peking University and Tsinghua University. Navigating the constricted landscape of travel and visa constraints, my foray into China during this period was a distinctive rarity for Western scholars. My special affiliation with Tsinghua University, as one of under 300 international students granted entrance into China during the pandemic, unlocked access for me to embark on this research endeavor. It will remain as one of a very small number of studies conducted under Zero-COVID in China.

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I reveal three key trends: a reconsideration of long-term plans to live or work abroad due to growing anti-Asian sentiment and perceived failures of the American public health system, disillusionment with the “American Dream” and its values, and bolstered support for the Chinese government. I compare these results with analysis conducted from other sources, finding that contrary to several prominent studies, this specific subset of Chinese students’ opinions is relatively measured and not singularly defined by nationalism, although their views have become increasingly negative due to the events of the pandemic.

This chapter offers a timely and updated analysis of the thoughts and sentiments harbored by China’s burgeoning leaders, serving as a reservoir of knowledge that can nourish diplomatic strategies aimed at ameliorating inter-country relations. Amid a backdrop of evolving paradigms and shifting geopolitical dynamics, the depth and nuance that this research affords provide a canvas upon which strategies for fostering constructive discourse, mitigating misperceptions, and establishing platforms for meaningful collaboration can be painted. As such, this chapter stands not merely as an empirical study but as a catalyst for shaping the discourse and charting a course toward a more informed and cooperative future for both the U.S. and China.

## CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The imposition of travel restrictions and social distancing protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic severely curtailed opportunities for cross-border interactions, impacting vital person-to-person domains like education, tourism, and the arts. A significant outcome of this evolving landscape has been the reshaping of perceptions within China concerning the U.S. This transformation is particularly pronounced among the younger generation of Chinese citizens, who, prior to the pandemic, enjoyed unprecedented access to international education and cross-cultural encounters.

The two most recent comprehensive studies of the views of Chinese youth toward the U.S. were conducted by the Global Times, a Chinese state-sponsored publication with a highly nationalistic slant that is considered propaganda by most Western scholars. Their 2021 survey of 1281 young Chinese found that more than 40% of respondents’ favorability toward Western countries fell over the period of 2016–2021. Specifically, 53.8% of respondents said that China’s “remarkable effort in fighting

COVID-19” make them begin to see the West as an equal. Additionally, 51.9% cited “ineffective COVID-19 control [in Western countries]” as leading to the deterioration of their views of Western countries. 72.4% also considered “promoting international cooperation to combat COVID-19” as the most notable contribution that China has made to the world in the last decade (Yang et al. 2021). Even considering the source of the data and the biased wording of the questions, the picture is worrying. A more recent Global Times survey from October 2022 revealed that over 60% of respondents aged 18 to 29 view the U.S. unfavorably, while only around 35% view it positively (Tang 2022).

The Global Times’ surveys portray an alarming trend, and other sources also reflect deteriorating attitudes toward the U.S. The China Data Lab’s May 2020 survey reported that favorability ratings toward the U.S. among the general public decreased from 5.77 to 4.77 out of 10, due to the American government’s COVID-19 response and anti-China rhetoric (Guang et al. 2021). A few months later, Adam Liu and his co-authors found that 77% of Chinese people hold either “unfavorable” or “very unfavorable” views of the U.S., a 60% point jump since twelve months prior (2020).

The response of the American government to COVID-19 also impacted how the Chinese government’s effectiveness is perceived domestically. In October of 2021, Cary Wu conducted a survey of 19,816 Chinese citizens asking them what they thought of the Chinese government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 67% of respondents marked that they were satisfied with the Chinese government’s pandemic-era delivery of daily necessities and protection materials. 75% of respondents said that they were satisfied with the government’s information dissemination. However, those with higher levels of education and younger respondents were overall less satisfied.

Many scholars agree that Chinese youth are increasingly nationalistic. In a January 2022 lecture that has since garnered significant discussion and controversy both domestically and internationally, Yan Xuetong, Dean of Tsinghua University’s Institute of International Studies, cautioned that China’s Gen-Z was developing “a make-believe mindset, thinking it’s very easy for China to achieve its foreign policy goals. They think only China is just and innocent, while other countries, especially Western countries, are evil and thus have natural hatred towards Westerners” (Mai 2022). He noted that Chinese youth now look down

on the U.S. and warned of the danger to a country of an entire generation that believes too highly in its own ability and power.

Nonetheless, the nationalistic tendencies of Chinese youth are still unclear. In 2017, the number of young people applying for admittance to the Chinese Communist Party hit an all-time low, and a 2018 survey of 10,000 respondents found that the younger the individual, the lower their sense of national identity (Li et al. 2021). Additionally, some literature contends that nationalism is too broad a term to describe the ongoing phenomenon among Chinese youth. A 2019 article by Jessica Chen Weiss proposes that the focus should be on public perception of policy and government performance, rather than just “nationalism” among the general public. Weiss contends that younger Chinese individuals tend to be more hawkish in their foreign policy, but not due to nationalism; rather, due to their nuanced worldview and pragmatic tendencies.

I utilized a two-pronged approach to data collection: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Undertaking field research in non-democratic countries presents unique challenges in terms of political sensitivity and ensuring the accuracy and reliability of data. In non-democratic systems, individual interviews based on personal relationships and trust can provide more reliable data than mass surveys of the general public. Specifically for China, “socially embedded” surveys that are built around personal relationships are more likely to produce unbiased data. Thus, as an international student attending Tsinghua University, I was able to utilize my personal relationships and connections to gather interviewees that would be forthcoming in their opinions.

The length of each interview varied from 15 to 45 minutes, and the conversation was not strictly confined to a certain set of questions. Instead, I followed the flow of conversation while keeping in mind the research questions and engaged in two-way conversation with the interviewees rather than one-sided questioning. Additionally, I asked the questions in various sequences to eliminate question order bias and make the interview feel more organic. As is customary, all information obtained, used, studied, and analyzed was anonymized to protect the identity of the participants and minimize potential risks.

To balance the downsides of in-person interviews, I ran a digital survey in parallel. The survey was administered in Chinese and conducted through a mini-app on WeChat. The survey questions were designed to be concise and easily answerable. Potentially identifying information such as age, major, and school year was not collected. Although this hampers

the construction of a comprehensive demographic model of respondents, the potential downside of having students respond less honestly was assumed to outweigh the benefit of having this data available. Respondents for the survey were recruited via word-of-mouth, interest groups, sports teams, and clubs at each university.

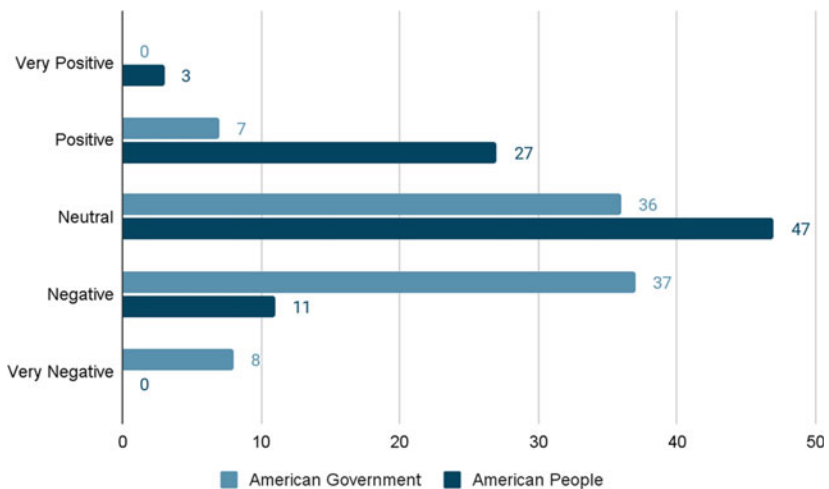
The focal participants of this research encompassed a select group of Chinese undergraduate and graduate students, hailing from mainland China, Hong Kong, or Macau, who were currently enrolled at two of China's preeminent academic institutions—Peking University and Tsinghua University. These universities, beyond their distinction as the nation's foremost educational bastions, hold a mantle of extraordinary significance and influence woven into the fabric of Chinese social life. Reverberating beyond their academic acclaim, Peking University and Tsinghua University command an elevated stature that permeates through political echelons and the broader social tapestry. It is imperative to underscore that these institutions are not merely acclaimed for their academic prowess; they represent repositories of historical legacy and renowned prestige that transcend conventional academic circles. Peking University and Tsinghua University's unique significance emanates from their pervasive impact on pivotal arenas of China's identity. Their rich heritage and venerable reputation have contributed to their elevated role in nurturing political leadership and galvanizing influential networks. A striking testament to their influence is observed in the composition of the Chinese Communist Party's upper echelons, where a quarter of the 19th Politburo members and 7 out of 24 of the 20th Politburo members were educated at these institutions, including President Xi Jinping himself. Thus, many of the future leaders of China are likely attending one of these two schools, and so their views provide a potential window into the future decisions of the Chinese government.

A total of 88 students answered the questionnaire, and another 22 took part in the interviews. Of the 22 original interviewees, eight agreed to take part in a Zoom conversation for a follow-up interview during February of 2023. The questions I asked were mainly based on the original interviews, but I included a few additional questions related to recent pandemic developments.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

First, students' opinions toward the American government and people were substantially different. While they had an overall negative to neutral view of the American government, their opinions of the American people were on average positive to neutral. No students reported having a "very positive" view of the American government, while three answered that they have a "very positive" view of the American people. Likewise, eight answered that their views toward the American government were "very negative," but none held a "very negative" view of the American people (see Fig. 7.1).

The interviewed students' views followed a similar pattern—they made distinctions between the American government and American people. With only a few exceptions, the students saw the American people in a positive light. An interviewee who had worked alongside Americans at his job described them as "really down to earth and pure in terms of natural life characteristics. I think it's based on [geography] of the continent that created the character of American people to be very open and friendly. They don't care about [people's] backgrounds or anything."



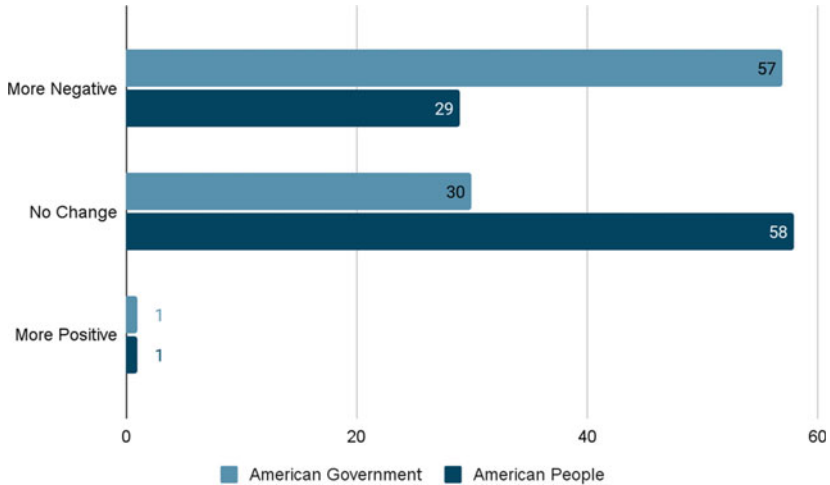
**Fig. 7.1** Number of respondents with positive, negative, and neutral views of the American government and American people

The idea that Americans are “open” was a common theme, spoken of in a positive manner. One student said he understood the practicality of “a country that can accept a lot of different cultures and people from all over the world with different backgrounds...this diversity fosters development of scientific research and economic development.” Another admired Americans’ “open” culture for its acceptance of “queer culture, feminism, these things.”

Many indicated that they believed that the government and media were misleading the American people in one way or another. One student expressed his belief that “The U.S. government is controlled by a few bad guys. They cannot represent the whole of U.S. citizens. So actually, U.S. citizens are in our minds good, but [those in] governance, those are really our enemies inside the U.S.” Another hastened to assure me that Chinese people do not dislike Americans, just the American government. He insisted that “[Americans are not the] specific target for [Chinese] hatred [towards the U.S.]. [We’re] very clear that [we’re] not talking about American normal citizens. Most Chinese are very clear that the monopolies, some rich guys that control the American economy, those are the people we hate right now.”

More than two-thirds of respondents indicated that their views of the American government had grown more negative since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a little more than one-third said that their views had not changed. Only one student responded that their view had changed in a positive manner (see Fig. 7.2). There were two main reasons that students gave for the changes in their views: pandemic-related racism and anti-Asian sentiment and the difference in public health responses and outcomes in the U.S. and China.

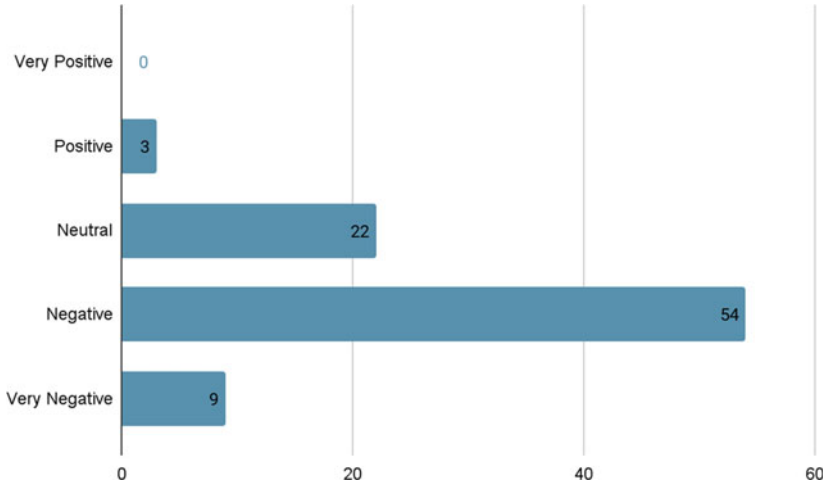
U.S. public opinion toward China has also fallen drastically since 2018, and especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Ipsos, around 82% of Americans held an unfavorable view of China as of March 2022, a 35% point jump from 2018 and a 16-point jump since 2020 (Silver 2022). Similar studies of Chinese public opinion, while more difficult to administer, have shown a parallel trend. The most recent large-scale study (October 2020) of Chinese public opinion showed that 77% of Chinese people hold an unfavorable view of the U.S. Moreover, while the American public’s views toward China have been decreasing steadily for over six years, only 17% of Chinese held an unfavorable view of the U.S. in October 2019, suggesting that the pandemic is a larger factor in Chinese changing views than Americans’ (Liu et al. 2020).



**Fig. 7.2** Number of respondents that changed their views of the American government and American people since before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

The students interviewed were aware of Americans' dislike of China. "They hate China because of COVID," one told me. "During COVID times, the hostility has increased." While only a few of them felt strong negative feelings toward the U.S. most of them believed that the U.S. was unsafe, especially for Chinese people or people of Asian descent. Many who had previously planned on living or working abroad in the long-term had shifted their plans due to a combination of factors relating to COVID-19. Similarly, almost three-quarters of the surveyed students said that the American people's view of China was negative (see Fig. 7.3.)

Moreover, there is a direct link between having experienced anti-Asian racism and increasing one's support for the Chinese government. A 2020 study of Chinese students studying abroad showed that even those students who are open to Western-style democracy will become more sympathetic toward China's authoritarian government when they are exposed to Sinophobic or racist comments. The extent to which students will increase their support of the Chinese government is directly correlated to their baseline levels of nationalism; the less nationalistic the



**Fig. 7.3** Number of respondents that believe Americans have positive, negative, or neutral views of China

students were at the beginning of the experiment, the more supportive of their government they became following the exposure (Fan et al. 2020).

One of my interviewees mentioned that while she personally had not experienced anti-Asian racism, she was aware of the hostility that existed against Chinese people in America, and said that many “[Chinese people] saw the hostility towards China, towards Asians, and they also saw the differences in pandemic control...When I grew up we really admired the U.S. In China, there was the [idea of] the American dream...But now things have really changed.” Another student, who had studied in the U.S, recalled a moment in his first undergraduate economics class where the professor asked him if Chinese people ate dog meat. Now, he said, “The current anti-Asian and anti-Chinese trend in the U.S. makes [Chinese people] feel that China is safer than the U.S....[In America], we’re prejudiced against, openly or secretly. That’s why many Chinese students decide to go back to China.”

The statistics support his assertion; the number of Chinese international students in the U.S. dropped from almost 375,000 in 2019 to 290,000 in 2022 (Fromer 2022). Moreover, new applications for student visas dropped 30% from 2021 to 2022, meaning that this trend will likely continue as students who were enrolled pre-pandemic complete their



degrees and return to China (Ubell 2022). Students in China looking to study abroad following the relaxation of Zero-COVID regulations are looking in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia rather than the U.S. (ICEF Monitor 2023).

Not only did the interviewed students fear racism, but they also worried about the accessibility of healthcare in the U.S. The failures of the public health system during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these concerns. One student said bluntly that “American people live in a very dangerous condition, every day there are so many increasing [COVID] cases, they cannot get medical care, the government doesn’t give a shit anymore.” Another agreed, saying that the U.S. “overruled health concerns with economic interests.” Indeed, when comparing the U.S.’ over 1.1 million COVID-19 deaths to China’s official count of 83,150 deaths as of February 2023 (after the relaxing of Zero-COVID regulations), China seems much safer. Even the higher end of the range proposed by the New York Times estimates 1.5 million deaths in China, which is less than one-third of U.S. deaths if controlled for by population (Glanz et al. 2023). At the time of the interviews, the U.S. had reported over a million deaths, and China only 5,200. While the numbers reported by the Chinese government are certainly an undercount, even an assumption of 10 times the official numbers show a stark difference with the U.S.

The students also saw the American government as putting economic interests ahead of the safety of their people and/or unable to utilize its vast resources to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. To these students, the American government appeared either grossly incompetent or fundamentally immoral. Many of the students cited the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the main reasons that they had become disillusioned with the American dream and so-called American values. In some cases, this inability to control the pandemic has affected not only the students’ views of America, but of democracy in general. These students viewed COVID-19 as a litmus test for various ideological systems and believed that America’s system had failed on both moral and practical grounds.

One student explained that “The U.S. had the best medical system in the world, the strongest economy, the most talent in the world from all over the world. But they still failed in the fight against COVID-19. China has done a very good job fighting COVID-19. Many people [now] realize that we don’t have to learn from the U.S. because under these circumstances, the U.S. is doing so badly.” He acknowledged the issues that

existed with Zero-COVID lockdowns, agreeing that “China is a dictatorship. It is an autocracy. But somewhere along the line, this system has suited its own people. It suppresses civil liberty, that’s a fact. But increasingly, people are treating this as a trade off because it performs better [than democracy].”

One woman I interviewed told me to, “Imagine I tell my parents that I’m going to marry an American man in the future. For me, I’m open to any kind of marriage in the world, to any nationality. My parents will say, okay, you can do that. But he’s American, he’s a foreigner, and America is a bad place. They have a lot of bad issues happening. If [I] have a Chinese man as an option, [my parents] prefer that.” Another said that “Before COVID, people always had this sense of ‘Oh, America is better. I want to go there. I want to live there.’ But now, after COVID, ‘China’s actually pretty good, at least it’s safe for Chinese.’”

Many of the students were honest that the pandemic affected their views not only of the U.S. but of Western-style democracy. One said, “[The pandemic] has confirmed that democracy is not for every country.” Another agreed that “The COVID pandemic gave me proof and evidence to prove my knowledge on American culture and values.” The interviewees had previously been somewhat neutral on the American government, but their views had changed after seeing how the U.S. responded to the pandemic.

One of the interviewees who had previously studied in an American college and traveled to the U.S. many times throughout his life spoke at length about his lack of surprise with how the U.S. handled the pandemic: “I could predict the current issues that we’re seeing in the United States—people who are unwilling to wear masks because they feel like that’s their own right to choose. There are two sides of the idea: individualism or groups’ values first. These two collide amid the COVID situation, and we’re seeing two ideologies being presented in their most revealing way. It’s not because of COVID that China and the U.S. decided to go head-to-head but it certainly became a playground device to play against each other, to [test] the strength of the political ideologies.”

He continued by saying, with a great deal of bitterness, that Americans do not deserve the freedoms that they are given because they take them for granted. He mentioned that even though the Chinese approach to COVID-19 was too overbearing, in the U.S., “everyone is for themselves...that’s a lazy interpretation of freedom...I hold my grudge against a lot of American people and the country’s ideology in general

[because] of the imposition and entitlement [that became obvious during the pandemic].”

Many students believed that, despite starting at a disadvantage compared to the U.S., China managed to combat the pandemic more successfully. They were aware that there are downsides to the Chinese government’s methodologies, namely, the suppression of rights, and many did not like living in a Zero-COVID world. Nonetheless, they believed that China had been much more successful at controlling the pandemic than the U.S., and thus the COVID-19 pandemic increased their support for the Chinese government and their trust in its competence, and at the same time negatively impacted their view of the U.S.

In January and early February 2023, after the lifting of Zero-COVID policies, most mentions of COVID-19 on Chinese social media involved people complaining about symptoms. Increasingly, the responses have been the same as in the rest of the world: let’s move on with our lives. As of December 2022, about 40% of Americans considered the pandemic “over.” Another 45% felt the U.S. had done enough to combat COVID-19 and should now move on. Almost 70% agreed that “We’re moving towards a time when COVID-19 won’t disrupt our daily lives,” and half of Americans reported having already returned to their normal lives (Jackson et al. 2022). According to eight interviewees who participated in follow-up interviews in February 2023, sentiment among Chinese citizens is rapidly aligning with this perspective. One person noted, “With so much happening around us, people haven’t had the space to reflect on their opinions about the government or U.S.-China relations.”

Several of the students mentioned that they saw the government’s actions in lifting Zero-COVID as responding to the will of the people. One said, “Before lifting of Zero-COVID, there were so many protests...[but] the government knows it’s impossible to make people [quarantine] anymore, so the Chinese government has to listen to the people’s voices, the experts’ voices.” He argued that the government’s actions demonstrated a willingness to listen to the public on some policy issues. He further contended that China’s response to the pandemic suggests it operates as a form of democracy, albeit not a Western-style one.

Most did not agree. One student who was now living in a “third-party country” (not closely allied with the U.S. or China) described how her views had evolved over the pandemic. She had been studying in the U.S. when the pandemic hit, and she chose to finish her studies before

returning to China in 2021. At that time, she left a world still in the throes of COVID-19 and entered a world without COVID. “I was a bit more patriotic,” she said. Indeed, in her first interview, she had spoken with hope about the possibility that “China [could] show the world that there’s a different way of doing things.”

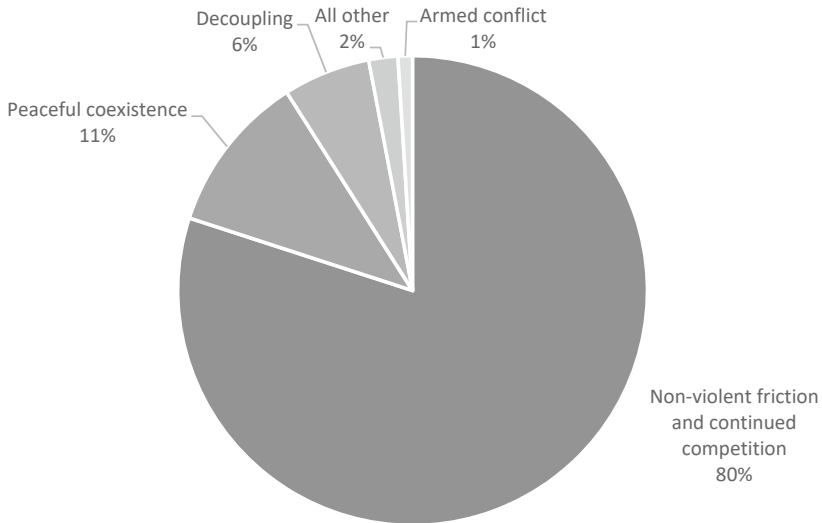
However, an incident where she was quarantined due to a “close contact” and nearly prevented from leaving China for a new job abroad convinced her never to return while Zero-COVID policies were in place. She watched from the outside as the Zero-COVID protests erupted and then restrictions were relaxed, but “Deep down, earlier in 2022 I already felt this political despair and depression that has really triggered my thinking...[the past year] made me really reflect a lot on the whole policy, whole political system, whole society, so the past year has really changed a lot the viewpoints of mine.”

She said that she was not interested in returning to China to live long-term, but that she was equally unlikely to return to the U.S. Other students had similar thoughts—even those students whose regard for the Chinese government had decreased drastically over 2022 did not see the U.S. as more attractive in comparison. One student said that “The Chinese government is not fooling anyone who’s following the current [COVID-19] situation,” but that the U.S. is “crazy about China, crazy about immigrants...there’s a disease in U.S. society.” Many expressed a desire to relocate to neutral countries like Singapore, the U.A.E., or Germany. They are disillusioned with both the American government and the Chinese system.

More specifically, the respective responses of the U.S. and Chinese governments to the pandemic have inflicted seemingly irreparable damage on U.S.-China relations. In the 2022 survey, nearly 90% of students believed the relationship was on a path toward intensified competition, decoupling, or even armed conflict (see Fig. 7.4).

The prevailing sentiment was one of powerlessness and ambiguity regarding potential solutions to the situation. One student stressed that “Being an ordinary citizen, you can’t really change anything [when] the two governments are chess playing.” Another pointed out that “It’s easy to say that we want to be more open-minded and empathetic but it’s always easier said than done.”

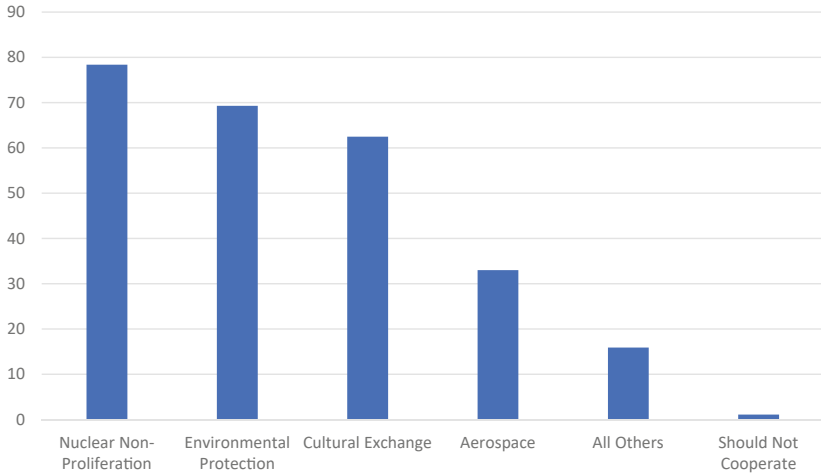
A year later, the outlook had darkened even further. All but one of the follow-up interviewees believed that the U.S-China relationship was worse off than a year prior. While the pandemic has, in many ways,



**Fig. 7.4** Percentage of respondents to the 2022 survey that believe that China and the U.S. are headed toward each path over the next 5–10 years

ended, its effects are far-reaching. U.S. government officials continue to advance the theory that COVID-19 originated in a Chinese lab, despite their own scientists expressing “low confidence” in this conclusion (Matza and Yong 2023). The Chinese government has retaliated by publicly supporting conspiracy theories that accuse the U.S. military of releasing COVID-19 in China (Ambassade de la Republique Populaire de Chine en Republique Francaise 2023). Many other similar acts have piled strain onto the relationship. The result is simple, and disappointing. As one of the interviewees put it, “There is no trust. And without trust, what can we do? Nothing will get done.”

Nonetheless, there is a glimmer of hope in how these students view U.S.-China relations. After all, their educational institutions are shaping the future leaders of Chinese society. In the 2022 survey, 87 of 88 respondents—and every interviewee—believed that the U.S. and China should cooperate on at least one policy area (see Fig. 7.5). Large majorities supported cooperation on nuclear non-proliferation, environmental protection, and cultural exchange. None believed that the relationship was cemented in antagonism for perpetuity.



**Fig. 7.5** Percentage of respondents to the 2022 survey that believe that China and the U.S. should cooperate in specific areas

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It is pertinent to reiterate the foundational aims of this survey following the exploration of key findings—chiefly, to scrutinize young Chinese students’ evolving perceptions of the American government, society, U.S.-China relations, and how these views have been significantly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The key trends I uncovered—such as reconsidering plans to live or work abroad due to increased anti-Asian sentiment, doubts about the American public health system, disillusionment with the “American Dream,” and increased support for the Chinese government—provide nuanced perspectives that challenge the often monolithic and nationalist views found in other research. This chapter, therefore, serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it is an empirical exploration that provides a timely and updated analysis of the thoughts and sentiments of China’s future leaders; on the other, it functions as a repository of insights that could guide diplomatic strategies and policy frameworks aimed at improving relations between the U.S. and China. In the context of a world undergoing rapid geopolitical shifts and amid waning trust in traditional superpowers, the value of this research is not merely academic. Rather, it stands as a substantive contribution that has the

potential to shape the discourse and guide bilateral relations toward a more cooperative and mutually beneficial future.

There are several policy lessons that can be taken from this study.

First, both American and Chinese leaders should invest more in programs that facilitate people-to-people interactions. The significant decline in visa applications from Chinese students to study in the U.S., along with the U.S. government's refusal to reinstate Fulbright Exchanges with China, both signal a concerning trend toward isolationism. Fulbright participants have historically acted as grassroots diplomats and help to inform geopolitical strategy, especially in regions where high-level relations were fraught. Exchange programs like the Fulbright not only deepen American knowledge but also serve as a counter-narrative to negative portrayals, thereby benefiting both nations.

Second, the U.S. must increase its efforts to recognize and combat racism at both societal and systemic levels. Studies have shown a more than 300% increase in incidents of anti-Asian racism since the pandemic's onset (Wong-Padoongpatt et al. 2022). According to the 2022 STAATUS Index, one in five Americans believes that Asian-Americans bear at least some responsibility for the spread of COVID-19. Racism in the U.S. harms domestic communities but it also echoes internationally, as incidents of racism provide more ammunition for narratives that portray the U.S. as a deeply flawed society. Moreover, racism erodes the "soft power" that the U.S. has traditionally wielded globally. U.S. claims about the virtues of democracy and human rights are undermined when racial minorities are subjected to discrimination and hate crimes. This undermines the U.S.'s ability to credibly critique the human rights records of other countries or promote democratic values, thereby weakening its diplomatic standing.

The COVID-19 pandemic is more than just a public health crisis; it marks a pivotal juncture that has reshaped young Chinese students' views on governance and international relations. This has far-reaching implications, affecting not only domestic policies in both the U.S. and China but also shaping how the international community navigates an increasingly skeptical view of existing superpowers. This study underscores the urgency for both American and Chinese leaders to re-examine and reformulate their approaches to people-to-people exchanges and societal issues, particularly in combating racism. As we move into a post-pandemic world, it is imperative to heed the perspective of students like the ones I interviewed,

for they offer invaluable insights into the evolving landscape of geopolitics and their collective aspirations for a more equitable and just future.

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## The Pandemic and the Sino-U.S. Echo Chamber Effect

*Da Wei and Li Haixuan*

From the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China, in January 2020, to the reopening of China in early 2023, personal interactions between China and the United States virtually ground to a halt over the three-year period (Sliver et al. 2021). This was unlike anything we had seen in the past five decades of Sino-U.S. relations since President Nixon's visit to China in 1972. The lack of in-person contact made it easy for politicians, academics, and media experts to overlook finer details when assessing and discussing each other. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Sino-U.S. relations had been deteriorating for a few years, with both sides viewing each other in an unfriendly light. During the pandemic, both sides attributed some of their own countries' challenges to the other. After the Wuhan outbreak, Chinese citizens expressed anger with the U.S. decision to ban Chinese people from entering the country, as well as the use of derogatory terms like "Wuhan virus" by U.S. officials to refer to the outbreak. Likewise, due to the substantial human and economic toll of the COVID-19 pandemic, instances of discrimination

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against Chinese or Asian individuals increased within the United States (Human Rights Watch 2020). The pandemic severely impacted President Trump's re-election campaign, leading to a series of highly antagonistic policies toward China in 2020 (Economy et al. 2020).

In the context of isolation and tension between China and the United States, both countries held contrasting views of themselves and each other. In China, the notion that “the East is rising and the West is declining” (*Dong Sheng Xi Jiang*) gained popularity, signaling a shift in global power dynamics with China leading the ascent of the East, while the United States represented the decline of the West. Conversely, in the United States, the narrative of “Peak China” (Brands and Beckley 2022) gained attention, suggesting that China faced significant internal challenges and that its trajectory was either reaching its conclusion or slowing significantly.

This article argues that during the pandemic, both China and the United States created echo chambers, where policymakers, analysts, media, and the general public were primarily exposed to information and opinions that reinforced their existing views. This phenomenon is often referred to as an “Echo Chamber Effect.” Like an individual in an empty room hearing only their own voice and its echoes, people within these chambers tend to believe that everyone shares their perspective. This reinforcement of existing beliefs and attitudes resulted from the lack of in-person communication during the pandemic, causing China and the United States to form separate echo chambers. Each country's population adopted polarized viewpoints within their own communities. Relying on such oversimplified perspectives, both countries risk making harmful policy decisions that could worsen tensions in their relationship.

### THE EAST RISE AND THE WEST DECLINE?

The notion of “the East is rising and the West is Declining” got noticed in China even before the pandemic. Chinese scholars began to discuss the concept at least in 2019 (Zhu 2019; Gao 2020; Wei 2021). It's evident that this perception stems from China's rapid economic growth over the past three decades. When simply comparing economic size, the relative “decline” of any country in the world in comparison with China can be observed.

The pandemic dramatically popularized the term “the East is rising and the West is declining.” For example, Chinese President Xi Jinping

mentioned this concept in a speech at the Central Party School on March 1, 2022 (Xi 2023). China successfully controlled the virus within its borders during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in 2021 and 2022. In contrast, Western countries struggled with implementing strict societal controls, resulting in widespread virus transmission and much higher infection and mortality rates. This situation has ignited a debate in China about the governance system's superiority or inferiority when compared to Western societies.

However, toward the end of 2022, the global COVID-19 landscape was disrupted by the Omicron variant, posing significant challenges to pandemic containment. In 2023, China faced pandemic response difficulties, culminating in a significant outbreak by year-end. The Chinese government subsequently adapted its pandemic prevention strategies, ultimately emerging from the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. In retrospect, it's valuable to reevaluate the concept of "good governance in China and chaos in the West." China's political and social system initially demonstrated effectiveness against the Alpha variant but encountered challenges with the highly infectious Omicron variant, despite its lower fatality rates. Both China and Western countries grappled with containing the virus. Notably, Western countries' governance models enabled more agile adjustments to pandemic policies, resulting in a swifter and smoother recovery compared to China. The governance models in China and Western countries are deeply rooted in their respective political and social traditions. Rather than debating the superiority or inferiority of these models in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be more beneficial to assess their strengths, facilitate mutual learning, and address common challenges in areas like public health and artificial intelligence development.

The concept of "the East is rising and the West is declining" requires a more nuanced perspective. Firstly, it lacks a clear time frame: Is it discussing past changes in global power dynamics or a concept for the future? Secondly, the terms "the East" and "the West" are not well-defined. While "the West" generally refers to Western countries, including the United States, Canada, the European Union, Japan, and others, it is less clear what "the East" refers to. Does it encompass emerging markets and developing countries represented by BRICS nations, "Far East" countries like China, Japan, and South Korea, along with Middle Eastern nations like Saudi Arabia and Iran, or socialist countries like China, Vietnam, and Cuba? The concept's lack of clarity complicates

its interpretation. Lastly, “rise” and “decline” can pertain to changes in economic size or broader aspects of national power and authority, with the latter being a more complex and vague notion. While it’s easier to compare relative changes in economic size, there’s no universally accepted standard for gauging a country’s overall national power and authority in international discourse. Therefore, reaching a consensus on whether a country is rising or declining in these broader terms is quite tricky. Just like the “Peak China” argument, any assessment regarding long-term trends must be approached with great caution. Changes in a country’s relative position over the short and medium term can be relatively certain, but long-term trends are difficult to predict. Few scholars in the 1980s could anticipate Japan’s relative decline and the subsequent resurgence of the United States relative to Japan, highlighting the need for caution when making medium-to-long-term forecasts today (Table 8.1).

If we simply use a country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a proportion of global GDP to measure its rise or decline, there is validity to the concept of “the East is rising and the West is declining” to some extent. If we consider developed countries as “the West” and developing countries as “the East,” over the three decades from 1992 to 2002, the share of global economic output represented by developed economies, typified by the OECD, decreased from 84% to less than 60%. Correspondingly, the economic size of global middle- and low-income countries increased from 15% to 38.6%, representing a shift of more than 20% in each direction. This can be seen as compelling evidence for the concept of

**Table 8.1** The share of some economies in global GDP (Unit: %)

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022
China	1.7	3.0	4.2	6.0	11.3	15.1	17.8
U.S	25.6	27.1	31.3	24.8	21.5	23.9	25.3
EU	29.0	24.5	23.1	25.2	19.4	18.1	16.5
Japan	15.3	14.2	11.9	7.8	8.3	6.0	4.2
India	1.1	1.3	1.4	2.0	2.2	3.3	3.3
OECD	84.0	80.6	81.7	74.4	64.4	61.9	59.3
BRICS (excluding China and India)	3.9	4.6	2.8	5.2	6.8	4.9	4.5
Low- and middle-income countries	15.0	18.2	17.6	24.6	34.0	36.3	38.5

*Data Source* World Bank Database, Author’s own work

“the East is rising and the West is declining.” However, middle- and low-income countries form a highly diverse group and is not a meaningful international political player. When we examine individual countries or economic entities on a global scale over the past 30 years, only China and India have consistently expanded their economic size. While India is in the early stages of its rise, it is primarily China that has experienced a remarkable ascent. It’s also hard to claim that other emerging major nations have seen similar growth. Excluding China and India, the combined economic size of the other three BRICS countries has grown over the two decades after the Cold War. However, their share has declined in recent years and is currently back to the level of 1997. Among developed countries, Japan and the European Union have experienced consistent declines over the past three decades. In contrast, the United States’ share of the global economy has fluctuated but eventually returned to historical norms after a significant post-Cold War increase. U.S. economic share peaked in the early twenty-first century, then declined in the first decade of the century, only to show noticeable growth in the past decade. By 2022, the U.S. economic share in the global economy had nearly returned to the level of 1992 when the Cold War ended. Over this thirty-year period, the United States has remained relatively stable, while China and India have continued to rise, and the EU and Japan have experienced continuing declines. This situation is intricate and cannot be simply summed up as “The East is rising and the West is declining.”

### PEAK CHINA?

Over the past 20 years, the idea that China’s economic size will eventually surpass that of the United States is widely recognized. Scholars used to debate on when China will surpass the United States. This viewpoint also forms the basis of the “Thucydides Trap” (Allison 2017) concept proposed by Graham Allison. However, American scholars Michael Beckley and Hal Brands challenged this perspective in their book *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* published in August 2022. In their book, these scholars argued that China’s economic growth has already peaked, and that a slowing China may be more inclined to take risks, potentially leading to a conflict with the United States earlier than expected. This perspective quickly gained traction in the United States and the Western world, probably stimulated by China’s highly controversial decision to lockdown major cities like Shanghai. By the end of 2022,

the COVID-19 spread in the country with an extremely rapid speed, followed by social unrest in some parts of China. On May 11, 2023, *The Economist* featured “Is Chinese Power About to Peak?” as its cover story, bringing more attention to the concept of “Peak China” in the mainstream media. China’s slowing economic growth might pose a greater danger to the international community than rapid growth. Concerns about China’s economy encountering significant trouble or even collapse have become quite prevalent in Western media in recent months. President Biden even referred to the Chinese economy as a “ticking time bomb” (Bose and Mason 2023).

It’s obvious that China’s path to economic prosperity faces significant hurdles. It’s widely recognized that China’s shrinking population is a substantial long-term challenge. Another issue in China’s economy is the challenge of making domestic consumption the main engine of growth. The specter of local debt looms large, potentially leading to debt crises for local governments and businesses, which could drag down the national economy. Moreover, during the fierce pandemic, the Chinese government implemented controversial economic policies that undermined confidence among private enterprises in the nation’s future. These factors influence the speed of China’s economic recovery, as well as its pursuit of accelerated growth.

The criticisms aimed at China’s economy, as mentioned earlier, carry substantial validity. After 4 decades of rapid growth, it’s quite natural that China’s economic expansion gradually slow down. It’s fairly certain that China would not return to the previous era of high-speed growth exceeding 8%. However, whether these factors signify that China’s ascent has already “peaked” remains a subject open to debate. To find out whether China’s economy has reached its peak and if it’s larger than the United States’, we need to rely on long-term economic forecasts, not just recent yearly or quarterly data.

One of the fundamentals of the Chinese economy is that China’s population is over 1.4 billion, more than four times the size of the United States. The contraction in population size will be a long and slow process. According to the United Nations (UN 2022), regardless of whether we consider high, medium, or low scenarios for China’s future birth rates, the population is projected to remain above 1.2 billion by 2050, still about four times the size of the United States’ population. Moreover, a more significant decline in China’s population is foreseen in the latter



half of this century. Furthermore, China's adoption of artificial intelligence, automatic manufacturing, policies like postponed retirement, and other measures have the potential to mitigate the pace of population decline. Moreover, China's per capita GDP currently stands at around \$12,000, which is approximately 20% of that in the United States. This statistic underscores that China still holds substantial potential for long-term economic growth. Additionally, various challenges within China's economic landscape can be effectively addressed or alleviated through prudent policy measures. While local government debt remains a pressing concern, the cautious monetary policies of the People's Bank of China offer significant flexibility for the central government to manage this issue. Despite restrictions imposed by the United States and other Western nations on China's high-tech sectors, it's important not to exaggerate the impact of these restrictions in relation to the overall scale of the Chinese economy. Moreover, Western sanctions and constraints might even stimulate China to foster indigenous innovation in specific high-tech domains. In short, the long-term development trend of China's economy is an issue that is difficult to judge now, and everything is far from certain.

What's more, whether China's economic scale exceeds that of the United States is not a very meaningful topic of discussion in international relations. If calculated based on purchasing power parity, China's economic size actually surpassed that of the United States in 2014. Some scholars, such as Krugman (2023), have noted that the choice of standards for measuring a country's economic size and how the results affect its international influence and war capabilities are quite complex. Likewise, shifts in GDP comparisons do not inherently lead to direct changes in the dynamics between nations. Calculated based on the current U.S. dollar exchange rate, China's economic size is roughly about 70% of that of the United States. This is a number that has caused great concern in the U.S. strategic community. In other words, if China has a confrontational and hostile strategy, maybe China's capabilities is already enough to pose existential threat to the United States. Regardless of our outlook on China's future economic growth, whether the ratio of China's economic scale to that of the United States rises to 100%, 120%, remains at the current 70%, or falls to 50%, both China and the United States have the capacity to create challenges for each other. Therefore, in terms of the impact of national capabilities on state relations, whether China's economic scale has peaked actually has not that big an impact on Sino-U.S. relations.

Building upon the concept of “Peak China,” American and Western viewpoints often suggest that China’s foreign and military policies may adopt a more assertive stance (Brands and Beckley 2022). Furthermore, in recent years, there has been a prevailing belief in the Western world that China’s potential resort to military action to reunify Taiwan by 2027 (Davidson 2021) is seen as another manifestation of “Peak China,” indicating increased assertiveness in China’s foreign policy. However, if we carefully read the various documents of the CPC and the Chinese government, there has never been a statement that the Chinese Mainland will reunify Taiwan in 2027. The CPC announced at the 20th National Congress that it would achieve the “centennial goal of PLA” by 2027, but the Chinese authorities have never announced the specific connotation of this goal. Finally, the U.S. official (Lagrone 2023) also gradually adjusted his statement, indicating that the Chinese People’s Liberation Army aspires to have the capability to reunify Taiwan by force by 2027, without implying any intention or plans to achieve this goal.

All of these statements are based on the premise that a weaker China might resort to external assertiveness or military actions to manage conflicts, potentially escalating the situation. However, there are two significant issues with this argument. First, it’s challenging to conclusively determine whether China will indeed become weaker. Second, even if China were to experience a decline in power, it doesn’t necessarily imply a more aggressive stance. Scholars like Taylor Fravel (2023) have noted that historically, while China may be more responsive to foreign challenges during domestic difficulties, it hasn’t shown a consistent pattern of using foreign conflicts to address domestic issues. Fravel argues that due to China’s unique political system, Chinese leaders don’t automatically employ external strategies to manage domestic conflicts.

### THE FOREIGN POLICY INFLUENCED BY THE ECHO CHAMBER EFFECT

The echo chamber effect impacts people’s perceptions and naturally influences the foreign policies of various countries.

The echo chamber effect reinforces attribution bias in both China and the United States. In international interactions, people and nations often explain their actions based on their circumstances while attributing their counterparts’ actions to inherent traits. For instance, one side’s policies

are linked to their nature, such as viewing the United States as a hegemonic power or China as a communist nation. Conversely, actions taken by one's own side are typically seen as responses compelled by the situation, essentially reactions to the other side's perceived aggressiveness. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both China and the United States held a strong victim mentality, believing their policies were defensive reactions to the other's perceived aggressiveness. The narratives of "Peak China" and "the East is rising and the West is declining" further solidify the perception that one's own side is right and the other side is wrong, providing a more solid moral basis for attribution bias.

When Chinese leaders perceive significant governance challenges and deep-seated issues within the United States' political system, they naturally assume that American policymakers have made numerous mistakes in recent years. This is particularly evident in their view of the policies pursued by the Trump administration during the COVID-19 pandemic, which China regards as irrational and even absurd. For instance, the Trump administration made scientifically questionable statements about the pandemic and implemented policies like restricting the entry of the members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into the United States, which appeared irrational and ineffective. They also attempted to ban Chinese apps such as WeChat and TikTok in the United States. Based on these perceptions, Chinese government officials have urged the U.S. government to "change its approach" and "correct the wrongs." Wang Yi, a member of the CCP's Politburo, emphasized that "correcting the misunderstandings in Sino-U.S. relations requires dismantling the high barriers built by misguided perceptions of China." This viewpoint is widespread in China.

In recent years, the idea of "strategic stalemate" has gained acceptance in China. This concept is often viewed as a reflection of the "righting the wrongs" perspective within the context of "the East is rising and the West is declining." The term "strategic stalemate" can be traced back to Mao Zedong's wartime strategy during World War II, where he divided the war between China and Japan into three phases: "strategic defense," "strategic stalemate," and "strategic counteroffensive" (Mao 1952). Looking at it from this perspective, after the Trump administration initiated a trade and technology war against China in 2018, China can be seen as entering a "strategic stalemate" phase. As the United States gradually adjusted its policies, shifting from full decoupling to selective decoupling and risk reduction, China also moved progressively into this "strategic stalemate"

phase. The current trajectory suggests that if China maintains its current approach, it may eventually transition into a “strategic counteroffensive” phase.

On the other hand, U.S. government officials, as highlighted by Campbell in 2022, believe that China should be the party to revise its policies, pointing to China’s flawed domestic and foreign policies. Furthermore, American decision-makers perceive the Biden administration’s “strategic competition” strategy against China as successful and advocate for maintaining the current approach, which involves exerting pressure on China. This stance sharply contrasts with China’s expectations. In essence, the echo chamber effect may lead both sides to hesitate in taking proactive steps in the bilateral relationship, instead favoring a wait-and-see approach. This reluctance arises from both sides seeing themselves as right and just, while perceiving the other side as being in a challenging position.

When difficulties strain the bilateral relationship to a significant extent and compel one side to take measures to stabilize Sino-U.S. relations, the other side often interprets these actions as a sign of weakness and an admission of past errors. They may perceive these efforts to stabilize relations as indicative of the weaker side’s position. Within this psychological framework, even if one side observes the other taking such actions, they tend to adopt a wait-and-see approach. This implies that the other side’s actions haven’t yet fully reversed their prior policies and are unlikely to do so. However, this wait-and-see response can lead to frustration for the side that initiated proactive measures, possibly prompting them to discontinue their conciliatory actions.

In summary, misperceptions between China and the United States can lead to a classic trap in international political psychology. This mechanism operates as follows: Initial confrontations heighten tensions in bilateral relations. In response, one side takes conciliatory measures, raising unrealistic expectations from the other side. When these high expectations aren’t met, it leads to even greater disappointment and anxiety for the proactive side. Faced with little response to their conciliatory efforts, the proactive side becomes vulnerable to criticism and attacks from domestic groups advocating a tougher stance. The challenging circumstances faced by both sides may drive them to adopt more confrontational policies.

In November 2022, leaders from both China and the United States convened in Bali, Indonesia, where they jointly committed to stabilizing the bilateral relations. However, in February 2023, an unexpected incident involving balloons had a detrimental impact on U.S. efforts to ease

tensions. This incident became the subject of intense political debate on social media, ultimately prompted the U.S. government to take an unconventional approach by shooting down the balloons. On the other side of the Pacific, the Chinese government, which had hoped for reconciliation, witnessed the U.S. side politicizing this accidental event, resulting in renewed anger and disappointment. The momentum for rapprochement between China and the United States was disrupted until the summer of 2023. This incident stands as a typical example of how the echo chamber effect can escalate tensions in the relationship. While Sino-U.S. relations have since entered a phase of reconciliation, these underlying psychological mechanisms persist and could continue to influence future reconciliation efforts.

To address this issue, China and the United States must take action during the upcoming reconciliation period to mitigate the echo chamber effect and its impact on their foreign policies. They should prioritize increased official and scholarly exchanges. While both nations have already initiated joint working groups in diplomacy and economics since the summer of 2023, the specific operational details and meeting frequencies of these groups remain unclear. More frequent and institutionalized meetings would enhance the effectiveness of dialogues. Scholarly exchanges between the two countries are gradually resuming, aiding in a more accurate understanding of each other's motivations. However, these exchanges face disruptions due to factors such as limited international flights and security concerns. It is imperative for both sides to take government-level actions to collaboratively remove these obstacles hindering people-to-people exchanges. In summary, normalizing government and scholarly exchanges can help mitigate the echo chamber effect and align foreign policies with reality. While returning to a constructive path in their relationship may be challenging, both sides should work to prevent disruptions caused by misconceptions and allow policy flexibility for their respective governments.

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# AFTERWORD: THE PATHWAYS TO A U.S.-CHINA POST-COVID-19 RECONCILIATION

*Zheng Wang*

Although the impact of COVID-19 as a biological virus has been waning, its persistent effects as a ‘political virus’ continue to poison the well of U.S.-China relations. The far-reaching consequences of the pandemic’s damage to this vital bilateral relationship make the subject particularly important for research and discussion.

If COVID-19 is likened to a war-like experience, can reconciliation between the U.S. and China occur, and if so, what could facilitate this reconciliation? This Afterword aims to provide further discussion regarding potential avenues and strategies for reconciliation between the two nations. It also presents various thoughtful and actionable suggestions and recommendations from the contributing authors of the book.

Reconciliation refers to the process of repairing fractured relationships and fostering peace, especially following a period of conflict or dispute. In the context of two nations, particularly after a significant conflict or war, reconciliation entails a range of mechanisms and processes aimed at addressing past grievances and atrocities. Its goal is to heal the wounds of the past and lay the foundation for a peaceful future. Reconciliation is a multi-faceted and often lengthy journey that demands

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commitment and collective effort from all involved parties. This process frequently unfolds at multiple levels—among leaders, within institutions, and between ordinary citizens—resulting in a comprehensive and lasting peace.

Inspired by many great insights from the chapters of the book, I humbly provide the following thoughts, which I believe encompass several critical aspects and mechanisms essential for the future reconciliation process and peaceful coexistence between these two great nations.

### REOPENING SCHOLARLY AND PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE EXCHANGES

There is a stark contrast in travel between China and the U.S. during and after COVID-19. While over 300 direct flights connected the two countries on a weekly basis pre-pandemic, only 48 per week were operational in October 2023 (Russell 2023)—a number that, while double that of the previous year, still marks a significant decrease. The pandemic has severely impacted travel between the two nations. Although a swift restoration of direct flights could mitigate airfare costs and enhance mutual visits, both countries also need to implement additional measures to alleviate concerns and fears related to visiting each other's territories. Several practical steps could be considered:

#### **1. Establishing a Task Force to Facilitate Visits Between Policy Communities**

Historically, frequent interactions between the policy communities of China and the U.S. have served as a positive legacy, aiding in the management of numerous past crises. However, recent years have seen a substantial disruption in such exchanges. While the drastic decline in these interactions can partly be attributed to COVID-19 and China's strict travel restrictions resulting from its zero-Covid policy, another crucial factor has been the rapidly deteriorating relationship between the two nations. Scholars from both countries, regrettably, find themselves on the frontline of these geopolitical tensions. The 2018 arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver, followed by China's subsequent detentions of Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, generated apprehension among scholars visiting each other's countries. Furthermore, a "visa

war” erupted between the two nations in Spring 2019. An in-depth report by Jane Perlez (2019) of *The New York Times*, titled “F.B.I. Bars Some China Scholars from Visiting U.S. Over Spying Fears,” highlights how the U.S. State Department canceled the visas of Chinese scholars. Securing visas has evolved into a formidable challenge for individuals within the policy communities of both countries.

My experience organizing bilateral dialogues on regional security issues between China and the U.S. over the years has afforded me firsthand knowledge regarding the difficulties of organizing face-to-face exchanges between the two policy communities. Particularly after 2018, scholars from each country have harbored significant concerns about visiting the other, predominantly out of fear for their personal safety. For example, two of China’s most prominent international relations scholars personally conveyed to me their experiences of enduring lengthy and unfriendly inquiries upon entering the U.S. in 2022 and 2023. In a recent interview, a senior Chinese scholar expressed the belief that encounters involving additional questioning and unfriendly treatment at airport entry are very common for Chinese scholars and students, even more so than for their American counterparts entering China (Liu and Zhang 2023). Conversely, many American scholars harbor deep apprehension regarding potential detention as well as electronic surveillance and monitoring when visiting China. This leads to a widespread reluctance among scholars from both nations to visit each other’s countries.

However, face-to-face interactions among policy researchers have a direct influence on bilateral relations, assisting in averting misunderstandings and misjudgments. A joint task force committee ought to be established to explore avenues for reopening and endorsing mutual visits among foreign policy research scholars from both countries. This committee should encapsulate representatives from various government institutions on both sides, ranging from foreign service to border control. Practical measures ought to be instituted to streamline the process of visa applications and airport entry. A mutual understanding could be reached, stipulating that foreign policy scholars from recognized and mutually confirmed institutions, once they have obtained visas through standard channels, should not face unfriendly treatment or unexpected detentions, and that all screenings should conclude during the visa application process. Implementing such a measure would practically facilitate the reopening of scholarly exchanges. It is imperative that both sides recognize that reinvigorating people-to-people exchanges can play a pivotal

role in reducing demonization and misunderstanding between the two nations.

In Chapter 5, Margaret Lewis also puts forth thoughtful and actionable recommendations for both governments to bolster People-to-People ties. I wholeheartedly concur with her assertion that the most urgent priority is to ensure the safety and legal protections of members of the scholarly community when traveling between the two countries. As she rightly points out, “Any ties requiring in-person experiences in the other country hinge on addressing personal safety, as well as legal protections when actions are taken against an individual perceived as a threat to that country’s safety.”

## 2. Protecting Academic Freedom

Increasingly hostile anti-China and anti-U.S. sentiments have escalated issues beyond mere visa wars and concerns about travel safety in both nations. While China has experienced a noticeable surge in nationalism and anti-Americanism in recent decades, the U.S. is undergoing an unexpected revival of McCarthyism. Former U.S. President Trump has openly alleged that “almost every student that comes over” from China “is a spy” (Karni 2018), while FBI director Christopher Wray has advocated for an “all-societal response” to China’s influence and activities in the U.S. (Kranz 2018). There are regular reports of scientists and professors in U.S. universities and research institutes being investigated for their collaborations with China. Meanwhile, in China, with the escalating tension with the U.S., any research on the U.S. has become sensitive. Possible applications of the Law on Foreign Relations of the PRC and the Hong Kong National Security Law, which took effect on July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2020, respectively, are notably concerning, as these laws raise the possibility that research on foreign policy issues, particularly U.S.-China relations, could be tied to national security. This burgeoning trend toward securitization could potentially provide a legal basis for official investigation and interference into academic research.

Navigating the complexities of rising nationalism and a resurgence of McCarthyism demands a comprehensive, nuanced, and multi-faceted strategy. Implementing policies that protect academic freedom and ensuring scholars can express their views without fearing retribution or scrutiny are pivotal. Several concrete steps might include:

- Engaging in regular diplomatic dialogues to clarify misunderstandings and align on sensitive issues such as national security and academic freedom.
- Developing a bilateral agreement safeguarding scholars' rights, ensuring that academic activities are not wrongly classified as espionage.
- Hosting joint academic conventions for scholars from both countries to share research and build mutual respect and understanding.
- Forming support networks or associations that provide assistance and solidarity for scholars experiencing political scrutiny or accusations.
- Encouraging balanced and objective media reporting, and promoting stories of successful collaborations and positive interactions in Sino-American academic relations.

Implementing such diplomatic, institutional, and grassroots approaches might establish a framework where academic freedom is preserved and protected, facilitating healthy, constructive environment between scholars from both countries despite geopolitical tensions. It is crucial to implement these strategies sensitively, respecting each nation's socio-political climate, and ensuring actions are constructive and conducive to lasting, peaceful collaboration and coexistence.

### DE-DEMONIZATION, TRUTH, AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed a tragic process of mutual demonization between the U.S. and China. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 6, both countries have engaged in a blame game and propagated conspiracy theories. This has led to accusations of disinformation, heated rhetoric, and the implementation of reciprocal measures. These actions collectively contributed to the rapid deterioration of their relationship.

Accusations and conspiracy theories regarding the origins of the virus and the handling of the pandemic have created a hostile atmosphere. This has made it increasingly challenging for the U.S. and China to cooperate on global issues. Furthermore, demonization in the media and political discourse in both countries has significantly influenced public opinion. In the U.S., negative portrayals of China have fueled anti-Asian hate. In China, the government's messaging has fostered nationalism and anti-U.S. sentiment.

In the post-COVID-19 era, efforts to improve U.S.-China relations will require both sides to tone down the demonization, engage in constructive dialogue, and seek areas of mutual interest where cooperation is possible. This process of “de-demonization” involves transforming an image or perception of someone or something as evil, malevolent, or threatening into one that is more neutral, human, or normal. In the context of post-conflict reconciliation, de-demonization entails various efforts to change negative perceptions, stereotypes, and animosities between conflicting parties. The aim is to restore a sense of common humanity and mutual respect.

### **1. Strategic Approach to COVID-19 Origins and Future Pandemic Preparedness:**

Navigating through the controversy and misinformation about the origins of COVID-19, which have amplified mutual demonization between two nations, and executing a credible investigation is vital to dispelling rumors and conspiracy theories. Furthermore, understanding the virus’s origin is key to preventing future pandemics by addressing root causes and uncovering potential transmission pathways. As Chapter 3 outlines, however, the politicization of the origins of COVID-19 in both nations has significantly impeded scientific investigation, making a joint inquiry nearly unfeasible. In the post-COVID-19 era, especially following the reopening of certain collaborative areas and moderation of public opinion, both governments should contemplate resuming investigations into the virus’s origin, possibly alongside international institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO). For instance, for China, a comprehensive investigation might scientifically disprove the lab leak theory, while in the U.S., it could quash popular rumors in China relating to a supposed U.S. military lab origin. More importantly, both nations should prioritize establishing a solid collaborative framework for future pandemic preparedness and response. In Chapter 2, Joan Kaufman and Michael Gallo provide detailed suggestions on how the two countries can collaborate in vital areas such as viral sample and genomic data sharing, joint research, and capacity building and training. Such collaboration could contribute toward a gradual de-demonization and normalization of Sino-American relations.

## 2. Narratives Matter: Replacing Narrative of Hatred with Narrative of Humanity

President Trump ignited controversy when he referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus.” This term has faced criticism for stigmatizing individuals of Chinese and East Asian descent, perpetuating harmful stereotypes, and potentially contributing to a surge in anti-Asian discrimination and hate crimes. It is not solely Donald Trump who has utilized these tactics; China has effectively become a convenient target to rally domestic support within the U.S. Adopting a firm stance against China has emerged as one of the scarce areas of bipartisan consensus on Capitol Hill. Consequently, numerous lawmakers and politicians utilized sharp language and polarizing discourse regarding China throughout the pandemic and into the post-pandemic era.

What these lawmakers might overlook is the tendency of their rhetoric to inadvertently fortify Chinese propagandists. Although the Chinese government has consistently censored external criticisms, it has found that many such critiques can be skillfully repurposed for its propaganda needs. Some recent statements from American politicians concerning China have been notably emotional and, at times, mean-spirited and unsubstantiated, rendering them easily exploitable for propaganda aims. Comments from American political figures, such as Mike Pompeo, have frequently been translated and disseminated on Chinese social media. In a press conference in August 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian (2020) famously noted, “Every time Pompeo opens his mouth, the Chinese people support the Communist Party of China more and love the motherland more.” This highlights the potential for words and actions, initially intended for domestic audiences, to inadvertently fuel nationalism and anti-American sentiment, ultimately diminishing American soft power abroad.

Additionally, it appears that many politicians have not taken into account the potential consequences of their extreme rhetoric toward China on Chinese Americans and Asian Americans residing in the U.S. The recent increase in anti-Asian prejudice and crimes in the country cannot be divorced from this rhetoric. Narratives matter, as they have the power to shape the social fabric in which they circulate, influencing both interpersonal and international relationships. Without shifting from a narrative of animosity to one of humanity, envisioning a path toward reconciliation becomes unlikely.

Within the context of reconciliation, acknowledgment and apology can serve several crucial roles in repairing and rebuilding relationships. It is necessary to establish a task force to examine the increase of anti-Asian racism related to the pandemic. A national awareness campaign is needed to recognize the detrimental impacts of divisive rhetoric, notably from political figures. Inclusivity in language and narrative should be integral to educational and institutional training programs. Although it may be difficult to imagine former President Trump apologizing for using the term “Chinese virus” toward Asian Americans, acknowledging the effects of such language, or extending some form of apology and regret, could conceivably be advantageous for the post-COVID-19 reconciliation.

## RESUMING COLLABORATIONS IN CRITICAL AREAS OF GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

In the aftermath of the trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic, the strains in U.S.-China relations are palpable. While steering the two countries back toward the close collaboration experienced during the “golden years” of 2002 to 2016 may seem unfeasible in the current climate, a pragmatic step forward is discernible. Critical arenas exist where the U.S. and China not only harbor mutual interests but also shoulder global responsibilities, providing a possibility for rekindling cooperative endeavors.

### 1. **Public Health:**

As underscored in Chapter 2, the U.S. and China have historically engaged in close and fruitful collaborations in the realm of public health. The bitter and instructive experience of COVID-19 has accentuated the necessity of foresight and preparedness for potential future pandemics, signaling that it is imperative for the two nations to rekindle and elevate their collaborative efforts from this moment forward. It is necessary to establish a bilateral task force dedicated to pandemic preparedness and response. Prioritizing the resumption of data sharing and joint research will also harness the collective intellectual and technological capabilities of both nations.

## **2. Climate Change:**

The environmental endeavors of both the U.S. and China are crucial in shaping the trajectory of global climate action, making this arguably the most important area in which the two countries share responsibility. John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua have notably managed to sustain a dialogue on climate change during the pandemic, an effort that is highly praiseworthy and underscores climate change as a critical global issue that transcends even the immediacy of a global health crisis. Institutionalizing mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation, which are somewhat insulated from broader geopolitical tensions and shifts in personnel, will be critical for maintaining and further strengthening collaborative climate action.

## **3. Nuclear Non-proliferation and Arms Control:**

The rapidly increasing military budgets and modernization programs in East Asian countries have indicated a serious arms race. With rising concerns over potential military conflicts over Taiwan, North Korea, and the South China Sea, military confidence-building measures, including creating notification mechanisms for military exercises and establishment of communication hotlines, are vital for averting unintended conflicts and fostering an environment of strategic stability. In such a complex and sensitive geopolitical environment, U.S.-China collaboration on nuclear non-proliferation significantly impacts global security dynamics and can aid in averting potential threats and mishaps associated with nuclear materials, technology, and expertise.

To resume collaborations in these critical areas that are less controversial and hold mutual interests is both desirable and feasible. Ensuring sustained and effective collaboration demands a pragmatic institutional framework. Therefore, instituting dedicated task forces, facilitating regular high-level dialogues, and establishing joint committees for each critical area become essential. Furthermore, contemplating the revival of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) platform, which has historically proven useful, could serve as a constructive mechanism in guiding and solidifying U.S.-China collaborations. The last S&ED took place in 2016. It may not be realistic for the resumption to be as comprehensive as its previous format, but a new S&ED could



concentrate on several key issues in which both sides share interests and responsibilities.

It is also vital to establish measures that protect these collaborations from intervention and interference by domestic politics. Although it is a two-level game, leadership from both nations must demonstrate a willingness and responsibility to propel collaborations forward without making any country's participation conditional or using it as leverage in negotiating other issues.

### WHAT CAN THIRD COUNTRIES DO FOR PEACEMAKING BETWEEN THE U.S. AND CHINA?

The potent disruption in U.S.-China dynamics has reverberated globally, impacting economies, geopolitics, and global peace and security. The reconciliation of these two global giants transcends bilateral concerns; it symbolizes the linchpin for maintaining a stable global order. While much of the current discussion on the U.S.-China relationship focuses on a bilateral perspective, third countries can play positive roles in fostering an environment conducive to good U.S.-China relations. Peacemaking between the two superpowers is the most valuable job in the current world.

1. **Serving as Mediators:** In numerous Shakespearean tragedies, the impending catastrophe could have been averted through third-party mediation or the revelation of truth. However, the indifference of bystanders invariably paves the way for the tragedy to unfold. We hope that a similar tragedy does not befall U.S.-China relations. Third countries can act as mediators to create a diplomatic link between the U.S. and China. By adopting a neutral stance, similar to the model of Norwegian role in the Oslo Accords, third countries can enhance dialogue. The goal is to enable constructive dialogues that recognize shared global responsibilities, not necessarily to broker specific agreements.
2. **Becoming Truth-Tellers and Critics:** In the shadows of U.S.-China relations, third countries frequently dance a diplomatic waltz, oscillating between appeasement and discreet alliance-building. This often leads to a muddled international environment, where both superpowers might misconstrue global standings. Honest diplomacy

is valuable. Countries can adopt models similar to Singapore, where Singaporean leaders have often conveyed unpleasant yet truthful perspectives to both nations, candidly asserting that certain behaviors are detrimental. Authentic, albeit diplomatically articulated criticisms toward both nations, when warranted, could nurture a more transparent and accountable international milieu.

3. **Forming Cautious Alliances:** The historical precedent of alliances, particularly those forged against a single adversary, suggests a tendency toward escalating arms races and security dilemmas. Third countries should navigate with caution, ensuring that their alliances are not construed as aggressive posturing. All countries should understand that national security is tethered to global peace, and therefore, a more balanced and non-provocative approach to alliance formation is preferable.

All things considered, third countries, wielding influence as mediators, critics, and non-aggressive entities in alliances, can potentially assuage tensions and nurture an environment conducive to reconciliation and cooperative global governance.

It is a profound tragedy to witness two superpowers moving toward full confrontation during the COVID-19 period, despite still sharing significant common interests and responsibilities. For social scientists, this pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges that compel us to reevaluate established and enduring conceptual frameworks related to international relations, nationalism, and symbolic politics. This book strives to explore the complex impacts of COVID-19 on U.S.-China relations. It aims to shed light on the ways in which, and the reasons why, this significant relationship has been negatively influenced by the pandemic. It underscores the need for an objective and in-depth reflection on the pandemic and its far-reaching consequences, a crucial step toward healing and restoration in the post-COVID era. We sincerely offer this book as a dedicated starting point and effort in this critically important process of reflection.

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Throughout the pandemic, in many of our Zoom meetings, despite the virus spreading in both countries and the deterioration of bilateral relations fueled by various conspiracy theories and hateful rhetoric in the media, scholars from both nations consistently convened online to discuss various aspects of bilateral relations. These gatherings remain cherished memories from those challenging times. The dialogues enriched perspectives and deepened understanding of each other’s contexts and perceptions, especially during a time when travel was halted and bilateral relations encountered significant obstacles.

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We hope that the dialogues and discussions contained within these pages serve as a substantive resource, nurturing a deeper understanding and fostering ongoing dialogue on the U.S.-China relations.

In gratitude,  
Zheng Wang

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