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50 years after Nixon's visit

By Robert Lawrence Kuhn | chinawatch.cn | Updated: 2022-03-13 16:30

I would have liked to mark the 50th anniversary of US President Richard Nixon's breakthrough visit to China with a celebratory essay on how the US and China, as the world's two largest economies, are working together to benefit the American and Chinese peoples and to promote peace and prosperity for the global community of nations. This I cannot do.

What I can do is to use this half-century geopolitical anniversary to reflect honestly, soberly, and hopefully helpfully on China-US relations.

Although now something of a cliché, it is still undeniably true that the US and China can cooperate in vital areas of mutual interest: global warming, macroeconomic recovery, microeconomic development, environmental protection, sustainable development, international terrorism, pandemic control, global health, the list goes on. Yet, there is insufficient commitment, and inadequate energy and intensity, to make it happen.

Sadly, media and social media exacerbates much of the escalating antagonisms. A recent Pew poll has almost 90 percent of Americans seeing China as a competitor (54 percent) or an outright enemy (35 percent), with only 9 percent calling China a partner. Polls have Chinese attitudes toward the US essentially the mirror image.

To reverse the drop, we must explore the drop. I need to be blunt to help my two favorite countries. Seeing what the other side sees is the beginning of wisdom.

In China, many believe that the US seeks to "contain China" and thwart its historic resurgence. They see America encircling China via increasing alliances with the "Quad" (U.S., Japan, India, Australia), AUKUS (Australia, UK, US); restricting Chinese companies not only in the US but globally; among other concerns.

In the US, many believe that China, is a looming political and military challenger, a superpower and modernizing military power. Most worrying is the supposition that as China becomes stronger, it will impose its domestic values globally, among other concerns.

When I wrote similar words originally, some years ago, they were a deliberate exaggeration and represented minority views. Today, sadly, they are not an exaggeration and represent majority views.

Each side, of course, rejects and refutes these accusations, China labeling them "smear." What underlies them? I suggest that the deep reason, to some extent, is related to nationalism, which modern societies cannot seem to shake off and which peaks during leadership cycles in all social systems.

Nationalism is ubiquitous among all human collectives because it is rooted in biological evolution, where early human allegiance to the group, the tribe, increased fitness for survival and enhanced procreation success in the development of our species. Whereas the survival benefits of the long-ago tribe were unambiguous, the benefits of its contemporary analogue, the nation-state, are more complex and nuanced.

Human beings have confirmed over and over again that they will bear any hardship, endure any pain, to protect the sanctity and pride of the group, which today is usually the nation-state or distinct ethnicities.

Simplistic bias and one-dimensional stereotyping, driven by nationalism, is a recipe for confrontation, not cooperation. But to recognize and expose nationalism is to cool its passions and reduce its power, allowing rational forces on both sides to build trust.

2022 is a political year: in the US, fractious mid-term elections; in China, the pivotal 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Due to surging nationalism, to compromise on matters of national interest, to seek middle positions,

may seem, in the heat of public opinion, "soft" or "weak", and such epithets could be politically detrimental.

The US should come to recognize the benefits of China's CPC-led system, which the Chinese people overwhelming support; for example, in poverty alleviation and in controlling COVID-19 as well as in long-term economic development. For its part, China should come to have more confidence in the success of its system and not react sharply to every real or perceived criticism from abroad.

China's leaders assert that, in an integrated global economy, China's stability and development contributes to global peace and prosperity, from which the world benefits - from 5G technology to containing epidemics to alleviating poverty.

In today's world, with multiple nation-state and ethnic conflicts, and with planetary problems like climate change and pandemics, the real conflict should not be between diverse political systems, but rather between the forces of modernity, competence and development on the one hand, and those of ignorance, exploitation and oppression on the other. By this calculus, China and the US, whether they know it or not, are sitting on the same side of the table.

Let's have the perspicacity and the wisdom to not make bilateral relations worse, and thus to enable the elixir of time to work its soothing magic. For China and the US, while confrontation courts disaster, cooperation enhances economic efficiencies and raises standards of living. It takes vision to see the other's point of view. It takes strength to compromise. The peace and prosperity of the world depends on it.

The author is an international corporate strategist, investment banker, and the chairman of The Kuhn Foundation. He was awarded the China Reform Friendship Medal.

<http://www.chinawatch.cn/a/202203/09/WS622817b6a310e884bace4ab9.html>