

The Trend of China-US Strategic Competition and Chinese Domestic Public Opinion about Sino-US Relations from Trump to Biden

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Abstract: Over the past five years, Sino-US relations have taken on an increasingly complex dynamic. This paper will establish an analytical framework based on two key variables affecting China-US strategic competition: interests and comprehensive national power, and then utilizes this framework to analyze the trend of confrontation and cooperation between China and the US from the Trump administration to Biden. In the second part, this paper contains data from a two-wave public opinion poll in China done before and after the 2020 US presidential election and illustrates how public opinion affects foreign policy decisions in authoritarian nations. The conclusions are: the space of China-US competition and cooperation is growing with their increasing conflict interests and common interests due to the increasing strength of China; After Biden became president, Chinese opinions of the USA and the bilateral relationship improved somewhat; The majority of Chinese respondents thought China was the largest and most powerful economy in the world and supported China being the world's leading power; younger and more educated respondents had more pessimistic opinions. There are significant policy ramifications of these results.

Keywords: China-US strategic competition, interests, comprehensive national power, public opinion

1. Introduction

As the developing trend of China-US strategic competition become a world key issue which influences largely the building of a community with a shared future for mankind, and the rapid rise of China and the increasing awareness and means of the US to maintain its hegemony, "The development trend of strategic competition between China and the US" will be an important indicator for the two countries to formulate diplomatic strategies. This paper attempts to establish an analytical framework of Sino-US game strategies based on the two factors of interests and comprehensive national strength. In addition, according to various public opinion polls, Americans' perceptions of China have deteriorated significantly over the past few years, and little is known about the developments in Chinese perceptions of the US and the bilateral relations between the two nations [1]. Therefore, this paper will analyze the Chinese public opinion toward China-US relations during the tenure of Trump and Biden. Theoretically, This paper develops a case for how, generally, public opinion may affect the formulation of foreign policy in authoritarian states, and it provides substantial

evidence that the Chinese government has used and incorporated sophisticated analysis of online public opinion on both domestic and foreign policy issues in its decision-making [2]. Empirically, it shows the results of a two-wave survey of Chinese citizens' opinions that were carried out before and after the 2020 US presidential election [1]. Through the analysis, this paper will give the directional prediction of Sino-US relations, and explore the influence of public opinion on foreign policy, so as to provide a reference for the government's public opinion orientation and policy making.

2. From Trump to Biden: the Trend of China-US Strategic Competition

The academic community has basically reached a consensus that China and the US have entered the stage of long-term strategic competition [3-4]. Competition between China and the US can refer to benign competition [5-6] to maintain China-US relations and promote the interests of both sides, as well as vicious competition with destructive effects [7-8]. The dynamic change of comprehensive national strength between China and America is the key factor of strategic competition, and the substantial improvement of China is one of the biggest endogenous variables to effectively resist the US' containment of China. Meanwhile, China's stable development and positive foreign policy are conducive to the strategic buffer period between China and US, and the continued growth of the space for competition and cooperation between China and the US [9-10]. This paper establishes an analytical framework for the analysis of strategic competition and game strategies between China and the US based on two key variables: the interest base and the comprehensive national strength. Among many studies, the theoretical basis of the analytical framework in this paper is mainly Yan Xuetong's research on the national interests of China and the US [11-12] and Hu Angang team's research on the comprehensive national strength [13-14].

Conflict, cooperation, and competition coexist in the relationship between the two countries. From the perspective of dialectics, competition is ubiquitous and dynamic, which can be intensified into conflict or developed into cooperation [6]. The basis of the transformation of conflict, cooperation and competition is the interest between countries. Yan Xuetong divides interests into mutually beneficial interests and mutually adverse interests, further divides mutually beneficial interests into common interests and complementary interests, and divides mutually adverse interests into antagonistic interests and conflicting interests [11]. Yan stressed in the article that not only common interests are the basis for cooperation between the two countries, but also antagonistic and conflicting interests can lead to "negative cooperation" or "preventive cooperation". Therefore, strengthening "negative cooperation" will greatly expand the space for cooperation between China and the US. This point of view is the foundation of the analytical framework of this paper. The core point of this paper is deduced that the process of narrowing the comprehensive national strength gap between China and the US is also the process of increasing the interests of the two countries and expanding the space of strategic competition and game.

In Trump administration, the further improvement of China's comprehensive power, China's more aggressive and positive foreign policy, and the relative decline of America's national strength are the objective basis for the US to turn to a confrontational strategy. In addition, Trump himself lacks experience in national governance, and his strategy for handling relations between China and the world is too simplistic and tough, which expands the field of a zero-sum game in China-US relations. The triangle in Figure 1 represents the gap between the comprehensive national strength of China and the US in the late Trump administration. Compared with the late Obama administration, the gap between the two countries has been further narrowed. In particular, in 2017, China's GDP surpassed that of the US, ending a 130-year history that began in 1890 when the GDP of the US surpassed that of China and ranked first in the world [3]. Due to Trump's prefer power to the system, the oblique vector of competition and cooperation, which tended to be balanced in the late Obama administration, has been pushed by Trump's policy in the direction of mutually harmful interests, and the structural

contradictions that have always existed between China and the US have been activated, with a marked increase in confrontational behavior between the two and a marked decrease in consultation and cooperation, which damage the overall benefits of both sides.

The institutionalized US-China high-level dialogue mechanism has been disrupted by the US side. At the beginning of the Trump administration, the leaders of the US and China met in April 2017 and established four high-level dialogue mechanisms, including the Comprehensive Economic Dialogue, the Diplomatic Security Dialogue, the Law Enforcement and Cybersecurity Dialogue, and the Social and Humanities Dialogue, covering important areas of economic, cultural, diplomatic, and security aspects of US-China relations. Compared with the high-level dialogue mechanisms under the Bush Junior and Obama administrations, the high-level dialogue and consultations between the US and China established at the beginning of the Trump administration have further expanded in breadth and depth of US-China issue areas. However, the trend of US-China communication and cooperation was soon interrupted by Trump's China strategy, which explicitly positioned China as a "revisionist state" and "strategic competitor" of the international system in the first National Security Strategy Report of the Trump administration in December 2017, and then in 2018 as a "strategic competitor" of China. And in 2018, it provoked trade friction with China and extended it to numerous areas such as science and technology and humanistic exchanges.

In order to divert attention at home, the Trump administration has adopted a more confrontational strategy of "decoupling" and smearing in the face of the impact of COVID-19, and the failure to fight the epidemic. The US strategy of "decoupling" is mainly reflected in the following: in terms of theory and ideology, the Trump administration has continued to vilify and smear the Chinese Communist Party and government at the international level, interfering in the issues of Hong Kong and Xinjiang; in terms of action, it has withdrawn from various international organizations and international treaties and re-established new international mechanisms and rules to marginalize China. On March 27, 2020, the White House signed the Taipei Act, and on August 4, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar announced a visit to Taiwan, which was the highest-ranking US official to visit Taiwan since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two in 1979. In the face of these US challenges, China has maintained its strategic stability and leveraged its national governance capabilities to contain the epidemic and stabilize social and economic development. At the same time, it has introduced policies to counter US interference in China's internal affairs and "decoupling" actions.

The Trump administration's policy of containment and "decoupling" from China has not had the desired effect [15]. The strategic and academic communities in the US and the West also do not agree with the Trump administration's aggressive "decoupling" strategy [16-17]. Today's international system is more complex than it was a decade ago due to the rise of China and other southern countries as a whole, requiring the major powers to deal with each issue more carefully and to "take more of an approach that adapts to the complexity of the situation rather than resorting to simplistic solutions" [18]. The negative effects of such unilateral and simplistic policies and behaviors are generally manifested in the irresponsibility of the US to the international community (e.g., withdrawal and dumping behaviors), i.e., its strategic actions do not match its comprehensive national power, and the wrong strategic actions, in turn, inhibit the domestic development of the US even more.

The Biden administration has continued the Trump administration's strategy and policy of containing China. On this basis, the Biden administration's overall strategy toward China is "comprehensive competition, limited cooperation, and focused confrontation." Compared to Trump's hardline diplomatic strategy and China-containment strategy, this comprehensive strategy toward China brings about a further increase in the game between China and the US in areas of mutually harmful interest. The Biden administration's competitive approach to China with multi-disciplinary pressure, issue linkage, and allied collaboration has led to more areas of interaction and a more

complex relationship between the US and China [19]. It is foreseeable that the change in the contrast between the comprehensive national power of China and the US will remain in a strategic standoff phase for a long time.

The Biden administration has strengthened its strategic coordination with allies and partners and enhanced its joint strategy to control China. The Trump administration's diplomatic practices have made the Biden administration more aware that the US alone cannot "decouple" and contain China. So the Biden administration is trying to balance its domestic and diplomatic strategies and strengthen ties with allies to jointly check and balance China, a pragmatic strategy that matches internal and external aspects. It could be argued that the Biden administration has returned to the path of a competitive relationship between the US and China, but the difference is that there is more competition and less cooperation between the two countries, and more and more room for coordination and game. In his article "Why America Must Lead Again," Biden noted that "the US accounts for about a quarter of global GDP, when combined with other democracies, we will have more than twice the power, and China cannot afford to ignore more than half the global economy."

In terms of concrete actions, the Biden administration has strengthened the transatlantic alliance, upgraded the "Indo-Pacific Strategy", strengthened ties with Southeast Asian countries, and officially released a new version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy report on February 11, 2022, listing China as the top threat in the Indo-Pacific region. As early as September 2021, the "AUKUS" - the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US - was established to involve the UK in Indian Ocean affairs. Moreover, senior US officials have visited Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian countries, and actively participated in important regional mechanisms such as the US-ASEAN Summit, the US-ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting, and the Mekong-US Partnership Ministers' Meeting; and strengthened their military presence in the South China Sea with the goal of reshaping the regional order, strengthening US leadership, and containing China's development [20-21]. In addition, the Biden administration has disinformated and slandered China's epidemic prevention and control policies on the global new crown epidemic, intentionally deflecting the reality and responsibility for the failure of domestic protest governance. On the Russia-Ukraine conflict, on the one hand, the US demanded that China choose one or the other on the Ukraine issue, discrediting China's neutral position and policy measures on all fronts. On the other hand, the US took the opportunity to strengthen the North Atlantic Treaty Organization(NATO) and invite Asian countries to the NATO summit for the first time, expanding the functional role of NATO in global strategy.

Summing up the previous analysis, it can be concluded that the game struggle between China and the US is about the future direction of the world's unprecedented changes in a hundred years, about the overall situation of the great rejuvenation strategy of the Chinese nation, is the inevitable product of the rise and fall of the comprehensive national power of China and the US, the world's political, economic, technological and military development imbalance map of continuous change.

After entering the 21st century, the relative gap between the comprehensive national power of China and the US has continued to narrow. During the administrations of George W. Bush Jr. and Barack Obama, the two countries effectively managed their mutually harmful interests and strengthened cooperation through coordination means such as the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, and as China continued its rapid development, the US and China entered a strategic standoff phase during the latter part of the Obama administration, but the two countries were still able to focus on coordination and cooperation; along with the further narrowing of the relative gap between the comprehensive national power of the US and China, the Trump administration shifted to a strategic competitive game, strengthening the confrontation between the US and China and weakening coordination. The Biden administration has implemented a comprehensive competitive strategy against China, and the two countries have entered a phase of the systematic competition and even

confrontation. This dynamic process is in line with historical materialism and reflects the characteristics of “confrontation-integration-again-confrontation-again-integration”, and whether it further deepens the confrontation game depends on the management of differences between the two sides.

3. From Trump to Biden: Chinese Public Opinion about Sino-US Relations

On March 18, 2021, in Anchorage, Alaska, at the first high-level meeting between the Biden administration and the Chinese government, the two teams deviated from the script and engaged in a furious exchange that was aired across the world [22]. On China’s social media sites, Yang Jiechi’s words went viral and received hundreds of millions of views, shares, and comments [23]. This is not the way to interact with Chinese people, Yang specifically told his American colleagues, was an immediate hit. Since the Chinese populace had a turbulent connection with the United States during the Trump administration and may have hoped for a better start with President Biden, the Chinese words’ tone was actually more acerbic than their English equivalent [24]. There was no doubt that Yang, a seasoned diplomat with excellent English, intended his strong words for the Chinese audience.

The incident is one of the most eloquent examples of how Chinese authorities are conscious of how their actions on the international arena are perceived by the general populace. Additionally, it demonstrates the widely-held belief among watchers of China that Chinese officials are subject to substantial domestic pressure to seem tough abroad and cannot afford to come across as weak when dealing with other nations [25]. Furthermore, it is more challenging to “direct” or “control” public opinion regarding global issues than it is concerning local events due to the abundance of alternative (domestic and international) sources of information. Since Donald Trump was elected president in 2016 there have been numerous exchanges between the USA and China that have been broadcast publicly for everyone to see [26]. This link between domestic and foreign policy politics highlights how important it is to understand public opinion on both sides of the nuanced US-China relationship. The growing interest that the Chinese public has shown in international affairs likely reflects both the fact that their nation finds itself in a rapidly changing external environment and a perception that China’s foreign relations may have an impact on their personal lives, with the trade war serving as a prime example.

Additionally, as implied by Yang’s comments in Alaska, which were previously noted, there is evidence in their language and postures that Chinese officials do take into account popular preferences. From the standpoint of the government, as we stated above, a public preference-aligned foreign policy helps increase regime legitimacy, which in turn makes it easier to mobilize societal resources for attaining foreign policy objectives [27].

3.1. Views on the Bilateral Relationship

75% of Chinese respondents in the first wave, which was done just before the 2020 presidential election, said that the two countries’ ties had gotten worse during the previous year. However, in the second wave, which was done soon after Biden was elected, just 64% of respondents said that the relationship had gotten worse. Accordingly, the level of respondents who said their relationship had worked on expanded from 6% to 15%. Chinese international strategy thought pioneers who expected less disturbance between the two nations under the approaching president and even “forward leaps in restarting undeniable level discourse and reestablishing shared key certainty” may an affect the “Biden impact” [28], as confirmed by the distinction between the two waves, isolated by just three months. A progression of Seat Exploration Center Worldwide Mentalities Studies (PGAS) results from 2010, a year prior to the USA declared its “Turn to Asia [29],” uncovered that most of respondents (73%) had seen “moved along” respective relations and that main 18% accepted the

relationship had either remained something very similar or deteriorated. Notwithstanding this, the general negative impression of the relationship stayed high.

3.2. Views of the USA and its Role in the World

Almost four out of ten (39%) Chinese respondents to the PGAS in the spring of 2016 expressed that the USA was playing a less critical position of authority in the globe, while somewhat less (35%) trusted the opposite (35%). In late 2020 and mid-2021, utilizing the indistinguishable inquiry, we found that the differences between the two contradicting perspectives had developed altogether, with most of respondents in the two floods of the survey concurring that the USA's administrative role had contracted, separately. The change in sentiments has without a doubt been impacted by Trump's high-profile withdrawals from various peaceful accords and associations, including the Paris Understanding, the Iran Atomic Arrangement, and America's enrollment on the planet Wellbeing Association. Nonetheless, the assessment didn't change even after Biden expected office, demonstrating that different elements may likewise be influencing everything.

Chinese citizens now believe the US is playing a less role in the world than they did in 2016, a major increase from the previous year. Additionally, the small percentage of respondents who said they thought the US government valued its own citizens suggested concern regarding the discrepancy between reality and the ideal.

4. Conclusion

The space of China-US competition and cooperation is growing with their increasing conflict interests and common interests due to the increasing strength of China; the essence of capitalism and world hegemony in the US still challenge China as its tactics and strategies are based on confrontation. China is becoming the leader between the two countries to navigate and coordinate the conflicts interests and strengthen cooperation, actively responding to the strategic competition, striving for great achievements, leading the world peace and building a community with a shared future for mankind.

Today, the foundation for China-US ties has been considerably eroded, if not completely removed, by the two nations' growing competition. A similar tendency has been emerging in Chinese public opinion toward the USA, even as multiple surveys done in the USA have revealed a decline in American public perception of China. The Chinese public has probably been prompted to reevaluate the state of the bilateral relationship, China's status in the world relative to the USA, and the USA as a country as a result of Trump's trade war and hostile rhetoric toward China. The Spring 2021 PGAS already demonstrates that since President Biden entered office, popular opinions of the USA in advanced economies have improved. However, a consensus—both inside and outside China—seems to be forming that Biden has basically followed Trump's China policy, but with a significant variation in approach.

This paper identifies several broad trends. First, there has been a considerable fall in favorable perceptions of the US from a prior baseline of very robust goodwill before to 2016, which came after a sharp deterioration in the US-China relationship under the Trump administration. Second, China is seen as being in a stronger economic position than the USA and ready to take on a bigger leadership role worldwide, either on its own or with the USA, while the public considers the USA as declining and playing a less significant role in the world. Finally, despite the "Biden bump" in Chinese respondents' assessments of the bilateral relationship and the United States, their confidence in China's power and position in the world remained constant.

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