

Editor's Note:

After the 2020 US presidential election, the topic of China-US relationship has become even more heated. What will the future of the two countries' ties be like? What kind of relationship between China and the US is most beneficial to both and also to the entire world? Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn (**Kuhn**), chairman of The Kuhn Foundation and recipient of the China Reform Friendship Medal (2018), shared his insights on these issues and more with Global Times (**GT**) reporter Xu Hailin in an e-mail interview.

GT: The 2020 presidential election has come to an end, but the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. The US has also registered new records in the past few days in regard to the coronavirus. Why is this happening in the US? To what extent may the election's aftershock affect the US?

Kuhn: 2020 was not a good year for the US – we are ready to consign it to history. Political polarization and Trump's monomaniacal focus on re-election led to suboptimal policies at the early stage of the pandemic that erroneously favored protection of the economy over health of the people.

A natural question is whether the excessive political polarization, as opposed to normal political contests, is now intrinsic to the US system or is it an aberration related to the personality of Donald Trump?

The jury is out but I'd bet on the latter.

President-elect Biden achieved a

seven million vote lead and, following the election, his favorability increased to 55 percent while Trump's declined to 43 percent. This indicates that some Trump supporters have moved to a more central position. Biden is a centrist; he rejects extremes. He will not be a puppet of the extreme leftwing of the Democratic Party – his top-level appointees already prove this. The team he has selected is professional, experienced, balanced and diverse. And he is reaching out to those who voted for his opponent. All this bodes well.

GT: Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger has urged Biden to restore communication with China. How much room does Biden have to reposition China-US relations?

Kuhn: We have a new administration coming in Washington, favored by a clear, but not an overwhelming majority of Americans. The country remains divided – but no one expects a radical reversal of American attitudes or policies toward China. It is now commonly

accepted in the US to view China as a competitor, as a challenger, perhaps even – it pains me to say this – as a potential enemy. This darker, monochromatic view of China has become one of the very few issues on which Democrats and Republicans, who are contentious continuously, actually agree. The only area that Democrats give Trump credit for, albeit begrudgingly, is getting tough with China, though they criticize Trump's incoherent strategy and his misdirected policies such as tariffs. The reasons for America's sharp turn against China are as subtle as they are complex and simplistic assumptions are counterproductive.

President-elect Biden has assembled a tested group of thoughtful, non-flamboyant foreign policy experts and diplomats. Their priority will be to re-establish and rebuild relations with America's traditional allies and he will seek to re-calibrate US-China relations. But Biden will move slowly, reflecting his own cautious, careful personality, and also because, in the heated election campaign, Biden was accused of being "soft on China."

Biden's priority will be getting the pandemic under control, stabilizing and re-energizing the economy, investing in the future, and rebuilding relations with traditional allies. At the same time, he is ordering a complete review of US China policies broadly and he will

re-establish regular channels of communications and respectful dialogue with China. Over

time, Biden will engage with China in areas of common concern, especially climate change and pandemic control, and he will work to reshape the distorting tariffs that suboptimize US and China economies. But there will be no return to the halcyon days of US-China relations. Pity.

GT: Every day it becomes clearer and



Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn

Photo: Courtesy of Kuhn

clearer that the US is locked in an ideological struggle against China. What's your latest take on this topic?

Kuhn: We have indeed entered a period of "struggle" between China and the US, though I would hesitate to call it an "ideological struggle." For example, issues of sovereignty and territoriality, for all countries, are drivers of foreign policy irrespective of political ideology. This is similar for espionage, cyber and other forms. Nationalism transcends ideology.

There are multiple, tortuous issues between China and the US. But if I have to pick, at this moment, the most insidious, it would be one on each side. In the US, some call for the CPC to be removed from power, a direct interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state, and in China, some would seek to control information and influence discourse in other countries via economic and diplomatic pressures and other means.

These two ways of thinking feed on each, in a vicious cycle of escalation. The more China senses that the US wants to overthrow its socialist, one-party-rule system, the more it will try to influence US and Western discourse. And the more the US senses that China

wants to control information beyond its borders, the more the US will seek to change the system.

The US should come to recognize the benefits for China of China's CPC-led system; for example, in poverty alleviation and in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic as well as in economic development. For its part, China should come to have more confidence in the success of its system and not react sharply to every perceived criticism from beyond its borders.

The challenge for the US is to avoid threatening China's core interests, especially Party leadership and Taiwan. The challenge for China is to reduce the anxiety of those who fear China's rise, especially with respect to restricting information and constraining freedoms beyond China's borders.

Worst case: the free fall in US-China relations won't halt until both sides see blood, which I hope will be figurative, not literal.

Best case: Now that the US election is over, a window of opportunity will open to reset relations. The window will be narrower than in past cycles and the differences will be wider. Progress is possible, but only through quiet diplomacy, with each side laying out its red lines and both sides seeking mutual rules of engagement in all sensitive areas, especially Taiwan, industrial espionage, and the South China Sea.

GT: What's your greatest concern for the world after 2020? What do you think is the most promising for it as well?

Kuhn: In today's world, with numerous nation-state and ethnic confrontations and with threatening planetary problems like climate change and pandemics, the real conflict should not be between opposing 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 should be sitting on the same side of the table.

Yet, the cascading free fall in US-China relations is awash with danger, as chances for escalation or miscalculation rise to flood-water levels.

There is a vicious cycle between American and Chinese mutual attacks, each reinforcing the other in a race to the bottom. Political wisdom is needed urgently for avoiding further exacerbation and escalation, which would only harm both countries and the world as a whole. China and the US, working together, should become bulwarks of peace and engines of prosperity, which would benefit all humanity.

A window of opportunity is open for resetting China-US relations: Kuhn



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