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## **Bound to Lead: US-China Relations and the Future of Global Leadership**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*Notwithstanding attempts by the United States and China to stabilise the relationship over the past year, both sides remain deeply suspicious of one another. To complicate matters further, conflicts elsewhere around the world have made cooperation more difficult between Beijing and Washington. To this end, the issue of political leadership in both capitals remains crucial to arriving at any form of political equilibrium.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Increased interactions between the United States and China over the past year may have created room to prevent further deterioration of the political relationship. Yet at the same time, US-China strategic competition is intensifying across various domains, including economics, technology, military, and ideology. Why is this so, and what can be done about it?



Despite the increased engagements and attempts to stabilise the political relationship, tensions between the United States and China continue to intensify across various sectors, destabilising global leadership in a world increasingly fractured by conflicts. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

### **America: The Still Indispensable Global Leader?**

One reason, not often explicitly admitted by American officials, is that China's rise represents a threat to American global leadership, including challenging its position as the number one superpower and consequently diminishing Washington's ability to preserve and protect its interests. The fact that America's interests are framed within an expansive view of the world means that there is a need for the United States to project power beyond its shores, including influencing events far beyond America's borders – something that Washington considers Beijing to be challenging.

More than that, American leadership also generally views its brand of global leadership as “good” and that what is good for America is synonymous with what is good for the rest of the world. Indeed, while the United States remains significant in its global standing, American political rhetoric has frequently alluded to itself in a manner that tends to inflate Washington's sense of importance to the rest of the world.

For example, following the Hamas attacks in October, President Joe Biden – in a televised address – referred to the United States as the “indispensable nation”. President Biden would go on to also post on social media that “American leadership is what holds the world together. Our alliances are what keep us safe. And our values are what make us a partner that other nations want to work with.” While this can be construed as a message primarily for a domestic audience, it reflects a deeper, more fundamental sense of American identity – one which the late Berkeley professor Ernest Lee Tuveson terms as that of seeing itself as a “redeemer nation”.

While the American desire and willingness to be a global leader is unquestioned, the United States' capacity and reliability to lead is. Indeed, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2016 is frequently mentioned as a case-in-point of Washington's leadership problems, and that domestic factors have somewhat crippled or blunted its ability to play a decisive role in global leadership.

In the 2024 Yusof-Ishak Institute of Southeast Asia Studies survey, more Southeast Asians express little to no confidence in the United States as a strategic partner and provider of regional security. Around 40% of the respondents feel that the United States is not as reliable compared to the 32% in 2023 while 34.9% of regional respondents view the US positively as a good security partner, a decrease of 12.3% points compared to last year.

To this end, the recent passing of a US\$95 billion bill to provide aid for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan is a strong reminder of the United States' ongoing support and commitment to its security partners. Whether this will be the case in the next administration remains to be seen, and the extent to which Washington is able to make good on its word will be a test and validation of its leadership capabilities.

### **China: The Uninterested Global Leader?**

On the other hand, China's vision of leadership is one which is more narrowly defined and is primarily focused on domestic developments. Indeed, many Chinese observers have [made the argument](#) that China's foreign policies are often an extension of its own domestic politics to ensure that the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) domestic legitimacy is not being questioned. To this end, China's domestic difficulties in the past few years have created a siege mentality within the CCP leadership in which they view the challenges to China as one that is externally manufactured by the West. This narrative perceives a united western front against China and seeks to rally Chinese citizens – including sympathetic overseas Chinese – to stand up and defend Chinese interests whenever and wherever they may be challenged.

This is not simply a top-down led effort by the Chinese state but one that also has considerable traction among the Chinese masses. As [argued](#), despite a century of humiliation and Chinese elites' scepticism about their cultural traditions at times, a sense of cultural pride has managed to survive and, combined with a historical narrative of dominance, has become deeply ingrained in Chinese society. This leads to the perception that China is inherently unique and thus does not need to conform to certain global norms, thereby hindering China's full integration into the existing world order.

From this, it can be said that China perceives the United States as wanting to remake China in its own image – thus diluting its cultural uniqueness and eventually leading to instability within or even the collapse of the CCP. Since any threat to the longevity of the CCP is being viewed as a threat to China, attempts by Washington to distinguish between China and the CCP – as encapsulated by the US House Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party – is interpreted by Beijing as a direct threat to China itself.

Not surprising then, President Xi has elevated the issue of national security to the highest level among his political priorities. One recent [CNN article](#) described China as “see[ing] foreign threats [and foreign spies] everywhere”. A video produced by its top spy agency, the Ministry of State Security, exhorted the “1.4 billion people [to become] 1.4 billion lines of defense”.

This mix of Chinese cultural exceptionalism and national security paranoia means that potentially anything and everything can be securitised by the Chinese government in defense of its national sovereignty and political stability. In this respect, it can be argued that Chinese political leadership is less concerned with wanting to lead globally and more concerned with how it fares domestically and remaining in power.

### **Global Leadership in a Fractured World**

Taken together, the issue of global leadership remains vital to the overall wellbeing and health of the international community. The move towards a multipolar world means that the global leadership is likely to be more diffused (as more countries exercise leadership agency) but also more contested (as countries may not agree with one another on what their preferred outcomes might be). In a world fractured by conflicts, the role for great power leadership is even more urgent. Whether the United States and China – or any other country – can rise to meet the challenges of our times will be a crucial determinant of 21st century global politics.

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