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Executive Summary

The United States is currently on course for globe-spanning conflict with China. Yet America's progressive movement is trapped in uncertainty over how to confront these dangers.

On the one hand, progressives have ample reason for antagonism toward Beijing: many of the devastating effects of neoliberal globalization, like deindustrialization, are closely associated with China. The Chinese government is forthrightly autocratic and responsible for terrible human rights violations rising to the level of crimes against humanity. Intense political pressure from other quarters makes supporting conflict the easy path forward.

But embracing a confrontational and exclusionary approach toward China would foreclose most progressive opportunities in the United States and around the world. Once underway, U.S.–China conflict would define what's possible not only in international relations, but on all major domestic issues as well, creating a political landscape decisively tilted toward authoritarians, militarists, nationalists, and nativists. As our societies reorganized around militarization, vital progressive goals like the climate transition and robust public health would be pushed aside in favor of concentrating on how to regiment “our” people to subordinate “their” people.

The alternative — fostering cooperation between the two powers — would not only prevent great power violence but also enhance human rights, workers' power, global development, and a just climate transition in both countries and around the world.

It is crucial that progressives gain clarity on the key tensions in U.S.–China relations, bolster their understanding of what a progressive response would be, and increase their urgency on moving the U.S. and China off the current trajectory toward serious conflict.

This research brief provides an overview of key facets in the relationship and recommendations for how progressives can orient themselves on each:

- Jobs and the economy
- Trade, technology, industrial policy
- Military and security
- Human rights and democracy
- Climate change and public health

Foregrounding internationalism, global cooperation, and multilateral collaboration are essential to solving shared challenges like climate change, public health crises, and global inequality. This can be accomplished only by forging a progressive path for U.S.–China relations that reduces bilateral tensions while confronting the root causes of great power conflict and the rise of illiberal politics in China, the United States, and around the world.

A choice that will shape everything

In the three decades leading to the global financial crisis of 2008, neoliberal globalization stitched the world together through a common set of market-dominated institutions and ideologies. Even as it built up dangerous social inequalities and dissipated the collective capacities necessary to act on the climate crisis, neoliberal globalization also fostered domestic consensus in the major countries and great power peace among them through the promise of shared growth.

Since 2008, that promise has been exposed as an illusion. The domestic and international accords that neoliberal globalization underwrote have disintegrated. The inequalities that it exacerbated have been exploited to mobilize popular support for interracial, interethnic, intercommunal, and international conflict over what now appears to be only zero-sum possibilities for growth and opportunity. The need to unify “us” against “them” creates broad support for strongman politics.

The United States and the world face a fateful choice. We can embrace one form or another of nativism, nationalism, and militarism, all of which aggravate the zero-sum structure of competition and thus make escalating cycles of violence and authoritarianism increasingly likely. Or we can pursue the progressive alternative: solidarity among those now pitted against one another to win structural reforms that would succeed economically, politically, and ecologically because they achieve inclusive prosperity.

On most of the core issues that will decide this epochal choice — migration, labor, climate — progressives in the U.S. stand clearly on the side of an inclusive, positive-sum solution to the crisis. But on the single most important international relationship, that between the United States and China, confusion and ambivalence reign among progressives.

There are good reasons for this: Many of the devastating effects of neoliberal globalization, like deindustrialization, are closely associated with China. The Chinese government is forthrightly autocratic, responsible for terrible human rights violations rising to the level of crimes against humanity, and increasingly targets all critics for repression — including progressive activists. Some U.S. progressives have also embraced animosity against China because it seems the only way to advance any sort of reform in a dysfunctional political system. As a result, most leaders in Washington now consider a confrontational and exclusionary approach toward China to be the only point of broad agreement in American politics.

To continue in this direction, however, would foreclose most progressive possibilities in the United States and around the world. The opening in American politics of recent years to questions of how to deepen democracy and create an egalitarian society would be sidelined in favor of a focus on how to regiment “our” people to subordinate “their” people — and how to suppress those on “our” side who dissent. Resources would be concentrated on the military; militarism would steadily expand in civilian realms, such as subordinating scientific research and economic development to the needs of great

power conflict. The strictures of compulsory patriotism would marginalize all critics of injustice in American society.

Pressure to choose sides or face punishment would become increasingly intense on those in each country with ties to the other and on third countries. Fragmentation of the global economy and global politics would intensify zero-sum dynamics. As the escalatory spiral accelerated, violent proxy conflicts would become more common, perhaps devastating the most vulnerable countries, as during the Cold War. And the most terrifying possibility — a war between the United States and China — would become a real possibility.

It is crucial that progressives gain clarity on the key tensions in U.S.–China relations, bolster their understanding of what a progressive response would be, and increase their urgency on moving the U.S. and China off the current trajectory toward serious conflict.

How can we understand the sudden reemergence of great power conflict? How can we maintain a sharply critical perspective on inequalities and injustices in both countries without fueling nationalist double standards in either? What is the program of political demands that would be both practical and progressive in the current context?

Two countries dominated by anxiety and insecurity

In the United States, China is often cast as the polar opposite of America — tyranny versus freedom, state control versus free markets and civil society, imitation and cheating versus innovation, a discontented power versus a status quo power.¹

¹ The theme is most crudely asserted on the right, but the Biden administration couches its geopolitical agenda in the same terms. Antony J. Blinken, “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China” (speech at George

While there are significant differences, the failure to recognize deep similarities has seriously distorted U.S. understanding of China and policy toward it.² The most important priorities for regular people in China, as in America, are good jobs, stability and opportunity for their families, thriving communities, and robust and affordable basic goods like healthcare, housing, and education. Recent decades in China, as in the United States, have seen an enormous increase in inequality, indebtedness, precarity, social competition, and elite corruption that undermine these goals, giving rise to widespread dissatisfaction.³

What does the Chinese elite want? Like status quo elites in all countries, the Party's motivation is to sustain economic growth and political legitimacy within the existing system. These are two sides of the same coin. Without growth, legitimacy would crumble; likewise, the instability caused by an illegitimate system would undermine growth.

Chinese leaders are proud of their success in guiding economic development that has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. They hunger for international recognition of these achievements and they bridle at criticism coming from the rich countries, which they view as hypocrisy aimed at preventing China's success.

Though China has avoided foreign military conflict for more than four decades, it has been more assertive in its foreign policy in recent years, raising fears in the United States and Asia. Yet Chinese leaders also recognize that the crumbling global system of

Washington University, May 26, 2022)

<https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china>. For an attempt to explain the glaring inconsistencies in the democracy versus autocracy framework, see Jake Werner, "What Biden Means When He Says We're Fighting 'Global Battle for Democracy,'" *Responsible Statecraft*, March 31, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/03/31/what-biden-means-when-he-says-we-re-fighting-global-battle-for-democracy>.

² For discussion of what sets China apart and how these differences arose from an unusual position within neoliberal globalization, see Jake Werner, "The Sources of China's Vision for Global Economic Governance," Boston University Global Development Policy Center, *Global China Initiative Working Paper* 18 (September 2021), 1–21, <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/2021/09/28/how-the-liberal-international-order-shaped-chinas-challenge-to-global-economic-governance>, and "China's Market Reformers: Review of Isabella Weber, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy*," *Dissent*, 68, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 135–141, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/chinas-market-reformers>.

³ This is not a moral equivalence but recognition of practical similarities arising from a shared embeddedness in a common global system. If taken in a critical rather than apologetic spirit, such a recognition could reduce the dangerous polarization of self-identity on both sides and open possibilities for shared efforts to improve people's lives.

open trade and great power peace is the foundation of Chinese growth. They resent U.S. restrictions on Chinese growth and status, but they are loath to destabilize existing arrangements.⁴

Even in the most sensitive disputes — those that impinge on territory and sovereignty — Chinese leaders carefully calibrate the degree and nature of their coercive measures to avoid the outbreak of conflict. In other areas, they exercise a degree of caution and restraint unusual for great powers, indicating that they do not seek to overthrow the existing global order.⁵

Chinese leaders, like their American counterparts, have been struggling to navigate the growing instability in the global system since 2008. In the volatile yet stagnant global economy of the 2010s, Chinese leaders (like American leaders) felt increasingly anxious about their ability to win a share of global growth and sustain their own legitimacy. That made them (like American leaders) highly sensitive to both grassroots discontent and external challenges. President Obama's pivot to Asia, for example, though it posed no immediate threat to China, was seen by many in Beijing as a threatening move.⁶

In response to these fears, over the last decade Chinese leaders have increasingly pursued a foreign policy that they understand as defensive but that other countries perceive as threatening. From moves in the South China Sea that Beijing sees as protection against the danger of the U.S. cutting off Chinese trade, to the Belt and Road Initiative, conceived to provide an outlet for surplus Chinese production and to secure access to raw materials, to the use of state subsidies to develop high-profit sectors necessary to escape the middle-income trap, China's foreign policy antagonizes

⁴ This is a central theme of top leaders' speeches, e.g., Li Qiang, "Opening Remarks at the 14th Annual Meeting of the New Champions" (speech at World Economic Forum, Tianjin, China, June 29, 2023), <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/06/amnc23-premier-li-qiangs-opening-remarks-at-the-14th-annual-meeting-of-the-new-champions>.

⁵ Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Getting China Right: Resoluteness Without Overreaction," Brookings Institution (June 2023), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/getting-china-right-resoluteness-without-overreaction>.

⁶ Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the U.S. Pacific Pivot," *China Leadership Monitor* 38, July 17, 2012, <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM38MS.pdf>.

similarly insecure American leaders — whose pushback only confirms the fears of Chinese leaders and deepens the cycle of insecurity and nationalism on both sides.⁷

The U.S. and China are thus locked in a zero-sum struggle that is distracting both sides from the root causes of the conflict and strengthening the forces of authoritarianism and nationalism in both countries.

The U.S. and China are thus locked in a zero-sum struggle that is distracting both sides from the root causes of the conflict and strengthening the forces of authoritarianism and nationalism in both countries. The crudely punitive measures advocated by American neoconservatives, reactionary nationalists, and military interests offer no path to success and are likely to make the problem even worse by convincing the Chinese leadership that its only choice is to take aggressive countermeasures.⁸ In effect, the proponents of confrontation in both countries work hand in hand to poison the relationship.

An alternative China policy would foreground internationalism, global cooperation, and multilateral efforts against climate change, public health dangers, and global inequality. Such an approach would not only reduce bilateral tensions, it would also confront the root causes of great power conflict and the rise of illiberal politics in China, the United States, and around the world.

⁷ On the South China Sea dispute, see M. Taylor Fravel and Kacie Miura, “Stormy Seas: The South China Sea in US-China Relations,” in Avery Goldstein and Jacques deLisle, *After Engagement: Dilemmas in U.S.–China Security Relations* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2021): 155–183, <https://www.taylorfravel.com/documents/research/fravel.2021.stormy.seas.pdf>. On the Belt and Road Initiative, Min Ye, *The Belt Road and Beyond: State-Mobilized Globalization in China: 1998–2018* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2020). On industrial policy, Barry Naughton, *The Rise of China’s Industrial Policy, 1978 to 2020* (México, DF: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Facultad de Economía, 2021).

⁸ Tong Zhao, “How China’s Echo Chamber Threatens Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (May/June 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/-china-echo-chamber-threatens-taiwan>.

Jobs and the economy

A slow and highly unequal recovery in the American economy following the 2008 financial crisis — which created few high-quality jobs but concentrated even more wealth at the top — raised serious questions about the bipartisan project of neoliberal globalization. China's much larger stimulus after 2008 and its successful industrial policy made for a sharp contrast with stagnation in the United States. American leaders began to fear that Chinese companies could dominate the "industries of the future," undermining economic opportunity for American workers and businesses at home and abroad while creating new vulnerabilities for U.S. national security.⁹

At the same time, for many people in the U.S. devastated by neoliberal globalization, China provided a human face for impersonal economic forces. Though U.S. corporations had been deindustrializing the country for decades before China became a major manufacturer, U.S. factory closures after China joined the WTO in 2001 were front of mind. China's rapid growth was often discussed in the U.S. while the thousands of grassroots protests in China against its terrible costs were little known, encouraging xenophobic resentment rather than working-class solidarity as the predominant U.S. response.¹⁰ The popular association of economic anxiety with China offered political support to U.S. leaders pursuing an anti-China economic agenda largely focused on protecting U.S. corporate interests.

Chinese leaders, far from delighting in U.S. misfortune, experienced the 2008 crisis as deeply disorienting and alarming.¹¹ Their previous plans to gradually implement

⁹ In 2010, for example, President Obama asserted: "we can't stand by as we let China race ahead to create the clean energy jobs and industries of the future." (Barack Obama remarks at a bipartisan meeting with congressional leadership, "Another Bipartisan Meeting: Help for Small Business & Energy Reform" July 27, 2010), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2010/07/27/another-bipartisan-meeting-help-small-business-energy-ref-orm>.

¹⁰ Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹¹ David Dollar, "U.S.-China Trade War Has Its Seeds in the Financial Crisis," *Brookings*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/u-s-china-trade-war-has-its-seeds-in-the-financial-crisis/>; Lin William Cong, et al., "China Weathered the Global Recession with an Aggressive Stimulus Package. But Did It Prop Up the Wrong Firms?," *Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University*, August 1, 2019, <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/china-credit-expansion-unintended-consequences>.

neoliberal reforms stood in shambles. With stagnation in its previous engine of growth, export markets to the rich countries, Chinese leaders saw no other choice but to inflate a huge real estate bubble despite fears that it might collapse at any moment. The well-connected economic elites that captured most of the gains flaunted their wealth, aggravating popular resentment and leading to an ominous rise of populist political currents. In 2015, the Chinese financial system came close to a serious crisis. President Trump's trade war and the rise of protectionist measures targeting China followed soon after.¹²

Today, Chinese leaders are preoccupied with the same anxieties troubling their U.S. counterparts. They worry about being excluded from profitable markets and sectors, missing out on high-quality jobs to sustain their own economic development and domestic legitimacy. They fear that U.S. technological supremacy endangers China's national security.

Rather than condemning Chinese leaders for sharing the same insecurities and pursuing the same goals that they do, U.S. leaders should look more deeply at the problem. The United States and China are trapped in zero-sum economic competition today because neoliberal globalization consistently failed to create the broad growth that would allow prosperity in all countries. This is a result of two key imbalances in the global economy: inequality between workers and business and inequality between the developing countries and the developed countries.

¹² Thomas Orlik, *China: The Bubble That Never Pops* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

The United States and China are trapped in zero-sum economic competition today because neoliberal globalization consistently failed to create the broad growth that would allow prosperity in all countries.

Both within and between countries, neoliberal globalization has concentrated income at the top. Investors looking for quick returns have channeled capital largely into high-income neighborhoods, cities, and countries. That has created a winner-take-all dynamic, leaving behind large numbers in every country while creating a pervasive sense of insecurity even among the winners.

Today, American leaders have finally begun to act against the domestic inequalities produced by market competition and corporate power. But they cannot see that international inequalities are equally corrosive to U.S. prosperity. A zero-sum struggle with China over who will survive in the dysfunctional global economy is a recipe for disaster.

The goal should instead be to reform the global economy so that growth and legitimacy are revived by spreading opportunity broadly. The key reforms are:

1. Increasing the power of workers at home and abroad by implementing a global system of labor rights as strong as the global system protecting the rights of capital that the U.S. built in recent decades.¹³ This would reduce low-wage foreign pressure on American workers while raising incomes around the world, spreading prosperity, and increasing global consumer demand;
2. Reducing the enormous gap between the rich countries and the rest of the world, not through simple redistribution but by dramatically increasing development

¹³ Yarik Kryvoi, "Three Dimensions of Inequality in International Investment Law," British Institute of International and Comparative Law, September 2, 2020, https://www.biicl.org/documents/117_tackling-inequalities-international-investment_law.pdf.

investment in the Global South.¹⁴ Because this would significantly strengthen the world's wealth-creating capacity, it would allow workers' wages to rise without sacrificing business profitability — replacing the winner-take-all cycle with a cycle of expanding gains for everyone.

This new system of global growth would benefit investors and workers alike while reducing the destabilizing inequality and insecurity that feed racism, nationalism, and authoritarianism.¹⁵ By opening enough space for both the U.S. and China to flourish, it would create the basis for healthy competition and cooperation between our two countries.

Trade, technology, industrial policy

Leaders in both countries currently doubt the possibility of such mutually beneficial reforms. After years of rising tensions, they are skeptical that their counterparts on the other side would negotiate in good faith. The very weakness of workers and the Global South makes great powers — habitually responsive only to strength — discount the hopeful possibilities that could arise from broader inclusion. Far from sharing power, American and Chinese leaders want to hoard it so they can succeed in conflict with each other.

As a result, economic policy on both sides is focused on reducing vulnerability to economic coercion by the other and on gaining advantage against the other. Where leaders on both sides once embraced a global division of labor that they claimed would benefit everyone, they now want to be largely self-sufficient in high-value and strategically important sectors like advanced computing, biotech, clean energy, and vehicles. This is reflected in the aim of “decoupling” (or, more selectively, “derisking”), under which the intertwined economies and societies of the U.S. and China would be

¹⁴ Independent Expert Group, “Strengthening Multilateral Development Banks: The Triple Agenda,” June 30, 2023), <https://icrier.org/g20-ieg/report.html>; Jonathan Glennie, *The Future of Aid: Global Public Investment* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁵ Jake Werner, “Only the Left Can Save Globalization Now,” interviewed by Eric Levitz, *New York Magazine*, February 9, 2021, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/02/only-the-left-can-save-globalization-now.html>.

pulled apart. In the process, a unified global economy is moving toward fragmentation within rival geopolitical blocs.¹⁶

China has long sought to develop its own production capacity in key products and technologies, seeking both the profits and high-paying jobs that go with them, but it did so through integration with global markets.¹⁷ The move to decoupling took off with Trump's trade war, which dramatically increased tariffs on Chinese exports to the United States, and his attempt to destroy China's most important multinational company, Huawei.¹⁸

Biden has kept Trump's measures in place and added to them, seeking to deny Chinese companies access to strategically important technologies like advanced semiconductors and to bring allies on board a shared agenda of selective exclusion and retaliation against China.¹⁹ While the bipartisan technology and trade agenda is heavy on rhetoric about American workers, the substance of the policy is focused on the profitability of domestic manufacturers, their access to critical raw materials, and defending the U.S. stranglehold on advanced technologies.²⁰

Some progressives nonetheless are using U.S.–China hostility as an opening to advance their agenda of breaking free-market dogma, establishing a place for industrial policy, and limiting the pressures of global competition on American workers.²¹

Exploiting geopolitical tension in this way is a Faustian bargain: It risks institutionalizing

¹⁶ Tom Hancock, "US-China Tensions Fragmenting Trade and Investment, IMF Finds," Bloomberg, April 8, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-08/us-china-tensions-fragmenting-trade-and-investment-imf-find>.

¹⁷ Jonas Nahm, *Collaborative Advantage: Forging Green Industries in the New Global Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁸ Jon Bateman, "The Evolution of U.S. Thinking and Policy," in *U.S.-China Technological "Decoupling": A Strategy and Policy Framework* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022): 9–34, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Bateman_US-China_Decoupling_final.pdf.

¹⁹ Alex W. Palmer, "An Act of War: Inside America's Silicon Blockade Against China," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/12/magazine/semiconductor-chips-us-china.html>.

²⁰ Jake Sullivan, "The Biden Administration's International Economic Agenda" (speech, Brookings Institution, Washington, April 27, 2023), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/es_20230427_sullivan_intl_economic_agenda_transcript.pdf; Peter Navarro and Kent Lassman, "Trade," in *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, 2023), https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-26.pdf.

²¹ Sameera Fazili, Roosevelt Institute, "Industrial Policy Synergies: Reflections from Biden Administration Alumni" (April 25, 2023), <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/publications/industrial-policy-synergies-industrial-policy-macroeconomic-policy>.

a post-neoliberal form of economic statecraft specifically devoted to great power conflict rather than human well-being.

The focus of industrial policy then would be on products useful in international conflict, as today's fixation on advanced technology and military production already reveals. Core human needs of housing, health, and education would be marginalized, dismissed as distractions from the urgent priorities of national security. If we continue on the current trajectory toward conflict, the pressure to sacrifice the interests of workers in the name of strengthening "our" corporations would swamp any short-term gains.

Yet the anti-China trade and technology agenda does reflect real problems that arose from China's success within neoliberal globalization. In a winner-take-all context, Chinese competition hurt workers in rich and poor countries alike. The concentration of manufacturing within China made global supply chains vulnerable to localized disruption, as dramatized by worldwide shortages in the early months of the covid pandemic.²² And unique benefits of industrialization, like rapid productivity growth, were largely channeled to Chinese business owners and (even more) the handful of major brands in the rich countries that exploited Chinese workers through subcontracting.²³

Raising the power of workers and the breadth of investment flows, discussed above, would address some but not all of these problems. Three additional reforms are needed:

1. Freeing all countries — not just the powerful ones that can break the rules with impunity — to pursue industrial policies aimed at making their companies more competitive in the global market;²⁴

²² Alistair MacDonald, "Coronavirus Exposes How Much Global Steelmakers Rely on China," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-exposes-how-much-global-steelmakers-rely-on-china-11583427077>.

²³ Greg Linden, Kenneth L. Kraemer, and Jason Dedrick, "Who Captures Value in a Global Innovation Network? The Case of Apple's iPod," *Communications of the ACM* 52, No. 3 (March 2009): 140–144.

²⁴ Kevin P. Gallagher and Richard Kozul-Wright, *The Case for a New Bretton Woods* (Polity, 2022).

2. Liberalizing intellectual property restrictions that today concentrate the gains of technology in the hands of investors (mostly Western but increasingly Chinese as well), so that the capacity to create wealth can expand broadly;²⁵
3. Establishing a global regime of genuinely universal public goods — health care, education, housing, clean energy, basic infrastructure — that would become the foundation for social inclusion and productive investment everywhere rather than just in the handful of rich cities and countries.

The economic nationalism that has come to dominate thinking about trade, technology, and industrial policy seeks exclusive possession of the benefits of knowledge and exchange in order to prepare for international conflict. In the process, it exacerbates inequality and insecurity in ways that dramatically increase the likelihood of international conflict.²⁶

A progressive reform agenda, in contrast, would create a new foundation for people around the world to connect with the global economy, making good on the promise of growth and opportunity that unconstrained markets never could. That would provide an authentic resolution to the problems that are disingenuously being used to justify a destructive fragmentation of the global economy.

Military and security

The rapid rise of Chinese military strength has forced a rethink of security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. Although Chinese military spending as a share of GDP has been stable for decades, the speed of growth in the economy has allowed China to build a formidable challenge to U.S. military power. China's more assertive military posture in the region has frightened U.S. military planners and unnerved China's neighbors. Even as the U.S. maintains a far larger and more powerful military presence around the world

²⁵ Dean Baker, "Want to Reverse Inequality? Change Intellectual Property Rules," *The Nation*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/economy/inequality-patents-taxes-copyright>.

²⁶ Jake Werner, "Industrial Policy's Comeback: Against Economic Nationalism," *Boston Review* Forum. 19 (September 15, 2021): 77–81, <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/industrial-policy-comeback/>.

and annually spends about three times as much as China on its military,²⁷ the gap in military power has fallen rapidly in the Asia-Pacific region.

The United States has a crucial role to play in preserving stability and security in the region. At the same time, U.S.–China tension is setting in motion a highly destabilizing security dilemma, in which each side takes measures it considers defensive but that the other side perceives as threatening. If allowed to continue, the outcome will be spiraling military escalation, a regional arms race, increasing militarism and nationalism in all countries, a loss of resources for social needs on all sides, and perhaps a catastrophic military conflict.²⁸

The U.S. and China are currently engaged in tit-for-tat provocations around Taiwan and in the South China Sea that reduce security for everyone.

The first priority should be reducing military tensions in the region. The U.S. and China are currently engaged in tit-for-tat provocations around Taiwan and in the South China Sea that reduce security for everyone and raise the risk of an accident or miscalculation exploding into serious conflict.²⁹ This constant friction helps nationalists in both countries while further eroding previous understandings that secured the peace. One of the only material gains from the reopening of U.S.–China diplomatic exchanges over the last year has been progress in reducing the rhetorical temperature and discussions on

²⁷ M. Taylor Fravel, George J. Gilboy, and Eric Heginbotham, “Estimating China’s Defense Spending: How to Get It Wrong (and Right),” *Texas National Security Review* 7, no. 3 (Summer 2024), <https://tnsr.org/2024/06/estimating-chinas-defense-spending-how-to-get-it-wrong-and-right/>.

²⁸ Jessica Chen Weiss, “The China Trap,” *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 5 (August/September 2022), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-trap-us-foreign-policy-zero-sum-competition>.

²⁹ Michael D. Swaine, “Ending the Destructive Sino-U.S. Interaction Over Taiwan: A Call for Mutual Reassurance,” Quincy Institute, October 24, 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/research/ending-the-destructive-sino-u-s-interaction-over-taiwan-a-call-for-mutual-reassurance>; Sarang Shidore, “The South China Sea Risks a Military Crisis,” *Foreign Policy*, May 31, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/31/philippines-south-china-sea-shangri-la>.

safety protocols and confidence-building measures, but much remains to be done on these counts.³⁰

Particularly fruitful would be opening arms control talks with China. Last February, China — breaking from its previous refusal to discuss limiting nuclear weapons because its own arsenal is dwarfed by those of the U.S. and Russia — proposed negotiations among all nuclear powers on a shared no-first-use treaty.³¹ Biden, who broke his campaign pledge that his administration would codify a strictly defensive nuclear policy,³² has not responded.

Second, we should reject calls from the military-industrial complex and the foreign policy establishment to dramatically expand the U.S. military. Rather than huge new outlays on weapons, military planners should be rethinking U.S. force posture in the Asia-Pacific to better deter China. The impulse to maintain absolute access for the U.S. military over waters and airspace near China is both needlessly threatening and resource-intensive. Instead, the U.S. should support regional allies to build up their own coastal and air defenses while switching to a lighter footprint for the U.S. presence: reducing the size of forward deployments, dispersing existing forces, and developing a strategy aimed at denying China control over the space in the event of conflict.³³

Even as the U.S. takes these prudent measures with its partners, however, it should repudiate the current push that they take sides against China, which antagonizes leaders in third countries afraid of being caught between the two powers while confirming Chinese fears of encirclement. Current U.S. policy one-sidedly emphasizes measures aimed at intimidating China into restraint, with almost no positive initiatives

³⁰ Michael D. Swaine, “The Lost Opportunity of the Biden-Xi Meeting,” *Responsible Statecraft*, November 16, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/biden-xi-meeting>.

³¹ W.J. Hennigan, “The U.S. Has Received a Rare Invitation from China. There Is Only One Right Answer,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/15/opinion/china-nuclear-weapons.html>.

³² Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, “The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review: Arms Control Subdued by Military Rivalry,” *Federation of American Scientists*, October 27, 2022, <https://fas.org/publication/2022-nuclear-posture-review>.

³³ Rachel Esplin Odell, Eric Heginbotham, et al., “Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia,” Quincy Institute, June 22, 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/research/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia>.

that would make peace an appealing prospect. Far from stabilizing the situation, such an imbalance exacerbates elite resentment and popular nationalism in China and risks convincing Chinese leaders that military action is their only choice to secure core interests.

An effective military balance of power requires far greater emphasis on nonmilitary opportunities to strengthen relations with both third countries and China itself, with a particular focus on nonexclusionary initiatives. The economic side of a positive program is addressed above — and its success is possible only through U.S.–China cooperation. The security agenda should build on existing ASEAN frameworks and revive bilateral U.S.–China diplomacy that Trump abandoned and Biden only nominally restored. Such measures are not meant to solve the underlying source of tensions, but to buy time for the structural reforms to the global economy and longer term security initiatives that could.

Success in both the short- and long-term also requires much more robust U.S. consultation with groups in Asia beyond the business and security elites on which U.S. foreign policy has overwhelmingly centered. The interests of labor, feminists, peace groups, human rights advocates, and progressive political leaders have been marginalized in U.S. considerations, impoverishing our understanding of social cleavages in the region and excluding critical perspectives on the effects of U.S. power.

³⁴ Even as the U.S. acts to maintain stability in the short term, these voices will be crucial in shaping reforms that could create a new regional security architecture to sustain peace and prosperity in the long term.

³⁴ Women Cross DMZ, "Feminist Peace Summit Recap: Building a Movement-Driven U.S. Feminist Foreign Policy for Peace," May 28, 2024, <https://www.womencrossdmz.org/feminist-peace-summit-recap-building-a-movement-driven-u-s-feminist-foreign-policy-for-peace>.

Human rights and democracy in China and the United States

The Chinese government's record on human rights and political liberties improved substantially over the two decades following the 1989 massacre of protesters at Tiananmen Square.

Though a deplorable level of repression persisted, unprecedented space also opened to journalists, human rights lawyers, labor organizers, feminist activists, and government critics.³⁵

Over the last decade most of those gains have been reversed, and many who once raised a critical voice have been imprisoned or intimidated into silence. The Chinese government put an end to Hong Kong's limited but vibrant democracy and civil society after the huge 2019 protests for greater democracy.³⁶ And it has undertaken a massive campaign of forced assimilation against ethnic minorities, particularly targeting Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang with mass internment in concentration camps.³⁷ Most of the camps have closed now, but an enormous number of those targeted were moved to the formal prison system while the rest of the population is subjected to intensive surveillance and police presence.³⁸

Those in the United States advocating economic and military confrontation with China have seized upon this awful record of repression to bolster their arguments.

Instrumentalizing human rights to promote international conflict is persuasive in the U.S. foreign policy community because a crudely punitive approach to wrongdoing has

³⁵ Jude Howell, "Civil Society In China: Chipping Away at the Edges," *Development* 50, no. 3 (September 2007): 17–23.

³⁶ Zen Soo and Huizhong Wu, "How Democracy Was Dismantled in Hong Kong in 2021," Associated Press, December 29, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/china-hong-kong-beijing-democracy-national-security-9e3c405923c24b6889c1bcf171f6def4>.

³⁷ Christian Shepherd, "Fear and Oppression in Xinjiang: China's War on Uighur Culture," *FT Weekend Magazine*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/48508182-d426-11e9-8367-807ebd53ab77>.

³⁸ William Nee, "A UN Body Sheds Light on the Fate of Disappeared Uyghurs," August 30, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/a-un-body-sheds-light-on-the-fate-of-disappeared-uyghurs/>.

been so dominant in U.S. political culture for the last four decades. But just as in domestic policy the strategy of mass incarceration provided an excuse to ignore the root causes of crime, so in foreign policy coercive and punitive strategies are more likely to backfire than to improve the situation. A more effective human rights agenda is possible, but it requires that we draw a sharp line between criticism of China's human rights record and the militarists pushing a containment policy.

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The Chinese government's refrain to the people of China is that U.S. criticism is disingenuous — that the real U.S. agenda is to stifle the Chinese economy and encircle China militarily. It says anyone critical of its own policies is doing the work of the foreign enemy. Because U.S. policy is explicitly aimed at maintaining the economic and military subordination of China, these claims have tremendous power. The current U.S. agenda conflates the defense of universal values with the defense of American power, endangering popular Chinese support for human rights and democracy and undermining Chinese dissidents.³⁹

A serious strategy for human rights in China must therefore begin with the alternative approach on economic and security issues outlined above. Nationalism and authoritarianism thrive in a climate of zero-sum international conflict, so establishing cooperative great power relations is a necessary, though by no means sufficient, condition for reopening political space in China.

³⁹ Jake Werner, "Outrage Without Strategy Means Failure on China and Human Rights," Quincy Institute, The 75th Anniversary of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights: A Symposium, December 8, 2023, <https://quincyinst.org/2023/12/08/outrage-without-strategy-means-failure-on-china-and-human-rights>.

This is just as true in the United States as in China. Periods of heightened international conflict in U.S. history have invariably brought major violations of individual rights and democratic norms, targeting political dissenters and those considered racially, ethnically, or religiously foreign in some way. Even though the conflict with China has not yet reached the point of violent conflict, the predictable consequences of international tension are already clearly visible in U.S. society, both in popular anti-Asian racism and in the racial profiling of the Justice Department's China Initiative.⁴⁰

Escalating conflict between the U.S. and China will also exacerbate human rights violations in those countries caught in between. The U.S. government has already demonstrated a willingness to provide support (including military support) to governments in India and the Philippines, both of which are guilty of widespread human rights abuses, in order to secure them as allies against China.⁴¹

The first priority must therefore be to reverse the current path to international conflict that is contributing to a hostile human rights climate in many countries. But, if American leaders renounce the instrumentalization of human rights to the agenda of American power, the United States could also take positive action to support human rights in China.

The key principle is consistency. American allies often commit abuses similar to those of the Chinese government yet face no consequences, encouraging cynicism not just in Beijing but around the world. Rather than condemning only the crimes of official enemies, the United States should stand for the impartial application of liberal values. Most issues on which a human rights critique of the Chinese government is warranted

⁴⁰ Daegyeong Kim, "Anti-Asian Racism and the Racial Politics of U.S.-China Great Power Rivalry," PhD diss., (UC, San Diego, 2022), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/94j226w2>; Eileen Guo, Jess Aloe, and Karen Hao, "The US Crackdown on Chinese Economic Espionage Is a Mess. We Have the Data to Show it.," *MIT Technology Review*, December 2, 2021, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/12/02/1040656/china-initiative-us-justice-department>.

⁴¹ Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, "Navigating the Democracy-Security Dilemma in U.S. Foreign Policy: Lessons from Egypt, India, and Turkey," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 4, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/11/navigating-the-democracy-security-dilemma-in-us-foreign-policy-lessons-from-egypt-india-and-turkey>; Nick Aspinwall, "The U.S. Has a Troublesome Asian Ally Against China," *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/21/us-philippines-military-relationship-ally-human-rights-china>.

— respect for minorities, police brutality, state-promoted misogyny, systematic violation of labor rights, repressive surveillance — would benefit from the U.S. government holding itself, American corporations, and its allies to the same standard it is demanding of China.

When the U.S. does exert pressure on China, it should base its concerns in international human rights law and standards — particularly those to which China has already acceded — and pursue complaints through multilateral venues like U.N. human rights bodies. The U.S. should also increase its funding for the U.N. system and use the same standards for all countries, regardless of geopolitical considerations. A commitment to multilateralism and consistency would leave cynical dismissal of U.S. concerns without foundation.

Finally, the United States should lend support to Chinese exiles fleeing persecution. Again, however, the failure to apply these principles consistently tends to discredit the United States. Both Trump and Biden have repudiated U.S. obligations under domestic and international law to welcome refugees, profoundly damaging the country's moral credibility.⁴²

Right now, the outlook for human rights and democracy is bleak in China, the United States, and around the world. To reverse the tide, the nationalist framing of great power conflict must be rejected in favor of one that focuses attention in all countries on domestic injustice rather than foreign threats.⁴³ Global reforms like those discussed above could then cultivate a political landscape in all countries that would revive the power of movements for human rights and democracy.⁴⁴

⁴² Myah Ward, "Biden to Replace Trump Migration Policy with Trump-esque Asylum Policy," Politico, February 21, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/02/21/biden-trump-migration-policy-asylum-00083873>.

⁴³ Tobita Chow and Jake Werner, "Congress's Hong Kong Bill Is Giving Cover to Nationalism," *The Nation*, Vol. 309, No. 15 (December 16–23, 2019): 4.

⁴⁴ Jake Werner, "How U.S.–China Cooperation Can Strengthen Democracy," China-Global South Project, September 9, 2022, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/how-u-s-china-cooperation-can-strengthen-democracy>.

Climate change and public health

The real existential threats to regular people in the U.S. and China alike are global in scope and can be effectively addressed only if the two countries are working together. The growing disasters from climate change and the devastation of the coronavirus pandemic demonstrate the urgency of international efforts to create resilient global systems that protect human life and secure the conditions for sustainable economic growth.

The real existential threats to regular people in the U.S. and China alike are global in scope and can be effectively addressed only if the two countries are working together.

Yet the U.S.–China record of cooperation is lamentably thin, characterized by cautious rhetoric that rarely translates to concrete work. More often than working together, the two countries trade accusations about who is at fault and demand that the other side change. Nationalism is already providing an alibi to irresponsible leaders in both countries to turn their back on the difficult choices required to ensure the common good.

In future years, even if both countries were to somehow escape the temptation of shirking their own responsibilities by blaming the other, great power conflict would focus political will on the seemingly more urgent task of countering the other country. That would not just distract from the real existential threats but would starve efforts to combat them of resources and talent.

Finally, the inequities of neoliberal globalization have left the countries of the Global South horrifyingly vulnerable to the ravages of pandemics and climate change. The United States and China have a special interest in supporting the developing countries

in transitioning to green production, building systems of adaptation to cope with climate breakdown, and establishing strong public health systems. The alternative — mass death, more wars, waves of impoverished refugees — would have profoundly destabilizing effects around the world. If the U.S. and China are locked in struggle, they will not only fail to support essential efforts in the Global South, but will likely make conditions even worse through proxy conflicts.

The United States and China have complementary strengths that could be combined to create a just and sustainable system of global development. The U.S. is a leader in research on essential medical and clean energy technologies, is a center of global finance, and leads the world's most powerful system of alliances. China is a leader in manufacturing capacity in clean energy industries and has become a major financier and investor in infrastructure and industrial development across much of the Global South.⁴⁵

If the two countries turned away from conflict, they could begin a range of significant joint initiatives. On climate alone, possibilities include improved technologies and practices for resilient, carbon-free housing; more effective and efficient mobility; improved clean energy technologies, including crucial advances in storage and grid-edge flexibility; and innovations in adaptive infrastructure to withstand extreme weather shocks.⁴⁶ Breakthroughs in research and development, if accompanied by large-scale initiatives to cofinance the climate transition in the Global South,⁴⁷ would achieve both a climate-safe world and dramatically expanded economic opportunity for the U.S. and China. Instead of wasting precious time and effort pushing countries in the Global South to choose one side or the other, all could cooperate in green development and rapid decarbonization. Demonstrating to all parties the economic benefits of climate cooperation would then lay the necessary foundation for deeper and more

⁴⁵ Joanna Lewis and Cecilia Springer, "Opportunities for U.S.-China Engagement on Development Finance for Overseas Renewable Energy," *Energy and Climate Management*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.26599/ECM.2024.9400008>

⁴⁶ My thanks to Daniel Aldana Cohen for these suggestions.

⁴⁷ Yangsiyu Lu, Cecilia Springer, and Bjarne Steffen, "Cofinancing and Infrastructure Project Outcomes in Chinese Lending and Overseas Development Finance," *World Development* 175 (March 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106473>.

challenging forms of environmental renewal in areas like biodiversity, agriculture, and ecosystem restoration.

Issues like climate change and public health, which will determine the future prospects of all humanity, dramatize a more general principle: the United States and China must find a way to work together, or they will sacrifice the well-being of their own people and those of the rest of the world. However, engaging in such cooperation requires more than changing mindsets. It requires a program of political, economic, and social reform that would demonstrate shared interests on all sides even as it eased the intense insecurities and zero-sum pressures now generating conflict. The U.S.–China relationship can be an insuperable obstacle to a world in which all people can thrive — or it can become a central force in realizing such a world.

About the Author

Jake Werner is the director of the East Asia Program at the Quincy Institute. His research examines the emergence of great power conflict between the US and China and develops policies to rebuild constructive economic relations. Prior to joining Quincy, Jake was a Postdoctoral Global China Research Fellow at the Boston University Global Development Policy Center, a Harper-Schmidt Fellow at the University of Chicago, a Fulbright Scholar at National Chiao Tung University in Taiwan, and a Fulbright-Hays Fellow at East China Normal University in Shanghai. He received his PhD in history from the University of Chicago. Jake is also a cofounder of Justice Is Global, a grassroots organizing project that advocates for reforms to the global economy; a cofounder of Critical China Scholars, a network of academics engaged in public education on Chinese politics and society.

About the Organizations

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