



Opinion

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

Anti-China rhetoric is not just US election bluster this time around

- Experience has taught Chinese leaders not to take statements made about China during US elections too seriously. However, this time, the window of opportunity to reset relations after the elections will be narrower and the differences wider



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US President Donald Trump speaks during a campaign rally in Charlotte, North Carolina on March 2. Anti-China rhetoric is expected to spike further in the run-up to the US presidential election. Photo: AP

The free fall in US-China relations has significantly heightened the chances for escalation or miscalculation. No doubt the US instituted, unilaterally, disruptive policies: Congressional acts related to Xinjiang and Hong Kong; restricting Huawei's access to US technology; seeking to limit foreign (read "Chinese") students; and now talk of prohibiting US visas for over 90 million Communist Party members, the vast majority of whom are not involved in policy.

But why does such a tough stand against China now enjoy widespread American support? Opposing China is just about the only issue on which Democrats and Republicans agree.

Politicians follow polls. A Pew poll in March found 66 per cent of US adults held a negative view of China, the highest percentage ever.

Certainly, there is election-year politics involved: given the US' disastrous record of controlling the coronavirus, attacking China seems both politically expedient and a convenient distraction.

The contest between US President Donald Trump and his presumptive Democratic opponent, Joe Biden, will be a slug-out brawl. Both seem to believe that whoever can best bash China will win. Each will accuse the other of being "soft on China" – the ultimate insult.

Democrats will attack Trump for his "weak" phase-one trade deal and for his initial praise of China in containing the coronavirus. Republicans will attack Biden for his past engagements with China and for his son's alleged financial dealings. Specific policies — trade, technology, human rights, South China Sea — will not be much debated.

Is all this negativity furthering long-term American interests? Of course not. But then neither are the anti-American pronouncements of some 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.

For decades, the "China card" has been played in American elections. It was "Who Lost China?" in the 1950s. In the 1992 presidential campaign, after three tough years in Sino-American relations related to the events of 1989, Bill Clinton took a hard line on China to attack his opponent, George H.W. Bush. However, once in office, Clinton sought better relations with China.

From then on, Chinese leaders recognised they should not take too seriously how China is bandied about in US elections, but simply seek to work with the winner in a business-as-usual manner. One hopes it will be the same this cycle, though one worries it will not.

Frankly, it would be a mistake to dismiss current American concerns as only election-year rhetoric. This time it is more. There is widespread conviction that China has become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad, amplified by territorial disputes and "wolf warrior" diplomats.

Many are convinced that as China becomes stronger, it will impose its domestic values beyond its borders, restricting information and discourse. There is also widespread conviction that there is little reciprocity, in terms of market and media access, and that China steals technologies to boost its economy and limits human rights to maintain one-party control.

How to combat these current beliefs is a challenge for China.

On their part, many Chinese believe that America seeks to “contain China” and thwart its historic resurgence as a great nation. This is the real reason, many Chinese believe, the US supports Taiwan and Hong Kong protesters.

China sees the US encircling it through military relations, if not alliances, with Japan, Australia, Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, and perhaps India and Vietnam; suppressing Huawei, ZTE and perhaps TikTok; fomenting “extremism, separatism and terrorism” in Hong Kong (with double standards); and applying the long arm of American law globally.

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 key to maintaining such stability and development, from which the world benefits – from 5G technology to containing epidemics to alleviating poverty.

When playing the “China card” in the coming campaign, accusations against China will be made — alleged unfair economic practices, job loss, intellectual property theft, cybertheft, human rights violations, militarism, aggressive foreign policy, the pandemic. But none of these, I suggest, is the deep reason.

The deep reason is “nationalism”, which features in leadership cycles in all societies and all social systems. Nationalism is rooted in biological evolution – early human allegiance to the tribe increased fitness for survival and procreation. Humans have confirmed time and again that they will bear any hardship to protect the group, which today is usually the nation-state.

After 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.

The challenge for the US is to avoid threatening China’s core interests, such as party leadership or Taiwan. The challenge for China is to reduce the anxiety of those who fear China’s rise, especially with respect to limitations of information and freedoms imposed on others.

But there is no going back to halcyon days of amiable US-China relations. Nothing would be better for the American and Chinese peoples, indeed for the world, than genuine US-China cooperation. I’m watching for wisdom.

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