



PISM

POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

POLICY PAPER

NO. 7 (182), SEPTEMBER 2020 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski, Patrycja Sasnal, Wojciech Lorenz

“The Decline of the U.S.”: The Chinese Discourse on Post-pandemic Relations with the United States

Marcin Przychodniak

The official Chinese discourse on relations with the United States focuses on presenting the pandemic as a critical failure of the Americans in power efficiency and global leadership. China showcases its own achievements in dealing with COVID-19 to strengthen the impression that Chinese solutions for dealing with international challenges are better than the American. At the same time, to avoid a sudden deterioration in relations with the U.S., which would endanger the development of its potential, China repeats its dedication to reach a compromise with the United States. The damaging effect current American policy has on transatlantic relations and multilateral initiatives makes China count more on Trump’s re-election than a Biden victory.

PISM POLICY PAPER

The current discourse in China on the rivalry with the U.S. is a top-down debate, but with a subtle variety of policy ideas. Guidelines are included in statements by PRC Chairman Xi Jinping, repeated by others, including State Councillor Yang Jiechi, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the whole MFA apparatus, together with Cui Tiankai, the Chinese ambassador to the U.S. Diverse policy ideas are included in the public discourse by such institutions as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Chinese Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) and prominent scholars on international affairs and relations with the U.S., including Fu Ying,¹ Yan Xuetong,² Yang Jiemian,³ and Wang Jisi.⁴ Recently (under Xi's regime) the discourse has also been fuelled by a growing list of academics providing Xi's authoritarian policies with a scientific background and explanation.⁵ The influence of all the experts, scholars, and academics remains limited in terms of ideology, but due to Xi Jinping's centralisation of power, their impact on the decision-making process has been very much strengthened within the last eight years.⁶ Besides delivering analysis to the authorities, they also disseminate Chinese official messaging in their international exchanges.

Five Milestones in China's Discourse on the U.S.

According to the Chinese discourse, there are five historic milestones in U.S.-China relations and America's role as leader of the international order. The first one is the end of the Cold War when China accepted U.S. hegemony, also because it had no capabilities to challenge the United States then and focused on the development of its economy. It also became aware at that time that a future successful challenge to the U.S. and becoming a global superpower (which remains China's main political goal) requires careful and time-consuming development of its military and technological capabilities, for example.

The second milestone is 11 September 2001, the day of terrorist attacks on the United States, while the third is the global financial crisis of 2008. Both events and their consequences are described by Chinese experts as significant examples of America's prevailing status in the international arena. They argue that despite the internal and external threats, such as engagement in long-term military interventions and the economic crisis, the United States, utilising its political system and cooperation with partners, generally succeeded in managing these crises and imposing its leadership on partners and rivals. These American abilities to impose and defend its interests (despite the consequences of the occupation of Iraq and Middle East destabilisation) were exemplified by the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as global cooperation within the United Nations and with transatlantic and Asian partners, including China.

Xi Jinping used the rhetoric of creating a new international order that will remain stable and peaceful.

The fourth milestone in China's debate on relations with the U.S. and the international order is Xi Jinping's leadership. Under him, the debate was influenced by assertive, offensive-focused foreign policy processes inaugurated during his first term (2012–2017) when the re-articulated growing Chinese ambitions on the international stage (exemplified by growing engagement in cyberspace and the

¹ Fu Ying is the former Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom and former vice minister of foreign affairs. Currently, she serves as deputy chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress.

² Yan Xuetong is dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

³ Yang Jiemian is a senior fellow and vice president at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies.

⁴ Wang Jisi is dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University.

⁵ For more, see: C. Buckley, "'Clean up this mess': the Chinese thinkers behind Xi's hard line," 2 August 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/02/world/asia/china-hong-kong-national-security-law.html#click=https://t.co/2bNB7087XW>.

⁶ This is based on talks with Chinese experts in Beijing and the diplomatic community there. They are supposedly financial benefits for experts if the ideas suggested in their reports are implemented by the administration.

PISM POLICY PAPER

South China Sea) irrevocably led to a conflict with the U.S. in both bilateral and multilateral space, which intensified during Xi's second term (2017–2022). Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 addressed that transformation. He used the rhetoric of creating a new international order that—in contrast to U.S. leadership—will remain stable and peaceful. The opportunity to implement successfully that narrative was later underlined in the “once-in-a century major change”⁷ debate during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is now generally described in the Chinese official discourse as the fifth milestone.

China's Perception of the US Global Leadership Decline ... and Its Ties with the U.S.

The December 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy identified China as a “strategic rival,” which was later followed by a series of economic, technological, and political sanctions. U.S. President Donald Trump's trade and technological pressure on China after its designation as a strategic rival filled the Chinese discourse with descriptions of U.S. policy as dominated by a “Cold War mentality” with a unilateral and protectionist approach. Chinese participants in the discourse critically evaluate several aspects of U.S. policy and the effect it has on international relations: 1) The U.S.-led rearrangement of the global order undermines American partnerships in Europe and Asia, which in the Chinese perspective are crucial to maintaining the political potential for global leadership; 2) the decline of U.S. engagement in international organisations (China believes these have been an important tool for the U.S. to defend its interests on the basis of international law); 3) promotion of protectionism (through its trade policies towards China and, to some extent, the EU) and undermining globalisation, which in the Chinese optics has been the main source of their economic success.

The COVID-19 pandemic specifically strengthened the generally negative evaluation of U.S. policies and its global leadership. It is presented as a test case for the U.S. government, which positively verified the whole evaluation of the negative effects of Trump's policy for the United States such as: “(...) populism, unilateralism and protectionism (...)”⁸ COVID-19 and the lack of a reasoned response from the American government (as presented in the Chinese discourse) also showcased how inefficient its political model is in terms of operative governance as well as reasonable political judgement.

The publication of “Fighting COVID-19. China in Action,” a white paper by China's State Council Information Office, in June 2020 was one of the main inputs to the discourse. The document delivered an overview over the internal management of the pandemic but also described the external implications.⁹ It presented the world with an opposing rhetoric to the Americans' accusations of China's mishandling of the pandemic in its origins. That was then described and extended in a series of statements and articles by officials and experts.

In the Chinese discourse, the deficiencies of the U.S. response to COVID-19 are described as a game-changer.

In the Chinese discourse, the deficiencies of the U.S. response to COVID-19, combined with the economic crisis, are described as a game-changer. Fu Ying writes: “this time, the United States (...) has not fully demonstrated its willingness and ability to play a leading role.”¹⁰ Yang Jianmian adds: “During this

⁷ Such a debate was a follow-up to the address delivered by Xi Jinping to the Central Foreign Affairs Working Conference in June 2018. For more, see: Cai Tuo, Zhao Kejin, Zhang Shengjun, Yang Xuedong, Liu Xuelian, Cai Cuihong, Gao Qiqi, “Bainian wei you zhi da bianju: Zhong shi Zhongguo yu shijie de guanjian,” (Great changes not seen in a century: the key to re-understanding China and the world), 24 January 2019, <http://www.tsyzm.com/CN/Y2019/V1/I1/4>,

⁸ Yuan Peng, “Xinguan yiqing yu bainian bianju,” (The coronavirus situation and the change of the century), 17 June 2020, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/121742.html>.

⁹ State Council's Information Office, “Fighting COVID-19. China in Action,” 7 June 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/07/c_139120424.htm.

¹⁰ Fu Ying, “Xinguan yiqing hou de zhong mei guanxi neng fou shixian liangxing jingzheng,” (Can Sino-U.S. relations achieve healthy competition after the pandemic?) 18 June 2020. <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/121761.html>.

PISM POLICY PAPER

COVID-19 pandemic (...), many U.S. allies and partners are no longer following the orders of their leader.”¹¹ This leads Chinese experts to seriously suggest the concept of a long-term reconstruction of the international order due to the U.S. decline. They also suggest taking advantage of current American political and economic problems stemming from the pandemic, as well as the limiting factor of the presidential campaign.

The negative Chinese perspective on the U.S. is not only limited to global leadership but also to the bilateral aspect of relations. Chinese experts nowadays claim that the U.S., with its anti-Chinese, radical, and confrontational rhetoric is trying to push China into the same position as it did with the Soviet Union, treating it as an enemy, where engagement is possible only when the adversary changes its policies, and until that happens, China must be contained. However, according to the Chinese discourse, the current situation is different than it was in the 1980s. and '90s. mainly because China is in a much different position than the USSR was. Its economy is better developed and political potential growing. That, as explained by Chinese experts, also makes the American accusations not reasonable and simply false. Some researchers even tend to blame the U.S. for driving China into a special hybrid war.¹² State Councillor Wang Yi, at the National People's Congress (NPC) in May 2020, accused the United States of “(...) abducting Sino-U.S. relations.”¹³

Opportunities for China? Between Pessimists and Optimists

Despite the general anti-U.S. diagnosis and negative perception of the country, its political model, and effectiveness in global leadership as described in the Chinese discourse, there are also some nuanced differences in the debate. They especially touch on the effect of the pandemic on China's relations with the U.S., abilities to effectively respond to newly constructed political opportunities in the China-U.S. relationship, and the international order. One may distinguish pessimistic and optimistic approaches based on different articles published by Chinese experts in recent months.

Pessimists

This group, the pessimists (represented by Yuan Peng, Zhao Yanjing, Yao Yang, or even Yan Xuetong¹⁴) identify the decline of American global leadership but do not define it as the most important factor that China should take into consideration in its political ambitions. They argue that the pandemic has strengthened global conditions (economic crisis, destabilisation of international organisations) that negatively influence China's capabilities to challenge the United States. Yuan Peng¹⁵ describes the post-pandemic international order as chaotic and on the verge of collapse.¹⁶ The U.S. economy is in crisis and Europe's too, Russia is not improving and China is entering a difficult situation on the job market. Yuan Peng's overall diagnosis of the Chinese abilities to challenge the U.S. remains sceptical. The interdependences and economic links (particularly global value chains) means China currently lacks the abilities to influence the global situation in its favour. The pessimists are not convinced that the global situation allows China to continue projects and initiatives optimised on challenging the

¹¹ Yang Jiemian, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Contemporary International Relations,” in *How COVID-19 is changing the global order*, 25 May 2020, http://www.gcms.org.cn/download/How_COVID-19_is_Changing_the_World_Order.pdf.

¹² Wang Xiangsui, “Yihou shidai de quanqiu geju yu zhong mei guanxi,” (Global pattern in post-epidemic era and Sino-US relations), 12 June 2020, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/121697.html>.

¹³ “Gouwu weiyuan jian waijiao buzhang Wang Yi da jizhe wen,” (State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi answered questions from reporters), 24 May 2020, <http://lianghui.people.com.cn/2020npc/GB/432587/432705/index.html>.

¹⁴ Yao Yang, “The New Cold War,” interview with *Beijing Cultural Review*, 28 April 2020, <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/yao-yang-the-new-cold-war.html>.

¹⁵ President of the Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations.

¹⁶ Yuan Peng, “Xinguan yiqing ...,” *op. cit.*

PISM POLICY PAPER

The pessimists are careful not to overestimate the Chinese potential.

hegemon. They are not denying the general overview of the decline of the U.S. but the pessimists are careful not to overestimate the Chinese potential. They especially are worried in the context of the future economy and the lack of success of the Chinese narrative in the West. Some

pessimists also claim that instruments already in use, such as the diplomatic offensive, need to be reconsidered due to their ineffectiveness.¹⁷

Optimists

Optimists emphasise Chinese advantages in relation with the U.S. and its global leadership. Like the pessimists, again they are not related to any formal group or milieu but their articles and statements in the discourse together echo the same factors emphasising better Chinese management and positive economic predictions and relations with partners based on trust. COVID-19 is presented by the optimists (e.g., Ruang Gongze, Fu Ying, Huang Qifan, or Yang Jiemin) as the first case after the end of the Cold War when the U.S. has failed to signal solidarity and cooperation at the global level.¹⁸ They also blame the U.S. for losing the trust of its partners, claiming that “Western ideological hegemony is in the process of its relative decline (...)”¹⁹ Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan is compared to the concept of the “end of history” from the 1990s—just as wrong and falsified in fact. The optimism of the Chinese experts applies mostly to their evaluation of China’s potential to challenge U.S. leadership. They also emphasise that Trump’s policy during the pandemic has harmed military alliances and cooperation in NATO.²⁰

Optimists emphasise Chinese advantages in relation with the U.S. and its global leadership.

The optimists point to the difficult social and health situation in the United States, underlining China’s responsible behaviour during the pandemic. China, the origin of COVID-19, which they quite openly admit, had more responsibilities but also a lot of opportunities, especially in the context of its rivalry with United States. It managed to contain the coronavirus and “bought precious time for the international community.”²¹ Some of the optimists like Ruan Gongze even treat the current situation as “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity in relations with the U.S.

China’s Ideological Response and Its View of a New International Order

The optimists and their observations most accurately shape current Chinese policy. The overall diagnosis of the post-pandemic situation in the United States leads China to use America’s problems to promote a new way of looking at the international order and multilateralism. The notion of undermining the “Western values” model and developing Chinese technological, military and political capabilities has become a main topic of policy discussion in China. The development of these trends and implementation of ideas accelerated after 2012 when China radically started to use it as the main frame for foreign and internal policy. Such a process, however, requires a positively oriented political programme designed to present cooperation with China as a “win-win” solution for other countries as a basis for international stabilisation. The rhetoric required a slogan useful for organising the narrative, disseminating the message among the partners, and dominating in the international debate on the U.S.-China rivalry. In 2015, Xi Jinping refreshed Hu Jintao’s ideas from his speech at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China into the concept of a “Community of Common Destiny for

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Fu Ying, “Xinguan yiqing ...,” *op. cit.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Yang Jiemin, “The COVID-19 Pandemic ...,” *op. cit.*

²¹ Ruan Zongze, “One World, Two Orders,” in: *How COVID-19 is changing the global order*, China Institutes of International Studies, 25 May 2020, http://www.gcims.org.cn/download/How_COVID-19_is_Changing_the_World_Order.pdf.

PISM POLICY PAPER

Mankind.” China presented this “community” as, among others, a solution to avoid the so-called Thucydides Trap²²—originally mentioned in Xi Jinping’s speech to the United Nations on 27 September 2015. During the 19th Party Congress in 2017, he mentioned China as a major and responsible country, as well as an active participant in the development of the global governance system.

Under the promotion of “community” in cooperation with foreign partners, Chinese experts advocate exploiting three political phenomena of the “Western world” in China’s favour in the current international environment: “(...) the ever-increasing inequality created by the liberal economy; (...)

China sees opportunity in exploiting inequalities, ineffective governance, and “decadence and nihilism” in the West.

ineffective governance caused by political liberalism; and decadence and nihilism (...) in a sense of the process of undermining Western values that leads to destabilisation of the liberal world.”²³ “Community” is also presented by some Chinese experts in the context of the discussion on reform of the United Nations as a new alternative. “Community,” according to the discourse, sets equality of countries as the most important factor. Some influential Chinese experts

(also during face-to-face conversations) even tend to brand it as a “transformation of Marxism-Leninism to the international environment” where all countries are to be treated as equal. Xi and his subordinates and acolytes describe the “community” as a change of a long-held paradigm under which one universal value system dominates international society.²⁴ As presented in one recently published article in *People’s Daily*, this alternative pledges to offer strong governance, efficient institutions, and leadership guided by science and technology, capable of developing major construction initiatives.²⁵ The best example is the newly constructed Beijing Daxing airport, which boasts modern, smart and high-tech infrastructure solutions initiated by the Chinese government and swiftly implemented.²⁶ The article points out that, unlike the Chinese model, the “Western capitalist system is plagued by diseases and troubles, with some followers trapped in the ‘democratic trap’ or ‘development trap’.²⁷ “Community” has been frequently used in official statements as a useful ideological base for interactions between China and foreign partners, and also during coronavirus cooperation.

This alternative pledges to offer strong governance, efficient institutions, and leadership guided by science and technology.

A China-Led Global Order and Relations with the U.S.—Implementation and Limitations

“Community” is the Chinese ideological response to the overall diagnosis of the current world order and rivalry with the U.S. Implementation of it is, however, a different story as China is very much focused on presenting (and defending) its advantages but less directly blaming the United States and “Western model.” The idea is not focused on playing offence but rather presenting its advantages through defensive measures. First, China will continue to try to influence international organisations and bodies to adopt policies convenient from its perspective (e.g., telecommunications, maritime issues, norms and values). It will promote its officials to leading positions and increase the financing of organisations. Second, it will launch propaganda and disinformation campaigns (like those visible

²² The Thucydides Trap refers to a term coined by Graham T. Allison describing the apparent tendency towards war between an old power and a new emerging one.

²³ Qiang Shigong, “Empire and the World Order,” 6 April 2019, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/115799.html>.

²⁴ Liu Ming, “Xi Jinping’s Vision of a Community with a Shared Future for Humankind: A Revised International Order?” in *Chinese Perspectives on International Relations*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/xi-jinpings-vision-of-a-community-with-a-shared-future-for-humankind-a-revised-international-order/>.

²⁵ “Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi zhidu weisheme hao?” [Why is the socialist system with Chinese characteristics good?] 4 August 2020, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2020-08/04/nw.D110000renmrb_20200804_1-07.htm.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

PISM POLICY PAPER

during the pandemic that criticise the U.S. for its lack of leadership and the EU for ineffective assistance), as well as finance lobby groups in different countries (through various institutions coordinated and orchestrated by the CPC United Front or others). Both tactics will be used to promote Chinese successes and its alternative model as opposed to the Western one. Third, China will invest in media and internet presence (especially using Western social-media platforms) and exploit investment opportunities to gain political influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, although limited due to the economic crisis after COVID-19) in order to pressure countries to support their normative and political positions.

Despite the ideas and narrative promoted in the “community” concept, there are still constant conditions that determine its implementation in China’s foreign policy. The country remains economically and socially affected by COVID-19, the U.S. tariffs and other restrictions, and delays in the development of its potential, especially in the technology sector. The Chinese authorities need to take these into consideration to keep their political promises of achieving the two “centenary goals” of building a “moderately prosperous society” by 2021²⁸ and making China a “prosperous and strong” country by 2049.²⁹ Participants in the Chinese discourse believe that, in order to achieve these overriding goals, temporary restraint in relations with the U.S., combined with careful management of relations in the international arena, is needed. In this way the *optimists* are becoming *realists* with less emphasis on the ideological dimension.³⁰

Therefore policy towards the U.S. and the international order will be two-sided: on one hand, will be the global promotion of the “community” as an alternative to U.S. leadership and, on the other, a cautious response to the U.S. in the strategic rivalry. China will not escalate for three different reasons: first, China believes keeping Trump in office is better for its interests; second, it needs to wait until the election results are announced; third, it is aware of its limited capabilities in comparison with the U.S.

China believes keeping Trump in office is better for its interests.

and needs time to build them up. At the latest NPC, Wang Yi emphasised China’s will to build a coordinated, cooperative, and stable Sino-U.S. relationship in the spirit of “no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation.”³¹ In July, he underlined three principles:

1) China and the U.S. should not seek to remake each other; 2) China is still willing to develop China-U.S. relations with goodwill and sincerity; 3) the importance of maintaining the course on dialogue and cooperation.³² The same response was repeated by Yang Jiechi in his article published by the *Global Times*³³ after the latest U.S. restrictions on TikTok and WeChat, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s speech on China.³⁴

These suggestions of a tactical compromise are supported by the Chinese experts. Wang Jisi identified the pandemic as a good opportunity to focus on cooperation with the U.S., but with three bottom lines: 1) differences must be dealt with in a peaceful manner; 2) both sides need to maintain a certain scale of economic and trade cooperation and financial stability; 3) Sino-U.S. cultural and social

²⁸ Building a moderately well-off society, which is translated into a doubling of per-capita income figures from 2010.

²⁹ There is no exact definition in terms of political or economic-specific goals. It can also be translated as China declaring it has reached the level of a developed country.

³⁰ Jie Dalei, “Yishi xingtai yu zhong mei zhanlue jingzheng,” [Ideology and Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition], 27 April 2020, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/121046.html>.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² “Stay on the Right Track and Keep Pace with the Times to Ensure the Right Direction for China-U.S. Relations,” Remarks by State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the China-U.S. Think Tanks Media Forum, 9 July 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1796302.shtml.

³³ Yang Jiechi, “Respect history, look to the future and firmly safeguard and stabilize China-U.S. relations,” 13 August 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1197044.shtml>.

³⁴ M. Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World’s Future,” 23 July 2020, <https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>.

PISM POLICY PAPER

exchanges need to be safeguarded.³⁵ It is worth noting that these “bottom lines” would finally result in drawing back the Sino-U.S. relations to the pre-Trump era and provide China with a positive political environment to reduce the differences in its military, resources, and technological potential with the U.S.

While avoiding a sudden deterioration and awaiting the results of the presidential campaign, the Chinese side acts with reciprocity to U.S. restrictions. It constantly tries to keep existing platforms of communication and develop less-obvious ones, like on the local level (province-to-state cooperation). It does so even if the existence of Huawei (one of its “crown jewels”) is endangered.³⁶ It is throwing American journalists out of China (after the U.S. designation of Chinese media outlets as “foreign agents”) or imposing tariffs on American products but on a limited scale. It will use the “phase-one” trade deal³⁷ as an opportunity to selectively signal its willingness to cooperate or disapprove of U.S. actions. China’s imposition of the “national security law” in Hong Kong is also a test of the U.S. response and—in the long-term—a probe of the American determination to defend Taiwan.

Trump or Biden?

There are no official Chinese statements on a preference in the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, but the general trend in the official discourse sheds some light on the connection between the next president, the future of the China-U.S. rivalry and the international order. Chinese experts describe the upcoming elections as “(...) a dispute between Trump’s “America First” and Joe Biden’s “America’s Re-Leadership.” If Biden wins, the United States will want to “re-lead” the world.³⁸ A Democrat in the White House could eventually focus more on cooperation with China on issues like climate

If Biden wins, the United States will want to “re-lead” the world.

Trump’s foreign policy convinces China to strengthen its position in cooperation with the EU.

change or Iran and the restoration of the JCPOA,³⁹ but it will not be a return to “business as usual” (the pre-Trump era), which from the Chinese perspective of developing its potential is crucial. The “threat of China” will remain an immanent part of American foreign policy, and therefore the current trade disputes and technological limitations will remain long-term problems for China. But these are already somehow managed (e.g., through informal channels of communication and mechanisms to replace products from the U.S.). Reading between the lines one can actually conclude that the rivalry with the U.S. under Trump provides the Chinese authorities with a useful political explanation of serious economic conditions, among others. That is, however, not directly stated in the discourse. The erosion of America’s post-war network of alliances, which, according to Chinese observations, has been one of the main effects of Trump’s presidency, is considered favourable to China.⁴⁰ First and foremost, Trump’s foreign policy convinces China to strengthen its position in cooperation with the EU. China currently reads the

³⁵ Wang Jisi, “Jianshou zhong mei guanxi de santiao dixian” [Adhere to the three bottom lines of Sino-U.S. relations], 2 June 2020, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/3yTzAfbL0Kc>.

³⁶ On 17 August, the U.S. Commerce Department imposed export-control regulations on Chinese entities that significantly undermine the possibility of Huawei developing 5G infrastructure.

³⁷ The “phase-one” trade deal is an expression used to describe the China-U.S. trade agreement reached in January 2020 that cut some U.S. tariffs on Chinese products in exchange for, e.g., Chinese pledges to buy more American farm, energy, and manufactured goods. It was supposed to be followed by negotiations of a “phase-two” trade deal with a much broader range of issues included, but both sides have ruled it out.

³⁸ Yuan Peng, “Xinguan yiqing ...,” *op. cit.*

³⁹ Zhu Feng, “Resetting Sino-U.S. Relations Depends on Presidential Elections,” 23 July 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-07-23/zhu-feng-resetting-sino-us-relations-depends-on-presidential-election-101583354.html?rkey=pAgjKe3ecjJoKPwASjdTxvFL%2FE7ci4pKQrHpH6D7WxxReA8nkguDsA%3D%3D>.

⁴⁰ Bloomberg News, “China Warms to Idea of Four More Years of Trump Presidency,” 15 June 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-15/china-warms-to-idea-of-four-more-years-of-trump-presidency>.

PISM POLICY PAPER

American pressure and cooperation attempts with European partners on U.S. policy towards the PRC as moderately successful. It is presenting the EU and the Member States with advantages and threatening consequences, depending on their decisions on 5G, Huawei, relations with Taiwan, human rights, as well as investment limitations. Second, Trump's policy is also considered an argument for the EU to cooperate more with China. Trump's policy also strengthens Chinese asymmetrical cooperation with Russia. In this sense, all these cases significantly outweigh the economic damage from the rivalry. As Ambassador Cui mentioned in one of his interviews: "We are ready to deal with the current administration under President Trump. And actually for the last couple of years, we have made good progress with him."⁴¹

Trump's policy also strengthens Chinese asymmetrical cooperation with Russia.

If Trump wins, China policy will then focus on keeping the existing channels of communication with the U.S., constantly looking for an opportunity to restore some of the economic cooperation. It will still use Trump administration policy as an excuse if the Chinese economy experiences serious difficulties. And, it will constantly exploit the narrative that the U.S lacks international responsibility, presenting China as an alternative to medium powers (especially in Europe and Southeast Asia). The misunderstandings and chaos of American foreign policy will also be used by the Chinese to undermine the possibility of forming an anti-China coalition in South Asia, as well as American reliability and credibility in case of a possible conflict over Taiwan. In this context, China will also seek more case-by-case anti-U.S. cooperation with Russia.

If Biden wins, there will be a slight change of the Chinese narrative to one of hope for restoring the communication and economic cooperation. One may expect some suggestions of limited concessions from the Chinese side, such as another opening of certain sectors of the market to American companies and a reduction in the anti-U.S. rhetoric. But as long as Biden continues to pressure China and, at the same time, strengthens cooperation with European and Asian partners, there could be a sudden and radical change in Chinese policy to try to secure its interests before the mobilisation of anti-China cooperation effectively endangers its core interests. On the one hand, this could take the form of either a radicalisation of Chinese actions towards Taiwan, policy in the South China Sea, or strengthening the anti-American cooperation with Russia. On the other hand, it will also be followed by a constant narrative of compromise and cooperation (in terms of climate change, relations with Iran, or the WTO) with the U.S., calculated on presenting China globally as a conciliatory partner.

⁴¹ "Transcript of the interview of H.E. Cui Tiankai, Chinese Ambassador to the U.S., with Bloomberg TV's *Bloomberg Day Break: Americas*," 25 May 2019, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgxss/t1666519.htm>.