

Will the US and China cooperate or clash?

The sheer absence of trust is making conflict between the two possible even if this is, as yet, improbable



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For *The Straits Times*

The relationship between the United States and China is the most important bilateral relationship in the world. It will affect the interests of many countries in the world, including the Asean countries.

Asean wants to be on good terms with both countries and does not wish to take sides in the rivalry between them. It is not an easy task given the complicated nature of US-China ties.

There are areas in which they have convergent interests and other areas in which their interests diverge.

Where their interests converge, we expect them to cooperate. Where they diverge, we expect them to compete. At the moment, there is too little cooperation and too much competition.

What are some of the areas in which they have convergent interests? They include winning the fight against Covid-19, helping the world economy to recover, the climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis, the oceans crisis, the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, strengthening the World Health Organisation's (WHO)

capacity to combat future pandemics, revitalising the World Trade Organisation, North Korea, Afghanistan and Myanmar.

In areas where the US and China have convergent interests, the imperative is for the two countries to cooperate.

For example, cooperation to deal with the climate crisis should not be made conditional to other considerations. For this reason, I was disappointed by the response of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to the US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Change John Kerry. Mr Wang said that Chinese cooperation with the US will depend on the state of their overall relationship. This should not be the case.

HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY COMPETITION

Competition between the US and China need not be bad. I shall give three examples of healthy competition.

First, it is healthy competition for the US and China to see who can produce the most effective vaccines against Covid-19. It is also healthy rivalry when both compete to see who can donate the most amount of vaccines to the developing countries, either through the WHO's Covax Facility or bilaterally.

Second, it is healthy competition for the US and China to bring to next month's United Nations Climate Change Conference the most ambitious proposals concerning greenhouse gas

emission reduction targets or financial support for the developing countries.

Third, I would like to see healthy competition between the US and China to develop the best clean technology and to lower carbon emissions. This will help the world make a successful transition to a low carbon economy.

I will now give you three examples of unhealthy competition.

First, there are voices in both the US and China who want to decouple the US and Chinese economies. The two economies are so interlinked and inter-dependent that it will be very difficult to decouple them. Even if it were technically possible to do, it would bring disaster to both economies and to the rest of us who are linked to both.

Second, the proposal to decouple technology is a bad idea. We, in the Asean countries, want to be able to source technology from both the US and China. We do not want to be told that we can no longer do that, and we will have to choose between using American technology and Chinese technology. Third, it is unhealthy competition for either country to use online falsehoods or to mount a campaign to interfere in the domestic politics of the other country, or to launch a cyber attack against the other country.

PERCEPTION AND POLICIES

US President Joe Biden's China policy is not clear. He has

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described China as a competitor. Other senior officials in the Biden administration have, however, described China as a threat. If China is a competitor, there is room for cooperation. If China is a threat, there is no room for cooperation.

As for President Biden's trade policy on China, the recent address by Ambassador Katherine Tai, the US Trade Representative, seemed to suggest that the new trade policy is very much like former president Donald Trump's trade policy.

What is Chinese President Xi Jinping's America Policy? The Chinese have been quite consistent in saying that China is not seeking to replace America as the global superpower. Chinese leaders have also emphasised that

they support the rules-based international order and are not seeking to overthrow it. Do the Americans believe the Chinese narrative? I am afraid that they do not. They believe that the Chinese agenda is to displace the US from the Western Pacific and to become the world's greatest power.

TAIWAN, SOUTH CHINA SEA

The biggest stumbling block to improving relations between the US and China is the absence of trust. To put it simply, they do not trust each other. To rebuild trust, the two countries should communicate more. President Trump had done away with the mechanisms for communication between the two sides, established by president Barack Obama. The two countries should also look for opportunities to work together. By working together, they will begin to trust each other again.

I think it is fair to say that at the highest level of the two governments, there is agreement to manage their competition responsibly and to avoid conflict.

However, this consensus does not appear to be reflected in their actions. Each side seems determined to provoke the other.

I am very concerned by the two potential flashpoints, Taiwan and the South China Sea. If not handled carefully, actions taken by the US and China in the two domains could lead, intentionally or unintentionally, to a clash.

DETOXING TIES

The world welcomes the good news that President Biden and President Xi will hold a virtual summit before the end of this year. We all hope that the summit will succeed in stabilising their relationship and in reducing the mutual distrust.

I urge the two leaders to consider launching a joint US-China initiative on Covid-19 or climate change. I would also urge them to consider taking coordinated steps to reduce the tension surrounding Taiwan. Such agreements would change the toxic atmosphere of their current relationship.

The world is big enough to accommodate the incumbent superpower, the US, and the rising power, China. If wisdom prevails in Washington and Beijing, the intense competition will not tip over into conflict. There is, however, no guarantee that this will happen. Conflict between the US and China is still improbable. It is, however, no longer beyond the realm of possibility.

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The writer says it is healthy competition for the United States and China to see who can produce the most effective Covid-19 vaccines and who can donate the most amount of vaccines to developing countries. PHOTO: REUTERS