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## *Sino-American Rivalry in the Shadow of Trump: Images and Impressions*

Essay by Jonathan M. DiCicco, Middle Tennessee State University

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Donald J. Trump made no secret of his resentment toward the People’s Republic of China (PRC).<sup>1</sup> As the Republican Party’s presidential nominee he tweeted hundreds of times about China’s unfair trading practices. As president he railed against China as a currency manipulator, dubbed COVID-19 “the China virus” and labeled China an enemy of the United States.<sup>2</sup> But for all of Trump’s bluster – and the tariffs, sanctions, and export controls – it is misleading to paint Trump’s China policy as altogether deviant. In truth, the slide toward greater antagonism was, and is, a widely anticipated development in a relationship that is recognized by elites on both sides as a strategic rivalry.<sup>3</sup> That rivalry has historical and structural roots, and is far bigger than any one president. Trump’s bombastic presidency consequently should not, and likely will not, reorient PRC elites’ fundamental views of the U.S.-China rivalry.

True, Trump’s norm-busting presidency cultivated a reputation for disruption. The unilateral imposition of tariffs on PRC-produced goods broke with trade practices institutionalized by the World Trade Organization, and arguably heralded an atmosphere of toe-to-toe competition between China and the United States.<sup>4</sup> For some elites, the tacit framing of PRC-U.S. relations as a bilateral struggle between near-peers was seen as validating claims of emergent bipolarity – and that overt competition absolved Beijing of any remaining need to “hide and bide,” even with the attendant risk of stumbling into dangerous metaphorical traps.<sup>5</sup>

Trump’s moves are sometimes interpreted as a rejection of the status quo, but viewed in broader perspective, his ratcheting up of the U.S.-PRC rivalry instead reflected the status quo. Indeed, ramping up the rivalry fits an overarching narrative that pre-dates Trump’s

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<sup>1</sup> The author thanks the editors and Jingjing An for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Toh Han Shih, “Trump on China: 7 years and 400+ tweets later,” *Inkstone News*, <https://www.inkstonenews.com/politics/history-trumps-view-china-tweets/article/2141292>; Joshua Rovner, Dingding Chen, Mira Rapp-Hooper, M. Taylor Fravel, Joseph M. Siracusa, Toshi Yoshihara, and Zhu Feng, *H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Roundtable 1-9: U.S.-China Relations and the Trump Administration*, [https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-9-us-china#\\_Toc482487430](https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-9-us-china#_Toc482487430). On calling China “enemy” see M. Taylor Fravel, J. Stapleton Roy, Michael D. Swaine, Susan A. Thornton and Ezra Vogel, “Opinion: China Is Not an Enemy,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html).

<sup>3</sup> William Thompson and David Dreyer classify the US-PRC relationship as a strategic rivalry from 1949-1972 and from 1996 onward. William R. Thompson and David R. Dreyer, *Handbook of International Rivalries, 1494-2010* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2012), 195–198. For a general discussion of international rivalries, please see Jonathan M. DiCicco and Brandon Valeriano, “International Rivalry and National Security,” in Derek S. Reveron, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, and John A. Cloud, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of US National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Emma Farge and Philip Blenkinsop, “WTO finds Washington Broke Trade Rules by Putting Tariffs on China; Ruling Angers U.S.,” *Reuters*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-china-wto/wto-finds-washington-broke-trade-rules-by-putting-tariffs-on-china-ruling-angers-u-s-idUSKBN2662FG>.

<sup>5</sup> Yang Yuan, “Escape both the ‘Thucydides Trap’ and the ‘Churchill Trap’: Finding a Third Type of Great Power Relations under the Bipolar System.” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11:2 (2018), 193–235; Chunman Zhang and Xiaoyu Pu, “Introduction: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 24 (2019), 1–9.

presidency and continues in its wake.<sup>6</sup> That narrative is scarcely lost on China's foreign-policy elites, as Minghao Zhao's survey of elite views on U.S.-China strategic competition demonstrates.<sup>7</sup> Zhao's observations inform what follows. But first, a caveat: reliable assessment of elite views in the PRC is exceedingly difficult. The University of Pennsylvania's Jacques deLisle aptly notes several obstacles: evidence "remains limited and unsystematic," and sources are "imperfect" due to political bias and self-censoring. Expert commentary is sparse, diverse, and constrained by experts' awareness of "political limits on what they can safely say and publish" — and therefore may not be altogether forthcoming.<sup>8</sup> Bearing that caveat in mind, an assessment of Chinese elite views derived from published academic works can nevertheless yield tentative insights.

Chinese observers forecast increasing US–China competitiveness long before Trump's election. Indeed, Zhao argues that the Trump presidency occasioned a *third* wave of debate, coming after the Obama administration's strategic pivot to Asia, and before that, the global financial crisis of 2008.<sup>9</sup> Yuan Peng of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) flagged the crisis as marking the onset of a shift in the global order: the U.S. would retain its superpower status, but the foundations of its hegemonic position were exposed as weakened. The crisis "altered the state of asymmetry in US–China relations, gradually compelling the United States to treat China as a co-equal," according to Zhao's reading of the arguments of Tao Wenzhao, senior researcher at the China Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).<sup>10</sup>

How have Chinese thinkers made sense of the shift, and of Trump's presidency, as part of the story? Four elite viewpoints can be identified, and they all fit neatly with the assumption of rivalry: realist analyses that draw on power transition theory; analyses emphasizing mutual perceptions; ideological competition as a lens for understanding strategic competition; and analyses focused on granular policy differences (or issue disputes) that animate U.S.-China relations.<sup>11</sup> Trump's presidency is not a decisive factor in any of these, though it may be understood as an accelerant of certain trends — and as an irritant or a salve, depending on one's perspective.<sup>12</sup>

Least helpful in the big-picture sense is that specific policy conflicts drive Sino-American strategic competition. The list is long and familiar, and features Taiwan, North Korea, and other longstanding flashpoints. Each conflict grows and matures, and together they stand between the U.S. and China; so many trees make a forest, and, perhaps, so many issue disputes make a rivalry.<sup>13</sup> But it is a mistake to

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Robert Sutter, "Barack Obama, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump — Pragmatism Fails as U.S.-China Differences Rise in Prominence." *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 24: 2 (2017), 69–85. For historical perspective on narratives concerning China's rise and role, see Ja Ian Chong, "Popular Narratives versus Chinese History: Implications for Understanding an Emergent China." *European Journal of International Relations* 20:4 (2014), 939–964.

<sup>7</sup> Minghao Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US–China Strategic Competition," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12:3 (2019), 371–394.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques deLisle, "Purple State China: China's Preferences in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election are...Complicated." <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/10/purple-state-china-chinas-preferences-in-the-2020-u-s-presidential-election-arecomplicated/> October 30, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable?" 373–374.

<sup>10</sup> Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable?," 374, citing Tao Wenzhao, "Jinrong weiji yu zhongmei guanxi" ("The Financial Crisis and Sino-U.S. Relations"), *Heping yu fazhan (Peace and Development)*, No. 4 (2009): 28–30. Note that Tao Wenzhao's views on the US-China power relationship are nuanced and should not be reduced to a simplistic understanding of relative power position. See, e.g., Tao Wenzhao, "International Order Won't Be Bipolar," *China-US Focus*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/international-order-wont-be-bipolar>. On changes in the system related to this more nuanced perspective, see also Edward Rhodes, "Challenges of Globalization, Flattening and Unbundling," *South Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases* 2:1 (2013): 17–23.

<sup>11</sup> Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable?," 376. Ronald Tammen has argued (against most others) that power transition theory is *not* a realist theory; see Ronald Tammen, "The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program," *International Interactions* 34 (2008): 314–332.

<sup>12</sup> William Pesek, "China's Xi Jinping Is Really Going To Miss Donald Trump Despite Four Chaotic Years," *Forbes*, 18 January 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williampesek/2021/01/18/chinas-xi-jinping-is-really-going-to-miss-donald-trump-despite-four-chaotic-years>.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, political scientists Paul Hensel, Sara Mitchell, and Cameron Thies have linked issue conflicts to rivalry relationships, and David Dreyer demonstrates that accumulated issue disputes make for war-prone rivalries. Paul R. Hensel, "Contentious Issues and World Politics: The Management of Territorial Claims in the Americas, 1816–1992," *International Studies Quarterly* 45:1 (2001), 81–109; Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and Cameron G. Thies, "Issue Rivalries," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28:3 (2011), 230–260; and David R. Dreyer, "Issue Conflict Accumulation

reduce the overarching conflictual relationship to the sum of its parts. Scarborough Shoal and the South China Sea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, the Senkakus and the Spratlys are important, of course, but each is a metaphorical Pleiku.<sup>14</sup> Any one of them would provide reason to escalate, should either side find it useful to do so. Rather than any one point of conflict, what is truly at stake is the underlying relationship.<sup>15</sup>

*Realist analyses* ostensibly privilege that relationship and the structural factors that shape it. Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University, as Zhao notes, argues that “US-China strategic competition is inevitable due to the structural contradictions between the hegemon and the rising power.”<sup>16</sup> China’s narrowing of the national capabilities gap, then, is identified as the root cause of the two countries’ burgeoning competition, which calls to mind theories of power transition and war.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in 2017 Yan appealed to the facts of structural change: “Donald Trump will come to understand that even though the United States was able to grow at a much faster rate than all other nations in the world after the end of the Cold War, China...has been able to grow faster than the United States in recent decades,” and that “while the United States will be able to make China’s rise more challenging, it will be unable to prevent China from rising successfully in the end.”<sup>18</sup> Yan’s commentary is consistent with power transition theory and endogenous growth theory which, like Yan’s article, identify the engine of growth as primarily domestic.<sup>19</sup> Tariffs, trade wars, and even aggressive “decoupling” will not derail the locomotive of China’s economy.<sup>20</sup>

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and the Dynamics of Strategic Rivalry,” *International Studies Quarterly* 54:3 (2010): 779–795. For disputed issues in the U.S.-China context, see e.g. M. Taylor Fravel, “The Certainty of Uncertainty: U.S.-China Relations in 2017,” *H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Roundtable 1-9: U.S.-China Relations and the Trump Administration*, [https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-9-us-china#\\_Toc482487429](https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-9-us-china#_Toc482487429).

<sup>14</sup> Paul R. Pillar, “Streetcars Named Deception,” *The National Interest*, May 30, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/streetcars-named-deception-16398>.

<sup>15</sup> The point is made in detail in Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, “Contested Territory, Strategic Rivalries, and Conflict Escalation,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50:1 (2006): 145–167, at 148; see also John Logan Mitton, “Rivalry Intervention in Civil Conflicts: Afghanistan (India–Pakistan), Angola (USSR–USA), and Lebanon (Israel–Syria),” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23:3 (2017): 277–291.

<sup>16</sup> Zhao, “Is a New Cold War Inevitable?,” 376.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g., A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958); A. F. K. Organski, and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980); Ronald Tammen, Jacek Kugler, Douglas Lemke, Allan Stam, Mark Abdollahian, Carole Alsharabati, Brian Efirid, and A.F.K. Organski, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2000). See also Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and commentaries including Jonathan M. DiCicco and Jack S. Levy, “Power Shifts and Problem Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43:6 (1999), 675–704; Jack S. Levy, “Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China,” in Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China’s Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 11–33; and *H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable XII-2* reviewing Steve Chan, *Thucydides’s Trap? Historical Interpretation, Logic of Inquiry, and the Future of Sino-American Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), <https://issforum.org/roundtables/12-2-Thucydides>.

<sup>18</sup> Yan Xuetong, “Strategic Challenges for China’s Rise.” Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, February 23, 2017, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2017/02/23/strategic-challenges-for-china-s-rise-pub-71208>.

<sup>19</sup> James Morley, “What is Endogenous Growth Theory?” World Economic Forum, 24 June 2015, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/06/what-is-endogenous-growth-theory/>; Jacek Kugler, “Extensions of Power Transitions: Applications to Political Economy,” *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 5:3 (1999): 1–25, at 5–6.

<sup>20</sup> Though the PRC’s growth is projected to slow as its population ages. On China’s endogenous growth path, see e.g., Ronald L. Tammen and Ayesha Umar Wahedi, “East Asia: China on the Move,” in Ronald L. Tammen and Jacek Kugler, eds., *The Rise of Regions: Conflict and Cooperation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 19–36. For a nuanced analysis of Chinese intellectual elites’ discourse on the US-China trade war and the prospects of decoupling, see Li Wei, “Towards Economic Decoupling? Mapping Chinese Discourse on the China–US Trade War,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12:4 (2019): 519–556.

Yan, however, does not reduce “composite national strength” to economic or material factors; he also assigns considerable importance to political leadership. In his “moral realist” view, a rising power must work to reduce international resistance to its ascendancy.<sup>21</sup> Friction with the declining power might be unavoidable, but overreaching by the rising state *is* avoidable; China should allow the declining power to make mistakes, reasons Yan, while cultivating “strategic credibility” with other countries.<sup>22</sup> Recent incidents of rabid “Wolf Warrior diplomacy” aside, the PRC is more typically depicted as having transformed itself from “revolutionary order-challenger” (say, under Chairman Mao Zedong) to “reformist order-shaper” – an image that, along with its considerable and growing influence, could be reconcilable with a widening base of support.<sup>23</sup>

On the topic of leadership, in early 2017 Yan projected a sanguine attitude toward what a Trump administration might do to frustrate China’s rise. “At most,” argues Yan, “the United States will only be able to create certain challenges for China by adopting tactics in the security and political realm.”<sup>24</sup> The use of the word *tactics* surely is far from accidental, as it underscores the non-strategic and fleeting nature of “America First” policies. Yan recognized that such “tactics” could include U.S. efforts to exacerbate tensions inside the PRC, or to use China’s internal problems as a lever in international politics. But Trump privileged trade over, say, human rights; for example, he sidelined the issue of Beijing’s alarming persecution of Uighurs in Xinjiang until trade negotiations with the PRC had ended.<sup>25</sup>

In this sense, Trump’s presidency was as much salve as irritant. Even though Trump used trade policy as a cudgel, prioritizing economic competition is a calculus well understood by the authorities in Beijing.<sup>26</sup> Those in Beijing with a dim view of the United States likely suffered the foolishness gladly, finding *schadenfreude* in the knowledge that United States was hurting itself with a short-sighted trade policy salvaged from history’s dustbin.<sup>27</sup> To borrow an image from the classic cartoons of Friz Freleng and Chuck Jones, the United States might have seemed less “Uncle Sam” and more “Yosemite Sam”: loud, temperamental, and given to wild threats, but prone to shooting himself in the foot.

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<sup>21</sup> See also Amitav Acharya, “From Heaven to Earth: ‘Cultural Idealism’ and ‘Moral Realism’ as Chinese Contributions to Global International Relations,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12:4 (2019), 467–494; Vasilis Trigkas, “On Global Power Differentials, Moral Realism, and the Rise of China: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 29:126 (2020): 950–963; and Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Some might see here a weak point in power transition theory, which typically frames a rising state as a challenger battling uphill against a dominant power and other powerful states “satisfied” with the status quo. What of situations in which a dominant power appears to be dissatisfied, and rising challenger cultivates a wide base of support before overtly challenging the once-dominant, declining power? Such concerns aside, power transition theorists anticipated China’s rise more than a half-century ago, and the theory’s logic is rooted in industrializing states’ endogenous growth, so its claim to provide solid foundations for analysis has genuine *bona fides*. For a recent treatment, see Yi Feng, Zhijun Gao, and Zining Yang, “East Asia: China’s Campaign to Become a New World Leader,” in Ronald L. Tammen and Jack Kugler, eds., *The Rise of Regions: Conflict and Cooperation* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 37–54.

<sup>23</sup> Zhimin Chen and Xueying Zhang, “Chinese Conception of the World Order in a Turbulent Trump Era,” *The Pacific Review* 33:3–4 (2020), 438–468; Zhiqun Zhu, “Interpreting China’s ‘Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy,’” *The Diplomat*, May 15, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>.

<sup>24</sup> Yan Xuetong, “Strategic Challenges for China’s Rise,” Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, February 23, 2017, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2017/02/23/strategic-challenges-for-china-s-rise-pub-71208>. For a discussion of alternative points of view, see Chen and Zhang, “Chinese Conception of the World Order,” 453–454.

<sup>25</sup> “Trump Held Off Sanctioning Chinese over Uighurs to Pursue Trade Deal,” *BBC World News*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53138833>.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); see also Benjamin Carlson, “China Loves Trump,” *The Atlantic*, March 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/03/trump-china/550886/>.

<sup>27</sup> Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark, “More Pain than Gain: How the US-China Trade War Hurt America,” Brookings Institution, August 7, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/07/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/>.

Cartoonish images aside, rivalries are partly constituted by enemy images, and elite viewpoints emphasize the importance of *mutual perceptions*.<sup>28</sup> In Zhao's words, "Many Chinese scholars observe that the new wave of China threat perceptions in the United States has deepened the anxieties of the hegemon about the rising power... As [Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University] Wang Jisi argues, 'the Americans are alarmed at China's expanded global influence, exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative, and its reinforcement of the role of the state . . . as well as the consolidation of the Communist Party leadership and its ideology'."<sup>29</sup> The shrill warning in *Foreign Affairs* magazine in October 2020 by then national security advisor Robert C. O'Brien provides one highly visible data point affirming Wang's observation.<sup>30</sup>

Perceptions may be complicated by domestic politics within both countries. It might seem from a Chinese perspective that the polarization and divisiveness of American politics have created fertile conditions in which perceptions of China-as-Other will thrive – but it also suggests vulnerability and contradiction in the United States' claim to global leadership. Symbolized by (but not reducible to) the Trump presidency, the populist turn in American national politics signals a rejection of liberal elites and the liberal international order. Moreover, Trump's attempts to undermine the results of the 2020 election suggest that the U.S. might appear to be its own enemy when it comes to democracy promotion in today's world. Ryan Hass, Senior Fellow at the John L. Thornton China Center and the Center for East Asia Policy Studies, outlines the optics of the grotesque attempt to keep Trump in the White House:

The January 6 insurrection in Washington, D.C., provided powerful ammunition to Chinese propagandists that long have sought to delegitimize democracy as a dangerous Western conceit that lacks solutions for 21st-century societal challenges. Chinese media outlets broadcast images of mayhem inside the American Capitol to a domestic audience to buttress a narrative of America as a country in descent, plagued by deep divisions and a broken political system... The images of insurrectionists occupying America's legislative seat of power will be part of the Chinese official media's playback loop for a long time to come.<sup>31</sup>

Though Chenchen Zhang has documented a tendency among Chinese social media users to co-opt right-wing populist tropes from the West – including racism – the larger point is not lost.<sup>32</sup> The image of the United States struggling to preserve its democratic traditions, and the erosion of American credibility in upholding the values that U.S. leaders have promulgated for generations, threatens to be a persistent legacy of the Trump presidency. The Biden administration's perceived need to restore confidence in an American commitment to democracy, rule of law, and human rights sets the stage for what might be an integral component of global rivalry: *ideological competition*.

Chinese elites recognize that competition may be fueled by ideological differences – or at least the *appearance* of ideological differences. The backdrop of global capitalism – whether interpreted as the government-led coordination and state-owned enterprises of the PRC's statist capitalism, or, on the other hand, the deregulation, corporate tax breaks, and privatization of public services associated with the

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<sup>28</sup> For a critique of the United States' "familiar tendency to attribute conflict to our opponents' internal characteristics," see Stephen M. Walt, "Everyone Misunderstands the Reason for the U.S.-China Cold War," *Foreign Policy*, June 30, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/30/china-united-states-new-cold-war-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>29</sup> Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable?," 377.

<sup>30</sup> Robert C. O'Brien, "How China Threatens American Democracy: Beijing's Ideological Agenda Has Gone Global," *Foreign Affairs*, October 21, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-10-21/how-china-threatens-american-democracy>.

<sup>31</sup> Brookings Institution, "Around the Halls: How Leaders and Publics around the World are Reacting to Events at the Capitol," *Brookings Institution blog: Order from Chaos*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/08/around-the-halls-how-leaders-and-publics-around-the-world-are-reacting-to-events-at-the-capitol/>.

<sup>32</sup> Chenchen Zhang, "Right-wing Populism with Chinese Characteristics? Identity, Otherness and Global Imaginaries in Debating World Politics Online," *European Journal of International Relations* 26:1 (2020): 88–115.

current U.S. model – provides more common ground than is sometimes acknowledged.<sup>33</sup> Family squabbles over which brand of capitalism is superior are a far cry from the pitched ideological confrontation that animated the U.S.-Soviet Cold War.

That said, Zhao attributes to Chinese analysts usage of the phrase “Cold war mentality” and a corresponding tendency to regard American rhetoric as symbolizing an ideologically charged Cold War in the making. For example, he cites CASS senior researcher Zhao Mei’s concerns about “a new ‘political correctness’... apparent in the spreading of anti-China discourse in the United States,” a “neo-McCarthy’ stance on China” characterized as “a truly disturbing trend that bodes far-reaching negative impact on US–China relations.”<sup>34</sup>

Trump may be fairly criticized for blaming China for the United States’ economic woes, but he did not elevate the U.S.-China trade rivalry to the abstract heights of an ideological one. Indeed, Trump’s trade negotiations with Beijing communicated an ‘American economic interests First’ sort of pragmatism. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic shook the world and threw diplomacy into a tailspin, the Trump administration became increasingly transparent about its emergent whole-of-government approach to countering China<sup>35</sup> – and introduced an explicitly ideological dimension to the competition. Consider the title of Robert C. O’Brien’s aforementioned *Foreign Affairs* article: “How China Threatens American Democracy.”

If Trump resisted pressure from ideologues to raise the stakes with China during the first half of his term, the second half revealed the resilience of China hawks.<sup>36</sup> Foreshadowing the argument in O’Brien’s subsequent article, the administration’s 2020 strategic guidance document on China emphasized ideological conflict on a global scale.<sup>37</sup> It leveled the following accusation at the Chinese Communist Party (CCP):

The CCP’s campaign to compel ideological conformity does not stop at China’s borders... PRC authorities have attempted to extend CCP influence over discourse and behavior around the world, ...[and] PRC actors are exporting the tools of the CCP’s techno-authoritarian model to countries around the world, enabling authoritarian states to exert control over their citizens and surveil opposition, training foreign partners in propaganda and censorship techniques, and using bulk data collection to shape public sentiment.

That document has since been removed from the White House website by the Biden administration, but (perhaps ironically) its ideological edge – as well as the whole-of-government approach to great-power competition with China outlined in the document – seems even more likely to stick with Joe Biden as president, according to reports at the time of the writing of this essay.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Naná de Graaff and Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn, “US Elite Power and the Rise of ‘Statist’ Chinese Elites in Global Markets,” *International Politics* 54:3 (2017): 338–355. Cf. Jude Blanchette, “Confronting the Challenge of Chinese State Capitalism,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, January 22, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/confronting-challenge-chinese-state-capitalism>.

<sup>34</sup> Zhao, “Is a New Cold War Inevitable?,” 379.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Sutter, “Pushback: America’s New China Strategy,” *The Diplomat*, November 2, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/pushback-america-new-china-strategy/>.

<sup>36</sup> Josh Rogin, “Opinion: Trump’s China Hawks are Loose and Not Wasting any Time,” *Washington Post* June 25, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trumps-china-hawks-are-loose-and-not-wasting-any-time/2020/06/25/cf19b98c-b719-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trumps-china-hawks-are-loose-and-not-wasting-any-time/2020/06/25/cf19b98c-b719-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff_story.html). See also Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and William Inboden, “In Defense of the Blob: America’s Foreign Policy Establishment Is the Solution, Not the Problem,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-29/defense-blob>

<sup>37</sup> “United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” The White House, May 26, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201009043525/https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/united-states-strategic-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>; full-text document: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201010090529/https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.24v1.pdf>. See also this apparently declassified internal document on “U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific”: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Jill Disis, “The China Trade War is One Thing Joe Biden Won’t be Rushing to Fix,” *CNN*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/21/economy/china-trade-tech-war-biden-intl-hnk/index.html>; Ana Swanson, “Biden on ‘Short Leash’ as Administration Rethinks China Relations,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/business/economy/biden-china.html>.



Indeed, Biden takes the helm from Trump in a moment of almost incomprehensible precarity for the United States. Assured by experts that great-power competition with China is an essential component of the way forward, Biden almost certainly will not deviate from the designated path: continued maintenance, if not escalation, of the strategic rivalry with the PRC.<sup>39</sup>

Whether Biden is able to counter images of the United States as a decaying, declining power wracked by divisions is an open question. It is, at least, what thinkers like Wang Jisi would anticipate; in Zhao's rendering, Wang "argues that although a large number of Chinese analysts believe that American power has declined, the Americans themselves cannot accept such a view. Therefore, as the United States is unwilling to acknowledge its weakness vis-à-vis China, a kind of strategic competition between the two sides is inevitable."<sup>40</sup> Wu Xinbo, Dean of Fudan University's Institute of International Studies and Director of Fudan's Center for American Studies, also forecasting an "inevitable" increase in competition and friction. But despite some Americans' tendency to see the rivalry as ideological, Wu argued just before the pandemic that "China did not intend to enter into such ideological competition...we have no intention to compete ideologically."<sup>41</sup> Whether such claims can or should be taken at face value is unclear.

What is clear is that strategic rivalry is what states, and their leaders, make of it. A structurally overdetermined rivalry need not take on the Manichean fervor of an ideological cold war. Whether it does so depends on mutual perceptions, particularly among leading elites on both sides. As president, the norm-defying Trump normalized a hard-nosed approach to the U.S.-China rivalry – a rivalry that existed before he took office, and that persists after his departure.<sup>42</sup> Strident insistence on a values proposition threatens to entrench the rivalry as a global franchise that could force other countries to choose sides. If a post-Trump United States takes that tack, it remains to be seen what the PRC's elites, and leaders, will make of it.

**Jonathan M. DiCicco** is an associate professor of political science and international relations at Middle Tennessee State University, where he teaches in the international affairs M.A. program. A senior fellow with the TransResearch Consortium, DiCicco researches power transitions, leaders and leadership, and international rivalries, current and historical. Representative works appear in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. National Security*.

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<sup>39</sup> For a welcome counterpoint to great-power-competition-as-strategy, see Daniel H. Nexon, "Against Great Power Competition: The U.S. Should Not Confuse Means for Ends," *Foreign Affairs*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-15/against-great-power-competition>. On rivalry maintenance, see Gary Goertz, Bradford Jones, and Paul F. Diehl, "Maintenance Processes in International Rivalries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49:5 (2005): 742–769.

<sup>40</sup> Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable?," 377.

<sup>41</sup> Tang Jie, "Wu Xinbo on the 'Transformation' of US-China Relations," *The Diplomat*, January 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/wu-xinbo-on-the-transformation-of-us-china-relations/>.

<sup>42</sup> See Keikichi Takahashi, "How Unique Is Trump's China Policy?" *The Diplomat*, June 17, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/wu-xinbo-on-the-transformation-of-us-china-relations/>.