

Editor's Note:

After the 2020 US presidential elections, Robert Lawrence Kuhn (**Kuhn**), chairman of The Kuhn Foundation and recipient of the China Reform Friendship Medal (2018), told the Global Times (**GT**) that there would be a “window of opportunity for resetting China-US relations.” A year has passed. What are the China-US ties like in Kuhn’s eyes? Where is the bottom line of the US’ China Policy? Will the Biden administration soften its hostile attitude toward China? Kuhn shared recently his insights with GT through a video talk. The following are the excerpts.

GT: Last year, you said about China-US relations, “Worst case: the free fall in US-China relations won’t halt until both sides see blood. Best case: After the 2020 elections, a window of opportunity will open to reset relations.” How do you evaluate the China-US relations in 2021? Are the two countries about to reset their relationship?

Kuhn: When I assessed US-China relations at the end of 2020, I meant figurative “blood,” not literal bleeding. Sadly, the past year has increased the possibility of kinetic conflict, though I still put the probability of hot war as low. As to whether the two countries can reset their relations, I can pretend to be hopeful, but, short term at least, I am not blindly optimistic. Events during the year have exacerbated tensions, hardened emotions. One can be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed by the cascading deterioration.

To make progress, I am looking for the bottom. When is the nadir, the lowest point, in US-China relations? Have we past it? Or is it yet to come? If we can recognize the bottom, that means from then on, we can see improvement, even if incremental and slow.

The first task is to not make things worse. Because if bilateral relations stop getting worse, then we can say that we’ve found the bottom. And once we’ve found the bottom – embedding all of the tough China-US issues – there would be many topics on which both sides would want to cooperate.

I was hopeful that the teleconference between President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden, which was constructive at least in its comprehensiveness and candor, would mark the moment when the bottom had been passed, as if a high-tensile-strength floor had been established

in China-US relations. For example, agreements for increased dialogue among critical constituencies: diplomacy, commerce/trade, military. Frankly, though, given events even since the presidential exchange, it is not clear that we have yet found that illusive bottom. I’m hopeful that we have, but only the future will tell.

GT: It is believed there is plenty of room for the two countries to cooperate. To what extent do you think the Biden administration will soften its hostile attitude toward China? Or because of the midterm elections, will the US not show any softness toward China?

Kuhn: Politicians in electoral systems must attract voters, and surely must not alienate voters, which is why tracking public opinion is vital. In the US,

politics is largely in the open, transparent, and amplified by independent media. That’s the way the system works.

Biden has been accused of being “soft on China.” There has been acrimonious reporting about his son’s engagement with China. The politics can get dirty. Yet, the Biden administration, staffed by seasoned professionals, is going to continue to focus on what they believe is the right China policy. Frankly, they don’t have it fully together. They have conducted a complete review of US’ China policy, but they still lack a fully coherent policy. What has been coherent is the Biden administration reaching out to some like-minded countries to assemble a unified, multi-lateral approach to China. But still, the policies to pursue are not clear.

American policymakers and think tank experts have been engaged in vigorous debate on US’ China policy, some of it in public forums. The most sensitive issue is obviously Taiwan.

From the Chinese mainland’s perspective, the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party), in power, has created tensions with moves toward increasing “independence.” The mainland has been staging various kinds of PLA military maneuvers, including large numbers of war planes, including bombers, heading toward Taiwan airspace. This is causing concern in the US and other countries, because it looks like testing or rehearsing for military action. However, from the Chinese mainland’s point of view, these military maneuvers are preventing conflict by warning Taiwan’s leadership that they should not even think about any sort of moves

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Robert Kuhn
Photo: Courtesy of Kuhn

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toward “independence.”

From the US point of view, if the Chinese mainland were to use force and take Taiwan, that would represent the most dramatic decline in American power and leadership – not just in Asia but in the world – and this is not acceptable. The situation is serious.

Wisdom is needed to maintain a status quo that is acceptable to both sides, with the mutual recognition, even unsaid, that over time circumstances will change in ways unforeseen, such that ultimately a resolution will occur, one way or the other. That’s perhaps the best we can expect.

GT: With 2022 just around the corner, are there any new Black Swan events in your sights? In what area is one most likely to happen?

Kuhn: COVID-19 and its hyper-contagious variants flying around are more than enough Black Swans. A Black Swan I fear would be an accident between US and China militaries in the South China Sea or in the Taiwan Straits.

A “good” Black Swan event, at least in terms of US-China relations, would be if the Earth was threatened by alien invasion. Say, we discovered a fleet of massive spaceships heading toward Earth, with an estimated arrival in five years. Quickly, I would hope, China

and the US, with the whole world, would unite in common cause.

I pose this most unlikely of scenarios only half in jest because in a very real sense COVID-19 is a kind of alien invader. Though a microscopic virus, it attacks everyone everywhere on Earth without respect to national origin, ethnicity, race, religion, etc.

It behooves the US and China, as the two leading economies, to work together to deal with this pandemic, with future pandemics, and with any and all Black Swan events. One concrete step is a cooperative, multi-channel, early-warning system to scan for Black Swans.

GT: There was an opinion piece in *The New York Times* entitled “Would Russia or China help us if we were invaded by Space Aliens?” Do you think the US would be willing to fight alongside China against aliens?

Kuhn: It would be suicidal and insane for the US and China not to cooperate in response to an existential threat. But the question is probative because it spotlights the deep mistrust and outright antagonism between the US and China. Would some Americans hope the aliens would attack only Chinese? Would some Chinese hope the aliens would attack only Americans? We must do better. We must rise above our evolutionary-molded minds that radically distinguish in-groups and out-groups and thus distort rational decision-making. We must see the world from a holistic, global perspective. We must do better.

