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Competitive Coexistence: An American Concept for

Managing U.S.-China Relations

Rather than let Beijing dictate terms in bilateral interactions, Washington should proactively and consistently promote its own ideas and phrasing. Describing the United and China as strategic stakeholders that should pursue competitive coexistence realistically is a good place to start.

by **Andrew S. Erickson**

In recent years, sentiment has been growing in Washington that China increasingly challenges U.S. interests, to a degree that is rendering several decades of efforts to

influence Beijing positively through deep engagement unsuccessful. Now a bipartisan Congressional-Executive Branch consensus is emerging that the United States must pursue a markedly different approach to China. Indeed, the latest National Defense Authorization Act mandates that President Donald Trump submit to Congress a whole-of-government strategy for dealing with China by March 1, 2019. A new report on China's military explains that the Department of Defense is working to support just such an across-the-board interagency effort.

Now well into their third century, relations between America and the Middle Kingdom are both arguably of unprecedented importance and in the greatest disarray since their normalization in 1979. Four decades of expanding cooperation, however fitful, have come to a close. While there is widespread agreement that fresh ideas are needed for managing U.S.-China relations, however, there has been little coalescence around an actionable way forward—let alone promulgation and implementation of a comprehensive, coherent China strategy. Meanwhile, Beijing relentlessly pursues its own strategy, and attempts to permeate bilateral interactions with supporting rubrics and wording to seize the initiative of ideas.

To rectify that disparity, I propose a new American vision for U.S.-China relations: the pursuit of “Competitive Coexistence.” Based on the advice I have provided to key U.S. government principals over the past several years, this paradigm contains four pillars:

- Don't suppress China wholesale, oppose its harmful behaviors.

- Accept risk and friction to recalibrate Chinese actions threatening American interests.
- Hold ground in contested areas to thwart Chinese dominance.
- Reduce tensions and pursue shared interests as much as Beijing is willing to do so.

Under Xi Jinping's ambitious authoritarian leadership, China shows unprecedented willingness and ability to undermine American interests even at the expense of harming its own public image and bearing other significant costs. Bilateral frictions are increasing apace. To help meet China's challenge, U.S. officials should publicly promote a paradigm for bilateral relations that is distinct from the problematic ones that Beijing hopes Washington uses: "competitive coexistence." While they contend continuously and interact in contested spaces, the United States and China may nevertheless avoid kinetic conflict, and may pursue shared interests where mutually motivated.

Proactively articulating this American vision is far safer than ceding the initiative to China with its manipulative rhetoric and unrivaled propaganda infrastructure and messaging discipline. Being clear, firm, and consistent from the start is far more stabilizing than raising false hopes in Beijing only to have them dashed, or risking dangerous misperceptions. And it is critical to sustaining public support and reassuring U.S. allies.

Principles for Competitive Coexistence

The following offers nine principles of competitive coexistence and explains how to implement them.

1. Competition is Inevitable

Ongoing contestation is normal between great powers. This reflects a reversion to historical norms of ongoing competition after the brief and unsustainable unipolar moment has ended; even as the United States remains strong as the world's leading power, China's power remains subject to significant limitations, and the world remains far from being a true "multipolar" system. Because of conflicting political systems, values, and interests, U.S.-China distrust and competition is unavoidable. Such competition will persist for the foreseeable future. Both nations must learn to live with it for the long term.

2. Embracing Competition

The United States will neither shrink from competition nor pretend that it does not exist. U.S.-China relations has competitive aspects that American officials should not exacerbate gratuitously, yet must grapple with and not shy away from. They must be clear and candid in voicing concerns to their Chinese counterparts in both public and private; the United States and its allies no longer tolerate inconsistent "happy talk" or unfair arrangements. In one of the best examples to date, National Security Council Senior Director for Asian Affairs Matthew Pottinger recently told Chinese officials: "In the United States, competition is not a four-letter word."

3. Safeguarding U.S. Interests

The United States will proactively pursue its interests. It will continue to uphold its vital interests and those of its allies and partners. These include maintaining the rules-based international order, in which disputes must be resolved peacefully under international law.

4. Holding Ground in Contested Areas

The United States will stand its ground in contested areas and thwart Chinese dominance. The two great powers have often-conflicting vital interests and overlapping presence in many domains and contested spaces. Neither can dominate, displace, or expel the other. The United States will uphold its interests even when China's efforts impinge upon them and generate friction.

Interests and presence overlap most visibly in what China terms the Near Seas (Yellow, East, and South China Seas). Home to all of Beijing's disputed island and maritime claims, these are the focus of its greatest military preparations and potential for conflict with the United States and its allies and partners. Much of these seas, together with their associated international waters and airspace, is a vital part of the global commons, on which the international system depends to operate effectively and fairly.

The United States, its allies, and the international community cannot allow Beijing to use force, or the threat of force, to carve out a zone of exclusion in which its neighbors

are subject to bullying without recourse and vital global rules and norms are subordinated to its parochial priorities and domestic laws. This would set back severely what Beijing itself terms “democracy” or “democratization in international relations.” China’s paramount leader himself has declared that “We should work together to promote the democratization of international relations.” (“我们应该共同推动国际关系民主化.”)

Instead, the way forward for the United States is clear: even as China advances, *America cannot retreat*. The United States must continue to operate in, under, and over the Near Seas; and preserve them as part of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific for all to use without fear or favor. This robust but realistic approach includes accepting the fundamental reality that the United States will not roll back China’s existing occupation of South China Sea features, just as the United States will not accept China’s rolling back its neighbors’ occupation of other features. At a minimum, the United States must preserve peace and the status quo in a vital yet vulnerable region that remains haunted by history. Better yet, it should pursue a competitive strategy of proactively helping allies and partners pursue their legitimate rights and interests. That would help put Beijing on the defensive, thereby helping to check its expansionism.

5. Accepting Risk

The United States will hold its ground and uphold its interests even when doing so entails some risk. China seeks advantage by opportunistically embracing risk and the friction and tension it generates. Examples include its decision to build “islands” in the

South China Sea, escalate the use of economic statecraft against American allies and partners, and directly interfere in the politics of countries across the world—activity that China was more reluctant to overtly engage in when it was weaker. Beijing’s current leadership is clearly comfortable with a certain level of friction and tension.

To pursue an effective competitive strategy of its own, the United States must accept more risk. It should make clear that it, too, is comfortable with a degree of friction and tension. Indeed, China is testing the United States continuously to determine its tolerance for risk, friction, and tension.

6. Using Friction to Counter Harmful Actions

The resulting friction can recalibrate Chinese actions threatening American interests. In Leninist fashion, Beijing pushes forward when its relentless probing fails to meet resistance. But when the United States does resist, China often chooses not to escalate: this demonstrates the limits of Beijing’s appetite for risk. Successes to date include:

- the previous administration’s threat of sanctions against Chinese companies for cyber theft, which resulted in significantly reduced People’s Liberation Army (PLA) involvement in such activities for two years;
- this and the previous administration’s deterring Beijing from dredging and fortifying Scarborough Reef;

- this and the previous administration’s increasing China’s risk perception and limiting its activities by explicitly linking the Senkaku Islands to Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty;
- and India’s temporary halting of Chinese road construction in Doklam near the long-disputed Sino-Indian-Bhutanese border.

These examples of Beijing’s recalibration following pushback indicate opportunities for American “counter-pressure” to deter negative Chinese actions. The United States should also prepare cost imposition options to punish bad behavior. When Beijing does respond, it does not automatically do so aggressively or escalate. Despite complaining, it continues to tolerate U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), military surveys in its claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and Taiwan Strait transits.

American officials must be willing to walk away from engagements that China values more than does the United States. There are multiple engagements which the PLA prioritizes highly, for instance, that yield little for the United States. Washington can, and should, accept—and in some cases insert—friction by denying these engagements. This is particularly the case when engagements the United States values highly, such as Military Maritime Consultative Agreement talks and Joint Staff Dialogue Mechanism meetings, are held hostage by the PLA.

American officials must also talk openly when they publicly seek engagement but are rebuffed by Chinese counterparts. When China pulls out of a constructive dialogue, for

example, Washington should issue a public statement explaining what happened to make sure the region knows that it is China, not the United States, which has withdrawn from valuable conversations. U.S. citizens also need to be aware of the threat posed by harmful Chinese actions. As the United States and China enter a period of more open competition, the American public will need to be on board.

7. Not a Zero-Sum Game

U.S.-China relations are not a zero-sum game. Competitive coexistence both rejects ready agreement on disputed issues (unrealistic) and an inevitable drift to war (similarly unlikely given overwhelming costs and considerable shared interests). In its latest report on China's military power, the Pentagon emphasizes that "strategic competition does not mean conflict is inevitable, nor does it preclude cooperation on areas of mutual interest." Even while differing in important areas, the United States and China maintain tremendous economic, cultural, and societal interaction. As strategic stakeholders, they share mutual interests in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, anti-piracy, counter-terrorism, and nuclear nonproliferation. This extensive interaction and overlapping interests distinguish U.S.-China competition from U.S.-Soviet Cold War rivalry in important respects.

8. Opposing Misbehavior, Not China Overall

Washington seeks not to suppress Beijing wholesale, but to oppose its harmful behaviors. The United States does not seek to replicate the Cold War by attempting to

“contain” (comprehensively suppress) China the way it did with the Soviet Union. Rather than oppose China in all dimensions, the United States seeks to counter Beijing’s negative actions. Importantly, for instance, the Pentagon “has not viewed every one of China’s expanding global activities as a problem.” Rather, “the Department is concerned by actions China’s government has taken that are out of step with international norms, diminish countries’ sovereignty, or undermine the security of the United States, our allies, or our partners.” Accordingly, Washington will resolutely oppose actions that threaten American interests and those of U.S. allies and partners. At the same time, Washington should encourage and acknowledge Beijing’s positive actions, giving credit where credit is due. This invalidates propaganda rhetoric that the United States pursues a “containment strategy” driven by a “Cold War mentality.”

9. Cooperation Requires Reciprocity

To the extent that Beijing proves willing, Washington will cooperate to reduce tensions, pursue shared interests, and achieve mutually-beneficial outcomes. In areas where China’s behavior supports American interests, the United States stands ready and willing to cooperate. However, it takes two to tango: genuine reciprocity is essential to managing bilateral relations and pursuing collaborative achievements. Washington will not court Beijing as a desperate “ardent suitor” who appears to want cooperation more quickly, deeply, or worriedly. It will not yield unilaterally to Chinese pressure or assume disproportionate responsibility for limiting friction and escalation. And it will not accept arrangements in which China consistently contributes, and makes adjustments, to a lesser degree. Progress will hinge on both sides’ willingness and

ability to contribute commensurately. With China having declared its arrival as a great power and seeking influence accordingly, the United States will not accommodate it selectively as a superpower in some contexts and a developing country in others.

Implementing the Principles: Avoiding Chinese Formulations

American officials must recognize what their Chinese counterparts have long understood: words matter, and there is weakness in ceding the conceptual initiative. The United States must not appear to acquiesce to—or, worse yet, embrace—“politically correct” Chinese Communist Party-dictated policy concepts or formulations that make Washington appear to fear tension, or to be willing to yield to Beijing’s policy positions in order to mitigate it. Such actions would only further embolden China towards further assertiveness vis-à-vis the United States and its regional allies. Accordingly, American officials must reject three particularly problematic formulations (and their variants) that Beijing has promoted persistently:

The Thucydides Trap

As invoked by none other than Xi himself to pressure U.S. counterparts, as well as by influential Chinese public intellectuals to call for American concessions, the idea of the imperative to avoid a “Thucydides Trap” represents a misapplication of history. It falsely implies that only by taking drastic measures can the United States and China avoid previous patterns of ruinous war between an established power and a rising power. Instead, the evolution of nuclear weapons, international institutions,

globalization, financial markets, and transnational production chains have made the world a very different place than it was just over a century ago in 1914 when the Great War erupted. This has also changed the dynamics of great-power rivalry, from highly battle-prone to continuous competition that complicates historical definitions of peace and war. As the latest *National Security Strategy* correctly emphasizes, while many American observers see today's situation as one of peace, Chinese strategists typically see more complexity. In the Near Seas, China engages in assertive “War without Gun Smoke” (gray-zone operations) to erode the *status quo*.

Today Washington and Beijing certainly face friction, tensions, and even the possibility of future crises of some severity. Yet both significant shared interests and collective reliance on a dynamic international system, together with mutual deterrence, can enable them to avoid war. Both sides are restrained by these strong positive and negative incentives; it is not necessary for Washington to shoulder the burden of restraint alone. American policymakers must thus consistently avoid embracing flawed historical analogies that encourage unrealistic Chinese expectations of inequitable accommodation.

New-Type Great-Power Relations

To set the right tone and expectations while safeguarding American interests, U.S. officials must likewise continue to reject the Chinese policy bumper sticker that flows from falling for the “Thucydides Trap.” Beijing originated and promoted the concept of “New-Type Great Power Relations” and its variants (including “New-Type Major

Country Relations” and subordinate concepts such as “new-type Navy-to-Navy relations”) to imply that Washington must yield to China’s self-declared “core interests” (including in the Near Seas) while not committing Beijing to corresponding accommodation in return. Beijing has also attempted to use this flawed model to promote Sino-American management of international affairs while excluding and subordinating key U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea.

Community of Common Destiny

With Washington having gotten wiser to the previous two poison pills, China under Xi is now promoting a vision for an international “community of shared future [common destiny] for mankind” (人类命运共同体). This is itself based on advocating a “new type of international relations” more favorable to Beijing. Both are designed to transform “the international environment to make it compatible with China’s governance model and emergence as a global leader.”

In sum, tracking Chinese policy approaches and slogans as they emerge and evolve can help American officials anticipate loaded phrasing and avoid further traps as Beijing sets them.

Using America’s Own Words

Circumventing pitfalls is not enough. U.S. officials must assertively articulate American concepts and policies to achieve a public framing for bilateral relations that

is separate from Beijing's. This will further help to avoid having Chinese interlocutors driving interactions and policy conversations in a direction that could undermine American interests. Certainly, each side is free to employ its own concepts and rhetoric. But, at a minimum, the policy formulations that U.S. officials themselves embrace should at least meet the standard of the Hippocratic Oath of international relations: "first, do no harm." That typically means using their own American wording unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.

The bottom line: Beijing won't do Washington's homework—the United States must safeguard its own interests throughout the course of U.S.-China relations. Rather than let Beijing dictate terms in bilateral interactions, Washington should proactively and consistently promote its own ideas and phrasing. Describing the United States and China as strategic stakeholders that should pursue competitive coexistence realistically is a good place to start.

Author's note: The term "competitive coexistence" has been used to characterize relationships in biology, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and China's relations with other great powers today. Since 2007, the author has been consistently using "competitive coexistence" to describe a possible state for U.S.-China relations. Examples from among the two dozen instances are available [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Leading Sinologist David Shambaugh has also used "competitive coexistence" to describe U.S.-China relations. Indo-Pacific security experts Rory Medcalf and Ashley Townshend have used the term to describe Sino-Indian relations.

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