



Shifting Dynamics: The International Order in a Post-Pandemic World

— 1st - 2nd of December | 2020 —

America vs China:

Trade Wars, COVID-19 and Future Economic Relations

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America vs China: Trade Wars, COVID-19 and Future Economic Relations



- Competition between Beijing and Washington did not begin with President Trump and it will not end with President Biden. Biden may be expected to bring stability and formality to the dialog between two countries, but they will continue to compete on multiple fronts.
- China and the US may be expected to (and should) cooperate on a number of major global issues, including climate change, pandemic-prevention, North Korea, anti-terrorism, financial crises, etc.
- COVID-19 was exacerbated by the initial mishandling of the situation by China. The lack of cooperation between the US and China likely also contributed to worsening of the outbreak.
- A comparison of the COVID-19 situations in the US and China during 2020 damaged American prestige. During this period, China effectively contained the virus whereas it was wreaking havoc over the US.
- A complete economic decoupling between China and the US is unlikely. We will most likely see a partial decoupling, especially in sectors with national security implications.
- We may witness the emergence of separate spheres of influence between the two (or perhaps more) power centres. This is especially true regarding the digital economy.

Summary of the Session

The panel titled “America vs China: Trade Wars, COVID-19 and Future Economic Relations” discussed the background and future of the confrontation between the world’s two largest economies. The discussion centred around three main topics: the prospects of China-US relations under the Biden Presidency, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and long-term economic relations.

Stephen Walt and Charles Kupchan noted that the competition between China and the US did not begin with Trump and it will not end with Biden. The two biggest economies will continue to compete on many fronts. However, panellists agreed that there are areas of potential cooperation, such as climate change, preparing for the next pandemic etc. President Biden is expected to bring stability and a return to more normal diplomatic engagement, as opposed to the erratic, informal style of President Trump. According to Peter Berkowitz, improving relations is not up to the US because the real aggressor is China. According to Richard Fontaine and Shi Yinhong, competing on some issues and cooperating in others may prove to be more difficult than anticipated.

Regarding China’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis, Cheng Li argued that the initial mishandling by local governments was later corrected by the Chinese central government. China has effectively contained the virus whereas it has wreaked havoc on the US, which, most panellists agreed, has hurt American prestige. There was a missed opportunity for cooperation over COVID-19 due primarily to the domestic politics of each country, however, Shi Yinhong disagreed that cooperation between two countries in aggressive competition was a possibility in the first place.

As for the economic tension between China and the US, panellists agreed that the two economies have too much to lose from a total decoupling. According to Walt, there will be some form of decoupling, especially in the digital sphere. According to Kupchan, with the rise of China, US dominance of the international order will end, and we will have a wider distribution of power between a number of centres. Stephen Orlins opposed the view that a decoupling is foreordained, arguing that the two countries can and should avoid this fate, which would harm both. Li claimed that the two powers can coexist and pointed at the lack of communication as the source of conflict.

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Stephen M. Walt's Highlights



Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School

Stephen M. Walt is Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School. He is a contributing editor at *Foreign Policy*, co-editor of the *Cornell Studies in Security Affairs*, and was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in May 2005. He received the International Studies Association's Distinguished Senior Scholar award in 2014. His writings include *The Origins of Alliances* (1987), *Revolution and War* (1996), *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*, and *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (co-authored with John J. Mearsheimer, 2007). His latest book is *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (2018).

- ” “The Biden administration will continue to compete with China in a variety of ways, just as China will be competing with the United States, while trying to ward off the few areas where the two countries should continue to cooperate, most notably trying to manage their economic relationship, deal with future pandemics and address climate change.”
- ” “COVID-19 is one of several pandemics or close to pandemics we have seen. We have had AIDS, we have had SARS, we have had MERS, and Ebola in Africa. There's every reason to expect that something like COVID-19 could happen again in the future. And therefore, a task going forward is for the international community to be much better prepared the next time this goes on.”
- ” “China's initial response was very bad and showed some of the real limitations of the Chinese system. Since then, China's response to the problem at home has been quite effective, which is why they have been able to reopen their economy to a greater extent than the rest of us. In the second phase, the United States and some other countries badly mishandled the pandemic at home, which is why we are dealing now with spiking infection levels and rising death tolls and we are not able to reopen our economy more effectively [...] That has, I think, damaged the American reputation, even just our reputation for being basically competent.”
- ” “If within a few months the Biden administration can get the United States essentially back to normal, get the economy recovering more rapidly as a result of that, they will look very good. If they're unable to do that, that's going to be a political liability for them and also could undermine the American position more broadly in the world.”
- ” “You're not going to see the American and Chinese economies completely separate themselves, even if the political competition intensifies, because, again, it's too important for China to continue to be able to trade with the United States, and it's too important to the United States to maintain its economic ties.”
- ” “Over time we're going to see the emergence of more sort of partial orders, a US-centred order that is going to have both an economic and a security dimension to it, featuring our allies in Asia, our allies in Europe, and probably the emergence for China of a set of countries that adapt more to the Chinese model than they do say to ours. This may be especially apparent in the digital.”
- ” “[...] the condition the United States was in in the 1990s as the unipolar power with no real peer competitors was very unusual, really had never happened in centuries, and that was not going to last forever. And that we are now back in a world which is either an emerging bipolarity or a very lopsided form of multipolarity with the United States and China as the two most powerful countries in the world, I still think the United States has many advantages over China, but the gap is clearly narrowing.”
- ” “The United States can't operate in quite the unchecked manner that it once did. It will have to compete with China, but in a realistic way. It's not going to be able to transform China into a liberal democracy. And it shouldn't try. We would resent it if China tried to turn us into a one-party state [...] we're going to have to wage this competition in a world where the United States, for the first time in, say, twenty five years or so, faces a genuine great power rival.”

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Charles Kupchan's Highlights



Professor of International Affairs, Georgetown University

Charles A. Kupchan is Professor of International Affairs at the School of Foreign Service and Government Department at Georgetown University, and Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. From 2014 to 2017, Kupchan served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs on the National Security Council in the Obama White House. He also served as the Director for European Affairs on the National Security Council during the first Clinton administration. His most recent books are *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (2020), *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (2012), and *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (2010).

- ” “I can imagine the US-China dialogue getting worse after Biden takes office. One, Biden will speak up more often about human rights, Hong Kong, the Uighurs in Xinjiang, other issues. Beijing will not like that. Secondly, I expect the trade confrontation to actually escalate. Biden will probably pull back on tariffs with allies but try to press China on the big trade agenda, in part because Biden's top priority for at least the first year in office is going to be reaching out to the American middle class, getting the economy going again, creating jobs. And part of that means having a more level playing field with China when it comes to trade.”
- ” “Biden is a diplomat. Biden believes in personal relationships. Biden will want to try to have a conversation with the Chinese about everything, security, trade, human rights. Will that improve the relationship? Very difficult to say, but I do think that there will be much more engagement diplomatically[...].”
- ” “[...] not coming together to deal with the greatest pandemic since 1918, was a matter of choice, and that did not need to happen.”
- ” “I don't believe that decoupling is possible. I think there will be a reallocation of supply lines, but the global economy is too interdependent to pull it apart and to go back to a world of two or more blocks.”
- ” “Even though we have areas of cooperation on the pandemic, on the economy, on climate change, I do think we have to keep an eye on the ability of Joe Biden and Xi Jinping to manage nationalism and to make sure that domestic political forces do not push them in the direction of increasing competition.”
- ” “I don't think there'll be a kind of US-centred world and a China-centred world. On digital governance, on data privacy, Europe and the United States are having some tough conversations. So, we may see a kind of multiple zones of governance when it comes to high tech.”
- ” “One important lesson from the Trump presidency is there are a lot of Americans out there who are unhappy, who haven't earned a living wage. And Biden has said we are going to have policies that favour the middle class. A lot of that is investment, innovation, worker retraining. But I do think you're going to see a tougher conversation on trade and a lot of pressure being put on China to do more to level the playing field, to play by the rules of the WTO, to open up its domestic market.”
- ” “We are headed into a period in history in which there will be a much more wide distribution of power, both economic and military, than we have seen for quite a while. And to me, the big issue of the day is when we get to that world that is no longer dominated by the United States and its democratic partners, will we be able to sustain a rules-based system? Will we be able to find a meeting of the minds with countries that are not democratic on the big questions of the day; the trade questions, the governance questions, intervention, war, peace, these are the big questions that that lie before us.”

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Shi Yinhong's Highlights



Professor of International Relations, Renmin University of China in Beijing

Dr. Shi Yinhong is a distinguished Professor of International Relations, Chairman of the Academic Committee of the School for International Studies, and Director of the Center on American Studies at Renmin University of China, Beijing. He has also served as a Counsellor to the State Council of the People's Republic of China since February of 2011. Dr. Yinhong has also served as Professor of International History at Nanjing University, Professor of International Relations at the International Relations Academy, Nanjing, Visiting Professor of Public Policy at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and Visiting Professor of Modern China Studies at Aichi University at Nagoya. He was also the President of the American Historical Research Association of China from 1996 to 2002. He received his Ph.D. in international history from Nanjing University. He has published eighteen books and more than 630 articles and essays.

- ” [...] Sometime later, maybe two years or one and a half years later, Biden will be striving to improve the trade situation between China and United States, to reduce the great amount of the American exports enforced upon China, to make it compatibly in some degree to China's capability and China's real requirements.”
- ” Cooperation will be quite limited and complicated by competition between the two countries for prestige, for world influence. Altogether, the situation could become a little better in major issue areas. And, this is valued by most of the Chinese scholars on international relations, because the current situation between the countries is much, much worse than the past few decades. If we continue to have another major on-off, so-called free falling and deterioration, I think some kind of military conflict between two countries could be clearly imagined.”
- ” If you look at the highly political, even ideologically-charged environment in the bilateral relationship, you will realise that even from the beginning (of COVID-19 pandemic), there were so few chances to have practical and substantial cooperation in combating the COVID-19 pandemic.”
- ” Many people connect the earlier Chinese performance, which is not so wonderful especially in Wuhan, in dealing with the pandemic to the nature of China's current system. But months later, when China used whatever means to so effectively control the pandemic within China, you cannot say this proves the power system in China is wonderful. And if you look at the United States, millions and millions of people have this disease, and you see a lot of people die. So, I think this is a dangerous and self-defeating argument, but these kind of arguments are already embedded deeply in the political culture in the United States and some other Western countries.”
- ” Although only a few months have passed, two things have already become so clear. One thing is that not only the United States perhaps is unable to decouple from China, but the more important (thing) is that the United States does not want to, does not require to decouple its economy from China.”
- ” It's probable that President Biden will relaunch another round of trade negotiation with China and talks on so-called structural change. But I guess my government at this time will become tougher than it has during the so-called trade negotiation with the Trump administration, because in Chinese eyes, there are a lot of new requirements for structural change in the United States, in terms of letting the Chinese, especially high-tech, enterprises have access to American technology and American market.”
- ” A temporary situation is not necessarily a lasting situation. But one thing is certain. If United States is not emancipated from its current highly divided situation, not emancipated from its relative isolation and a lot of illusions in a lot of corners in the world, that the situation will continue and will advantage China, although this does not necessarily mean that in the end China will replace United States as the world leader. I agree with Mr. Trump that world leadership is not such a worthy matter. Everyone should first try to focus on his own home.”

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Peter Berkowitz's Highlights



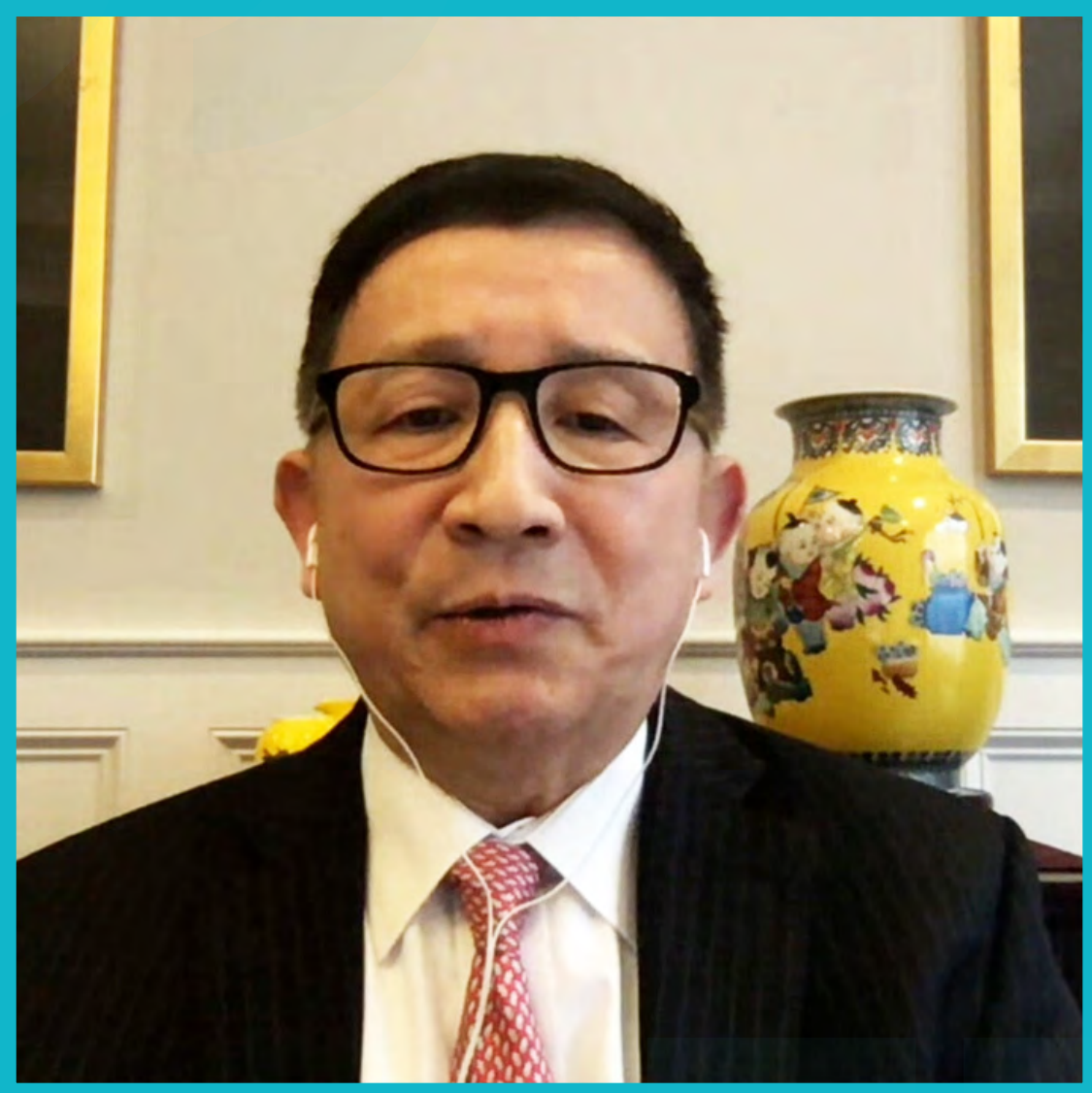
Director, Policy Planning Staff, US Department of State

Dr. Peter Berkowitz is the Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff in the office of the Secretary. He joined the State Department from the Hoover Institution at Stanford University where he is the Tad and Dianne Taube Senior Fellow. He focuses on constitutional government, conservatism and progressivism in the United States, liberal education, national security and law, and Middle East politics. He is the author of *Constitutional Conservatism: Liberty, Self-Government, and Political Moderation*; *Israel and the Struggle over the International Laws of War*; *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*; and *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*.

- ” “The China challenge didn't begin yesterday. It didn't begin with the global pandemic. We think it's a mistake in the policy planning staff to see the pandemic as some kind of inflection point. What we see is the global pandemic, which did indeed arise in China and became a global pandemic because of a concerted disinformation campaign conducted by the Chinese Communist Party, as clarifying for the nations of the world the conduct on the international scene that has been typical of China.”
- ” “The fact is that no Secretary of State before Mike Pompeo made more to bring into focus the question of human rights in China, China's gross abuses in Xinjiang, more than a million Uighurs in concentration camps, the repression of Tibetans, the repression of ethnic Mongolians, the repression of 70 million Christians in China.”
- ” “The United States continues to seek cooperation with China, but the kind of cooperation that we want is cooperation that is based on well-recognized international norms, especially in commerce. We want commerce based on fairness and reciprocity.”
- ” “The Trump administration has rallied countries from many regions of the world, more than 50 countries now, to join the Clean Network. What is the Clean Network? Countries devoted to creating digital communications networks that do not rely on companies that will funnel information, funnel data directly back to China.”
- ” “China's is the second largest economy in the world. It's not only a matter of America's entwinement with China's economy. All of our major friends and partners have economies that are entwined with that of China.”
- ” “We point out that the United States is going to compete effectively and cooperate effectively with China, we have to secure freedom at home, respect for our constitutional traditions, a bustling economy.”
- ” “For the sake of cooperation, for the sake of more effective competition, we have to maintain the world's best military. This is very important. We have to support a free, open, rules-based international order. We have to more effectively invest in friends and partners around the world. It's not enough for us to preach that it would be destructive for countries to open their infrastructure to Huawei and ZTE. It is important for us to present to countries better investment deals. It is important for us to continue with the Clean Network, to unite other countries.”
- ” “We have to see the big picture. We have to understand what is at stake. What is at stake is China continues to be ruled by the CCP, one party repressive rule, the party continues to engage in economic coercion and co-optation around the world, defies international law in its own region, attempts to rewire international organizations to serve authoritarian ends. We have to understand just how much is at stake in the United States. And so, we must work, as others have said, with allies, friends and partners in defence of freedom.”

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Cheng Li's Highlights



Director, John L. Thornton China Center, Brookings Institution

Cheng Li is Director and Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution's John L. Thornton China Center. Dr. Li is also Director of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations and a Distinguished Fellow of the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. His recent books include: *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (2016), *The Power of Ideas: The Rising Influence of Thinkers and Think Tanks in China* (2017), and *Middle-Class Shanghai: Reshaping U.S.-China Engagement* (2021). Li received an M.A. in Asian Studies from UC. Berkeley and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Princeton.

- ” “Biden sees China more as a competitor rather than an enemy. So, he would emphasise competition rather than confrontation. Also, he sees China and Russia differently.”
- ” “From the Chinese perspective, what happened in the past six months or a year, was that the US really wanted to completely contain China on the economic front. It was really a complete systematic decoupling with China in virtually every area on the economic front.”
- ” “[...]the governments of Wuhan and Hubei made grave mistakes, including their slow response, spread of misinformation and mistreatment of Dr. Li Wenliang, the whistle-blower, and political censorship and also possible cover up[...] But after the first few weeks [of pandemic], certainly the Chinese government tried to correct these mistakes.”
- ” “The total number of deaths in New York City is over twenty-four thousand. The total deaths in Beijing is nine and the Shanghai is seven, Chongqing is six and the Tianjin is three. Now, people are sometimes cynical about these numbers, but you cannot cover up a contagious disease.”
- ” “We should really promote cooperation, whether it be prevention, treatment, or particularly the vaccine and its international distribution.”
- ” “Because the Chinese perceive that the United States wants to completely and systematically decouple with China in trade and investment and technology and financial system, including even education[...] they are preparing for how to expand the Chinese domestic market.”
- ” “I disagree with the people in Washington who favour decoupling, but I agree with a certain statement, for example, by FBI director Christopher Wray. He has described that the global economic landscape change in China's favour represents, “one of the largest transfer of wealth in human history”, which was the transfer of wealth from the United States to China. Now, this will not be comfortable. This will not be easy. I think that this reflects that the American middle class is shrinking while China's middle class is expanding.”
- ” “The Chinese still have a poor understanding of the outside world, how the outside world in Europe and in the United States looks at China. China certainly has some controversial economic behaviours, whether on intellectual property rights and market access, and we also use the term ‘forced technology transfer’ etc.. You do see that there is a long list. Of course, at the same time, China had a legitimate reason to pursue economic middle-class dream, but at the same time, China should comply with the WTO regulations and to be a real responsible stakeholder.”
- ” “The rise and decline of a major power is not linear and not necessarily inevitable. The mistakes or the lessons learned from our leaders could make a huge difference. The fact is that both countries will remain very, very powerful, using Dr. Kissinger words, almost equally powerful ... It is unlikely that one country will defeat the other, so [they should] not pursue a total war or total victory. These two countries need to find a way to work together. Nothing is more important than preventing a devastating war with no winner. This is the most important issue facing humanity and these two great powers.”

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Richard Fontaine's Highlights



CEO, Center for a New American Security

Richard Fontaine is the Chief Executive Officer of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). He served as President of CNAS from 2012-19 and as Senior Advisor and Fellow from 2009-12. Prior to CNAS, he served as a foreign policy advisor to Senator John McCain and worked at the State Department, National Security Council, and on the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He also currently serves as Executive Director of the Trilateral Commission and has been an adjunct professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. A native of New Orleans, he graduated summa cum laude with a BA in International Relations from Tulane University. He also holds a MA in International Affairs from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, and he attended Oxford University.

” “You are certainly going to see some differences in style from a new administration, in tone, in the way messages are delivered, in the way dialogue is conducted, but you are likely to see very little change in the underlying conditions that give rise to the US-China competition in the first place.”

” “Problems are not peculiar to the Trump administration or the Biden administration. They are differences in interest and outlook between the two governments. And that means that the United States and China are going to be in a position of long-term competition.”

” “We want to cooperate with China on climate change. We might want to cooperate with China on North Korea and non-proliferation, but we want to compete in all these other areas. And it is just not clear that those two things can be done simultaneously where you can really cooperate in areas of common interest, as if you're not competing fiercely in these other areas. I think they will try, but it's not clear to me they will be successful.”

” “There has been a missed opportunity between the United States and China, if you contrast what's going on now with the aftermath of the global financial crisis for all the differences. The G20, where both the United States and China are members, was a key kind of steering mechanism for coordinating fiscal and monetary policy after the global financial crisis.”

” “When we look at this mixture of cooperation and competition in areas where you can cooperate, it makes a big difference whether there's domestic political resonance for these issues or not. The average Chinese does not really think much about

what the diplomatic approach to North Korea is. The American voter does not vote on North Korea, but specialists can get together and, to some degree, try to coordinate US and Chinese approaches to North Korea [...] But when you are talking about COVID-19, it is the quintessential domestically sensitive issue [...] When you have these issues where there's real domestic resonance and sensitivity, it's going to be pretty damn hard for the United States and China to come together and cooperate. The problem with that is sometimes those are the most important issues. So cooperation is possible and attractive really in theory, but in practice, it is really difficult.”

” “Full decoupling is possible, but it's very unlikely because the cost would be too high[...] So, you look to the areas where they are willing to pay a cost[...] You can see this on rare earths and other sort of things where there's a national security or some other kind of acute interest in not relying on products or capital flows from the country with whom you're competing so fiercely[...] what you're going to see is decoupling in a circumscribed area where there are other non-economic interests that are fairly obviously at stake.”

” “You're not going to see a super coherent China block or an American block the way you saw around the US and the USSR during the Cold War. Most countries around the world want some mixture of security and economic benefits from both the United States and China.”

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Stephen A. Orlins's Highlights



President, National Committee on U.S.-China Relations

Stephen Orlins has been President of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations since 2005. Previously he served as Managing Director of Carlyle Asia, Chairman of Taiwan Broadband Communications, and President of Lehman Brothers Asia. Mr. Orlins was a member of the State Department legal team that helped establish diplomatic relations with China, and practiced law with Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison. At the National Committee, he leads briefings and delegations for senior military officers, members of Congress and other policy makers and runs U.S.-China track II dialogues on economic, maritime, energy, rule of law, healthcare, and strategic issues. He received his BA from Harvard and JD from Harvard Law School.

- ” “When President-elect Biden takes office, we’re going to see certain actions. We know we’re going to see certain actions which are going to provide a foundation for cooperation. We’re going to see America re-join the Paris Accords, which means that climate change is going to get on the agenda for US-China discussions. We’re going to see the United States re-join the WHO, which means that pandemic-prevention is going to be on the American agenda. President Biden recognises that the restrictions on people-to-people contact on Chinese students in the United States, on people who wish to remain in the United States to work, injure America.”
- ” “Despite what the President of the United States says, that China pays these tariffs, [it is] the American people [who ultimately] pay these tariffs, and it hurts the American people, especially working families. People who are not high-income in the United States are paying these tariffs. So, I expect early in the administration we’ll have a discussion about how the Chinese can end a lot of their tariff and non-tariff barriers and how the United States will end its and help the American people and the American consumer.”
- ” “They won’t resolve the fundamental issues. We have heard reference to the human rights issues. They will not resolve the South China Sea issues. They will not resolve the national security law passage for Hong Kong. They will not resolve things which are really tough, but they will make progress and we will see a professionalisation of the interaction. We won’t see foreign policy by tweet anymore.”
- ” “My great hope is that this tragedy becomes a teaching moment [...] We saw governments in China and in the United States focus on the competitive aspects of the relationship rather than the cooperative, which has led to the deaths of thousands of Chinese and hundreds of thousands of Americans.”
- ” “There’s probably not enough discussion in the United States about the impact of these export controls that lead to decoupling, that this costs a lot of American jobs. And we can decide national security needs to prevail, but we need to discuss how this affects jobs, how this affects American competitiveness, how this affects R&D budgets of American companies, that if we lose the China market, our profitability goes down, R&D budgets go down and our competitiveness decreases.”
- ” “When we think about this decoupling, it has to be multilateral, that if the United States says we’re not going to sell this, but the Dutch will sell it or the Brits or the French or the Germans or the Japanese or the South Koreans, we’ve really done nothing but hurt ourselves.”
- ” “Both governments, businesses, and the people need to work very hard to avoid the Thucydides trap because, as Cheng Li has said, that would be a catastrophe for the world[...] China sees its threats as domestic, not international, and to the extent that they are not confronted in this way, which calls into question whether the Chinese Communist Party can continue to rule, they have a different response.”



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