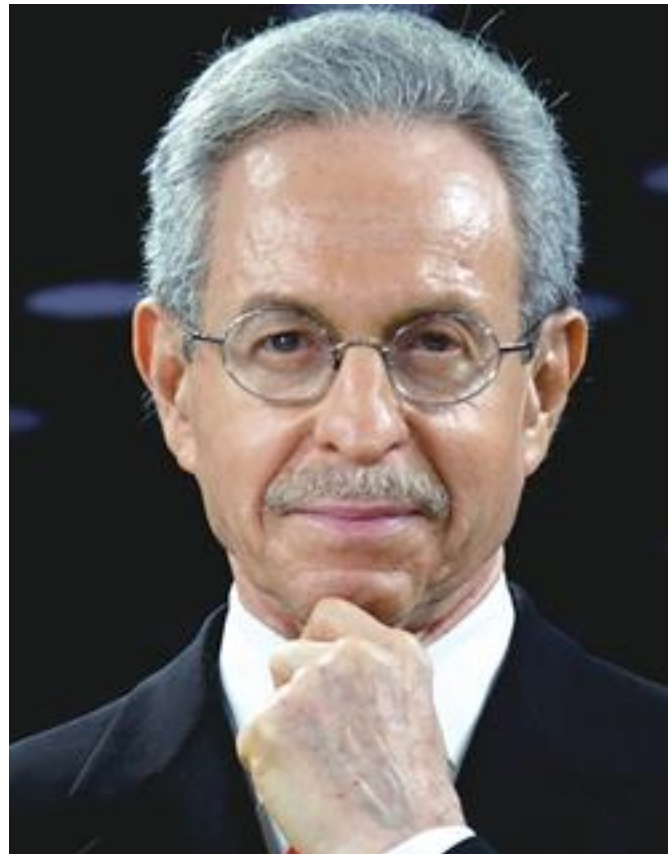




# A window of opportunity is open for resetting China-US relations: Kuhn

Source: Global Times Published: 2020/12/22



**Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn Photo: Courtesy of Kuhn**

## **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. CNN host Chris Cuomo criticized the current administration for not focusing on saving lives, but instead indulging in "endless vanity." 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. As I wrote before the election, "we are waiting for a vaccine to come and for the election to go". 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. When Attorney General William Barr, one of Trump's most loyal officials, stated that, "to date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election," it undercut Trump's claims, as did the Supreme Court's denial of a Trump-inspired challenge to the election results in four swing states, that voted for Biden.

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: US President Donald Trump has allowed officials to proceed with a transition to Joe Biden, but he still refused to give congratulations to his Democratic rivals. Many people think this is contradicting the good tradition. Are Trump's moves a reflection of the dysfunction of democracy that the US is so proud of? After the election soap opera, will the "beacon of democracy" still be able to light up the world?**

Kuhn: No country should impose its political or cultural standards on any other country; yet when benevolent leaders seek the best for their people, they may

well assess models of other countries for ideas from which they can select, modify and apply.

Though the US political process seems chaotic, and at times is chaotic, all is played out in the bright light of a diverse, competitive and occasionally raucous media. At this point, odds are that the US will recover from the divisive rancor in the election and return to the more normal competition-cooperation tension of a resilient democracy.

All political systems have trade-offs. American democracy trades off political uniformity and social stability for political competition and unfettered access to information. Developmental macroeconomics are not as controllable or consistent in the American system, but innovation and opportunity remain a strong characteristic.



China-US relations Illustration: Liu Rui/GT

**GT: Many media outlets and observers believe that the Trump administration has started its "final madness," especially in the anti-China campaign. Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger has urged Biden to restore communication with China. Under Trump's madness, to what extent will Kissinger's appeals resonate? 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" - President Trump trumpeted that under a President Biden, "China will own the United States," and he repeated accused Biden's family, especially his son Hunter, of profiting from China. Moreover, after the election, it was revealed that a federal criminal probe of Hunter's tax and financial affairs related in part to 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: Many people say Biden's China policy won't turn sharply, and there are calls for people to be prepared for possible intensity with China-US confrontations. How do you view the future of China-US ties? What relationship between China and the US is most beneficial to both? And also to the entire world?**

Kuhn: The bilateral relations between China and the US affect the entire world. To no small extent, the peace and prosperity of the world depend on China and the US cooperating as much as competing. Thus, China-US relations are too important to cover up systemic problems. I advocate being candid, with each side stating to the other side what it really believes.

I know leaders, officials and experts in China as well as in the US, and the large majority are highly educated, highly competent, professionally sophisticated, and morally upright. How then the dramatic opposing views?

To address the problem, we must understand the problem. Bluntly.

In China, America-bashers believe that the US seeks to "contain China" and thwart its historic resurgence. This is the real reason, they say, why America supports Taiwan - not as a worthy democracy, but as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" with which the US can threaten China while keeping the motherland divided. They see America encircling China via military alliances with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, Philippines, perhaps even Vietnam and India; restricting Chinese companies not only in the US but globally; hacking into China's computers and sending spy planes to patrol its shores; fomenting "extremism, separatism and terrorism" in Tibet and Xinjiang; trespassing with naval force into China's sovereign territory (South China Sea); interfering with China's internal affairs by stirring up rebellion and violence in Hong Kong; falsely blaming China for the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic; spreading false rumors and smearing China; applying the long arm of American law anywhere in the world; and injecting Western values to overwhelm Chinese culture, eroding China's independence and undermining its sovereignty.

In the US, China-bashers believe that China, playing by its own rules, is a looming political and military challenger, a mercantilist superpower and modernizing military power building a blue-water navy. China critics claim that China has become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad, amplified by territorial disputes and "wolf warrior" diplomats. They claim that there is little reciprocity in the China market and media access; that China steals technologies to boost its economy; and that China limits human rights to maintain one-party control. Most worrying is the supposition that as China becomes stronger, it will impose its domestic-control values globally. China critics, of course, add Xinjiang, the National Security Law in Hong Kong, threats to Taiwan, and supporting states like North Korea and Iran.

China, of course, rejects and refutes these accusations, labeling them "smear." But none of this, I suggest, neither Chinese nor American beliefs, is the deep reason for US-China tensions. The deep reason, on both sides, is nationalism, which features in leadership cycles in all societies and all social systems.

Nationalism is rooted in biological evolution, where early human allegiance to the group, the tribe, increased fitness for survival and procreation in the development of our species. 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.

I am always amazed how intelligent folk can so easily see the counter-productivity of misguided nationalism when viewing dispassionately the behaviors of others, while they are so easily blinded in not discerning the same misguided nationalism in their own, similar passions.

Notwithstanding real issues on both sides, simplistic bias and one-dimensional stereotyping, driven by nationalism on both sides, 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.

**GT: The topic of China-US "decoupling" is still going on. Every day it becomes clearer and 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.

Nothing would be better for the American and Chinese peoples, indeed for all people, than genuine cooperation between the US and China. I'm watching for wisdom.

**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.

Is all the negativity about China furthering long-term American interests? Of course not. But then neither are the anti-American pronouncements of Chinese officials furthering Chinese interests. 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's leaders assert that, in an integrated global economy, China's stability and development is essential for world peace and prosperity. One-party rule, they insist, is essential for maintaining such stability and development, from which the world benefits - from 5G technology to containing epidemics to alleviating poverty.

China and the US, working together, should become bulwarks of peace and engines of prosperity, which would benefit all humanity.

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1210636.shtml>