Bridging the Conceptual Gaps:

New Imperatives for Managing China-U.S. Relations

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Abstract: The election of Donald Trump as the 45th U.S. President earmarks a new beginning of American domestic and foreign policies, to which his populist thinking and unconventional approach have caused great uncertainty. While recognizing the challenges that President Trump may bring to the world in general and China-U.S. relations in particular, the Chinese government under the core leadership of President Xi Jinping firmly believes in the world's general trend for sustained progress, remains committed to the track of win-win cooperation with other countries, and is adopting both reactive and proactive attitudes toward the great changes in global arenas while taking every precaution against the worst possible scenario. To better manage China-U.S. relations at this critical juncture of world development, it is imperative for both countries to adapt to various new changes, deepen their mutual understanding of each other's diplomatic philosophy, and continue sharing the dividends of peace and development. If the two countries can manage to pass the first few rounds of tests through more active conceptual matching-up and pragmatic cooperation, they will be in a better position to realize their respective

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national agendas of “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and “making America great again.” Otherwise, both countries and even the whole world may fall into devastating confrontation and escalating conflicts.

Keywords: China-U.S. relations; Xi Jinping; Donald Trump; conceptual matching-up; diplomatic philosophy.

Elected as the 45th U.S. President on November 8, 2016, Mr. Donald Trump came into power at a critical juncture of world development and China-U.S. relations. With regard to the U.S.’ enduring supremacy in international affairs and President Trump’s unconventional thinking and approach, China and the United States are confronted with a new round of tests for their bilateral relationship, which require greater efforts from both countries toward more conceptual matching-up and pragmatic cooperation.

Conceptual Disparities Between China and the United States

To a certain extent, diplomacy is a matter of conceptions and misconceptions. That is also applicable to the China-U.S. relationship. At the time of information explosion, a main challenge comes from hasty interpretation and conclusion of the avalanches of notions, discourses and events concerning China and the United States; besides, Trumpian thinking seems to have made conceptual issues all the more salient to their bilateral relationship. Therefore, it is of great importance to understand the conceptual disparities — different interpretations of history, worldviews and future orientations — between both countries, so as to enhance their mutual understanding and cooperation under the leadership of President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Having long enjoyed great-power status as political and economic heavyweights on the world stage, both countries tend to view their present diplomacy as a part of their own historical missions. However, they differ sharply in the interpretation of history and embrace their own schools of historical thoughts. The Chinese mainstream thoughts are made up of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, all of which advocate for harmony between mankind and its social and natural environments. These thoughts

have been well crystallized in the notion of win-win cooperation as the guiding principle for China's foreign relations. In comparison, the United States has been developing its philosophical thoughts in a very different historical context, which is largely based on the nations' continuous expansion at the expense of the aboriginal Indians and other countries; competition and confrontation have constituted the main theme of its interpretation of history. Thus, the United States regards its superiority as a historical given, demonstrated in the so-called "Manifest Destiny" and "American exceptionalism."

Another big difference between China and the United States is the time frames they set when history comes as an important referent. The Chinese have always boasted their 5,000 years of enduring civilization, which is long enough for the nation's rises and falls and endows it with a quite balanced historical conception. The United States, however, was founded in 1776 and its 240-plus years of history are mainly marked by expansion, which makes it extremely reluctant to accept its weakening and declining status. The age gap between both nations also result in their different ways of thinking: while the Americans generally believe in their own capabilities to make history, the Chinese tend to wait patiently for the outcomes of natural development of events.

Different historical experiences of the modern eras also lead to different diplomatic priorities of both countries. Having suffered over a century of oppression and humiliation between 1840 and 1949, China attaches great importance to equality and mutual respect in its relations with other countries. Indeed, China has made "mutual respect" one of the three pillar principles of the new model of major-country relations with the United States.¹ The latter, however, has always emphasized its world and regional leadership. As an established power, the United States has been increasingly sensitive about China's rise and even the most remote possibility for China to replace its global status.

China and the United States also have their own characterizations about the current world. On the course of world development, China holds that multi-polarization and economic globalization constitutes the general trend of the day, and that all countries shall either conform to the

¹The other two are non-confrontation/conflict and win-win cooperation.

trend for prosperity or go against it and perish. By contrast, the United States is determined to maximize its global leadership with which to change the world in its own image. On major challenges and solutions for the world, the two countries' priorities are also very different: while the United States is often threat-oriented and thus tends to underscore confrontation with enemies and competition with rivals, China maintains that peace and development are the main themes of the time and thus endeavors to pursue international relations based on mutual benefits and win-win cooperation.

With regard to future orientations, both China and the United States strive to "make their countries great again" and explore ways for better governance of the world according to their respective desires and designs. President Xi characterizes rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the notions of the "Chinese Dream"² and the "Dual Centennial Goals."³ In comparison, President Trump's ambition to "make America great again" may be summed up as follows: to reinvigorate American economy by retaining jobs and enterprises at home; to strive for more trade benefits by withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and reconsideration of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); to reorganize domestic social and immigrant policies; to reverse the weakening of American military power; and to fight against international terrorism such as the Islamic

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²According to President Xi, the "Chinese Dream" translates to making China prosperous and strong, rejuvenating the Chinese nation, and fostering growing happiness among the Chinese people. Xi Jinping: Address to the First Session of the 12th National People's Congress, Beijing, March 17, 2013, see Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), p. 41.

³The goals are to complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects and double China's 2010 GDP and per capita income by the time the Communist Party of China (CPC) celebrates its centenary in 2021; and to build China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious by the time the People's Republic of China (PRC) celebrates its centenary in 2049.

State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁴ Obviously, President Trump's blueprint focuses on immediate policies and measures for his first four-year term, while President Xi's timelines are much longer and his goals are more of a strategic nature. With the unfolding of the two presidents' agendas, there will be more overlaps and discrepancies between policy concepts and actual policies of both countries.

Seeking China-U.S. Conceptual Matching-up

At the beginning of the Trump administration, China and the United States should not only deliberate on the other side's possible maneuvers and counter-maneuvers, but also try to match up to each other conceptually. It may take a long time — definitely longer than President Trump's tenure — for both countries to achieve basic conceptual matching-up, yet they can start by taking key initial steps on this journey. At present, there are four areas where they can and should work together.

First, both countries should adopt an open attitude toward each other's understanding of major historical trends. Indeed, if well handled, their different understandings in this respect will not necessarily lead to head-on collision, but may be complementary for a better grasp of the dynamics and trends of the world. In face of the diverse challenges arising from globalization, the Chinese experiences and concepts could be enlightening to the United States. As President Xi pointed out in his speech at the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos on January 17, 2017,

We should adapt to and guide economic globalization, cushion its negative impact, and deliver its benefits to all countries and all nations...In the face of both opportunities and challenges of economic globalization, the right thing to do is to seize every

⁴"Full text: Donald Trump 2016 RNC Draft Speech Transcript," Politico, July 21, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/full-transcript-donald-trump-nomination-acceptance-speech-at-rnc-225974>; "Full text: Read Donald Trump's Presidential Acceptance Speech," Courier-Post, November 8, 2016, <http://www.courierpostonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/11/09/full-text-read-donald-trumps-presidential-acceptance-speech/93571834/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>; and the White House, "The Inaugural Address," January 20, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address>.

opportunity, jointly meet challenges and chart the right course for economic globalization.⁵

Likewise, the United States has its own strengths and advantages thanks to its century-long leadership in the world. Its emphasis on concept-leading, institution-building, and pragmatism based on experiences also provides China with good lessons on its way toward becoming a global power. Meanwhile, both countries can learn from each other to meet those new challenges of the time, as seen in their cooperation in combating international terrorism since 2001 and tackling the global financial crisis since 2008.

Next, both countries should further explore ways to learn the best from history. History is always there, but what and how to learn from history is something that requires vision and wisdom. As Dr. Henry Kissinger pointed out,

The study of history offers no manual of instructions that can be applied automatically; history teaches by analogy, shedding light on the likely consequences of comparable situations. But each generation must determine for itself which circumstances are in fact comparable.⁶

At this particular moment, both countries need to revisit history in four ways. The first is to learn about each other's history from larger backgrounds. With most of its history centered in Asia and the bulk of its culture Asia-oriented, China can learn more from the history and culture related to Europe and North America. The United States, in turn, can better understand the global trends by learning more about Asian and Chinese history and culture — if it can truly take Asia and China as equals.

The second way is to benefit from observing the history of friendship and confrontation among nations. China and the United States were temporarily at war in the late Qing Dynasty, fought side by side against Japanese Fascism during WWII but against each other in the Korean War, stood in confrontation for most of the Cold War, and shifted toward close

⁵“World Needs More Globalization, Not Less,” *People's Daily*, January 20, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0120/c90000-9169548.html>.

⁶Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 27.

cooperation in the post-Cold War era and growing competition in more recent years. All the lessons of the past century provide insights to both countries in fostering a more constructive bilateral relationship for today and the future.

Third, China and the United States should learn more from specific historical cases such as the conclusion of the Shanghai Communiqué in 1972, realization of their diplomatic normalization in 1979, and subsequent ever-strengthening cultural and educational exchanges. More in-depth case studies will shed light on the two countries' cooperation on specific cases for win-win results.

The last way is to learn from the history of the other's development. The United States managed to grow from a vulnerable union of 13 colonies into the strongest power in the world and achieved peaceful replacement of the United Kingdom as the world's leading country. Yet faced by the rapid changes of the world today, it needs to shake off its past arrogance and prejudice and learn from the treasures of Chinese/Asian thinking and experiences in economic take-off and continuous rise. In particular, the United States should try to appreciate how China and many other countries can make those achievements mainly through win-win cooperation.

Furthermore, China and the United States should strive for more philosophical understanding of the times so as to facilitate their cooperation in global governance and international system-building. In China's diplomatic philosophy, the main themes and dominant trends of the world are thought to be generally positive despite occasional twists and turns. This philosophy contains a great deal of virtues inherited from traditional Chinese culture and expounded by ideas from other parts of the world.

In the diplomatic philosophy of the U.S., however, the Manifest Destiny and pragmatism have been two most important notions since the 19th century. The Manifest Destiny was a widely held belief that the settlers were destined to expand across North America. Later on, it developed into an American mission to promote and defend democracy throughout the world. Such notions as internationalism, overseas interventionism, and *Pax Americana* — exhibited in different forms in the diplomatic thinking of Presidents Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and George W. Bush — are all based on a firm belief in the Manifest Destiny.

Pragmatism in American foreign policy resorts to an applied practical approach and often deconstructs the problems concerned into sub-problems.

While sub-problems are usually easier to solve, such a process runs the risk of losing sight of the problem's larger context.⁷ In the case of President Trump, regardless of his efforts to apply business pragmatism into political and diplomatic arenas, as demonstrated in his campaign messages and policy moves immediately after inauguration, his focus has been centered on such sub-problems as side effects of immigrants, burden-sharing with allies, and protecting U.S. economic interests, which often conflict with the country's social policies, global alliance system, and interaction with other key members of the international community.

Apart from adopting a keen observation of history and the present times, leaders of both countries must define their respective roles and work together for closer China-U.S. relations in the service of the world. As the sole superpower of the world, the United States' oversensitivity to crises, especially to the possible replacement of its global status by a rapidly emerging power, has been seeping into the strategies and policies of the Trump administration. President Trump is trying to revise almost all of the major U.S. global strategies and foreign policies, including its alliance system, global governance, regional arrangements, and economic policies; many of his ideas and policies are debatable or even unlawful. At the same time, President Trump is trying his best at new blueprints by freeing himself from traditional and conventional thinking. As a matter of course, all his rhetoric and actions should be tested by realities down the road. While recognizing the individual's role in making history, the Chinese tend to believe that heroes are made by the environments they live in, and that leaders of both countries should meet as early as possible to exchange their basic principles and seek joint wisdom in handling their domestic and foreign affairs. China also hopes that a strong leader's charisma and unique approach would serve to promote cooperation instead of confrontation.

Now that great changes are taking place at both mass and leadership levels, both China and the United States need to adopt new ways of thinking

Xi and Trump should meet at their earliest convenience to set the course for future China-U.S. relations.

⁷"International Law — Pragmatism," Encyclopedia of the New American Nation, <http://www.americanforeignrelations.com/E-N/International-Law-Pragmatism.html>.

and try to enhance their mutual understanding. Above all, they should take a new look at their relative power and global status. For decades, both countries have accepted the notion that China is the largest developing country and the United States the strongest developed one, the understatement of which is that the United States is much stronger than China, thus able to deal with China from a superior and advantageous position. This general characterization will still hold true for some years to come, yet its contents and contexts are undergoing great changes. On one hand, China is already the second largest global economy and is catching up rapidly with the United States. As the U.S. National Intelligence Council predicts, China may surpass the United States and become the largest economy some time before 2030.⁸ Meanwhile, China will play a bigger role in global governance and international system-building. On the other hand, the United States remains the sole superpower in the world, outplaying all other countries by large margins in military and scientific strengths. Therefore, the United States needs to adjust its assessment and approach about a stronger China that is more confident in its own path, theory, system, and culture.

Indeed, the mutual concerns of China and the United States have been increasingly of strategic significance and have reached such an extent that both sides find it necessary to resort to more substantial measures while neither wants to make bigger concessions. On strategic dimensions, both countries regard each other as a potential source of strategic threats: China keeps emphasizing the necessity to prepare for more intense competition and even acute conflicts, while the United States has put China before Russia on its list of adversaries. In specific policies, both countries seem to have developed a model of tit-for-tat interaction on such salient disputes as concerning the South China Sea and the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in the Korean Peninsula. In addition, many of the existing bilateral institutions are under reassessment and some of them may not be able to survive under the new situation.

China and the United States are also confronted with new challenges brought about by rising populism and massive political participation, and they can no longer rely on the acumen of traditional elites and conventional thinking. Populism is a double-edged sword: it reflects grassroots

⁸Office of the Director of National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (National Intelligence Council, Washington, D. C., December 2012), p. 16.

dissatisfaction and demands, which exerts necessary pressure on the government to care more about their interests; but sometimes it may veer to the extreme and lead to rash and simplistic solutions. Although China and the United States are faced by different expressions of populism, both governments have to take this new reality into consideration in their decision making and implementation. Most importantly, they should remain cautious to the possibilities of extreme populism-driven mentalities and policies reinforcing confrontation in their bilateral relationship.

The most obvious and tangible changes, however, come with the leaders, since foreign policy decision making lies in the hands of the top leaders. It goes without saying that both President Xi and President Trump think and act based on their own national interests, and that they interpret their national interests from their own understanding and judgment. In fact, both leaders are putting strong personal imprints on China-U.S. relations. As a man whose orientation, determination, and way of thinking are shaped by his memory and experience of the decades of hardships China has undergone toward modern development, President Xi is resolute in defending China's core national interests, reiterating on many occasions that no country should expect China to "swallow any bitter fruit" that undermines its sovereignty, security or development interests.⁹ In comparison, President Trump takes his election as the mandate to reverse the U.S.' potential decline and to "make America great again"; his business success and winning a seemingly impossible election have enhanced his self-confidence that with resolve and enterprise he can practically achieve everything. With these two strong leaders at the helm, the China-U.S. relationship faces both opportunities for further improvement and new potentials for head-on clashes.

Therefore, it is generally believed that President Xi and President Trump should meet as early as possible after careful preparation for the timing, location and specific topics of the meeting. The topics they are going to address are certainly the most important. Other than such salient issues

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consensus on their
bilateral relations
and global roles must
be developed.

⁹Xi Jinping, "China's Commitment to Peaceful Development," in Xi, *The Governance of China*, p. 293.

as the rebalancing of China-U.S. trade and strategic prospects of the region, both sides should reconfirm the “one-China principle” and try to strike a balance between conceptual expressions and pragmatic deliverables; besides, both leaders need to share their views on and approaches to domestic and global governance. In terms of the right timing, two concerns must be fully addressed: one is for both sides to exhibit maximum goodwill and prevent any damaging incident from happening around the time of meeting; the other is to find a suitable time slot. Once the major topics and timing are determined, location is not a big problem. Hopefully, the two presidents will find their first summit meeting fruitful and their personal traits compatible with each other’s.

Tackling Challenges with Enhanced Joint Efforts

In spite of the long-term prospects for conceptual matching-up between China and the United States, the immediate challenges faced by both countries are grave in essence and immense in magnitude at a time when the new U.S. president favors unconventional ideas and policies.

The most prominent challenge is to avoid a trade war and economic confrontation between China and the United States. During the U.S. presidential campaign, China was depicted negatively from time to time. Mr. Trump’s charges focused on the economic and business fields, accusing China of cheating in business, stealing American jobs, and manipulating RMB exchange rates. If such campaign rhetoric is translated into actual policies, the prospects for China-U.S. relations will become quite gloomy. According to a report by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, in a total trade war scenario where the United States imposes a 45-percent tariff on non-oil imports from China and a 35-percent tariff from Mexico, if China and Mexico respond symmetrically, then the U.S. GDP growth rate would fall from 2.7 percent in 2017 to 0.3 percent in 2018, -0.1 percent in 2019, and 1.9 percent in 2020, and its unemployment rate would rise from 4.9 percent in 2017 to 6.4 percent in 2018, 8.4 percent in 2019 and 8.6 percent in 2020.¹⁰ China will suffer losses too. Therefore, the Chinese government

¹⁰Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson, and Tyler Moran, “CHAPTER 2: Impact of Clinton’s and Trump’s Trade Proposals,” in Marcus Noland *et al.*, *Assessing Trade Agendas in the US Presidential Campaign* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, September 2016), pp. 26–28, <https://piie.com/system/files/documents/piieb16-6.pdf>.

has reiterated its opposition to a potential trade war. For instance, when asked about China-U.S. trade frictions on the sidelines of a Lunar New Year reception at the Chinese Embassy on January 24, 2017, Ambassador Cui Tiankai said that China is firmly opposed to fighting a trade war with the United States because both will suffer as a result. As he noted, "currently, the world economy needs a strong engine to lead to stronger development and faster growth, it's inescapable responsibility for China and the United States to do this, rather than head toward a trade war."¹¹

The second challenge is about geopolitics and geo-strategies of both countries. Since 2010, China and the United States have adopted increasingly conflicting views on geopolitical issues as well as diverging geo-strategies. To many Chinese observers, the United State is tightening its encirclement of China by increasing military deployment and reinforcing its alliance system targeted at China, as well as siding against China in nearly every dispute between China and its neighbors. Similarly, more Americans are concerned that China might be trying to push the United States out of the Asia-Pacific region.

Although President Trump's notion of geopolitics and geo-strategy are somewhat different from his predecessor's, he sees China as a major rival by all means. At the global level, despite the absence of a concrete Russia policy, President Trump is attaching new global significance to the U.S.-Russia relationship, which will exert great impacts on the United States' relations with Europe and China. While China does not see a bipolar Yalta system restored by readjustment of the U.S.-Russia relationship, it is indeed preparing for the potential changes such readjustment might bring to its geopolitical surroundings, especially to the China-Russia-U.S. trilateral relationship. At the regional level, President Trump demands more burden-sharing from the U.S.' European and Asian allies and is deliberating major revisions to the alliance relationships in both regions. That gives rise to changing geopolitical dynamics in Northeast Asia among China, the United States, Japan, South Korea and North Korea, as well as readjustment of the China-U.S.-India relations in the Indo-Pacific region and of the China-U.S.-ASEAN relations in Southeast Asia. New trends of those trilateral or

¹¹"China-U.S. Cooperation Expected to Continue in Trump Era: Chinese Ambassador," Xinhua News, January 25, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/25/c_136012087.htm.

multilateral relations will exert significant impacts on regional peace and development.

Third, both countries need to enhance predictability of their bilateral relationship — a pressing task especially under the presidency of Mr. Trump, who tends to employ various uncertainties and surprises to overwhelm his counterparts and competitors. Such tactics might work in some business dealings, but to run the world's leading superpower and manage relations between the first and second largest economies, certainty and stability are more important and effective. It may take some time for President Trump to make necessary changes in concepts, philosophy and practice for the role of the U.S. president; meanwhile, China and the world at large should be prepared to make adjustments accordingly. Before President Trump is convinced that strategic certainty outweighs tactical uncertainty in the pursuit of American interests, China must exercise more strategic patience and stamina and try its best to enhance strategic certainty and predictability of the China-U.S. relationship, as well as of the regional geopolitical situation.

**China and the U.S.
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The fourth challenge is the growing strategic mistrust and possibility of crises between China and the United States. With President Trump's open repudiation of many of his predecessor's major policies, China and the United States have to redefine the nature of their relationship. The initial signs are a mixture of the positive and discouraging. In his opening remarks at the Senate confirmation hearing on January 11, 2017, Secretary of State-designate Rex Tillerson

pointed out: "We face considerable threats in this evolving new environment. China has emerged as an economic power in global trade, and our interactions have been both friendly and adversarial." Therefore, he held that "We should not let disagreements over other issues exclude areas for productive partnership."¹² Messages of such mixed meanings were also

¹²"Secretary of State Designate Rex Tillerson Senate Confirmation Hearing Opening Statement," U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 11, 2017, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/011117_Tillerson_Opening_Statement.pdf.

given by Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis. Speaking in Tokyo on February 4, 2017, he blamed China for “shredding the trust of nations in the region,” yet he played down any need for U.S. military maneuvers in the disputed waters of the South China Sea and instead called for open lines of communication.¹³

To reduce their mutual strategic distrust and prevent major crises from happening to their bilateral relationship, enhanced dialogue and cooperation are necessary. In fact, between 2013 and 2016 President Xi had nine summit meetings with President Obama, and through 90-plus mechanisms of regular dialogues, both governments managed to keep the China-U.S. relationship and regional situation by and large stable. President Trump will certainly bring some changes to the past way of communication between China and the United States. For example, there is much concern as to whether the China-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), a key mechanism during the Obama presidency for discussing the most salient issues in their bilateral relationship, will continue and, if not, what its substitution will be. Nevertheless, considering the lengthy and difficult transition period of the Trump administration, what is most crucial at this moment is to make sure that the disputes between China and the United States over trade, the Taiwan Question, and the South China Sea issue will not shatter the foundation for their overall relationship. That requires more prudence as well as a stronger sense of urgency for communication and cooperation from both sides.

The last challenge lies in the practical handling of the bilateral relationship. President Trump has no experience in public service, and many of the senior officials he has appointed share a similar lack of experience. Within weeks after his inauguration, President Trump signed a number of executive orders — such as those on building a wall between the United States and Mexico, “rebuilding the military,” and banning immigrants from seven countries — that have triggered increasing confusion and opposition domestically and around the world. Reportedly, he even cut short a phone call with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull when the latter tried to discuss his immigration policy. Those are only a few cases of President

¹³“Joint Press Briefing by Secretary Mattis and Minister Inada in Tokyo, Japan,” U.S. Department of Defense, February 4, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=1&ModuleId=1144&Article=1071436>.

Trump's surprise moves to attack the establishments and seek quick delivery of his policy plans. However, diplomacy is a field marked by intricacy and artful nuances. Thus, future trends of China-U.S. relations are, to some extent, a function of how President Trump's strong personality and the new approaches of his team will translate into actual dealing with China.

Turning Challenges into Opportunities

In general, China's responses to the election of President Trump can be described as both "reactive" and "proactive." Since it was the choice of the American voters and the new president has initiated an overhaul of American domestic and foreign policies, China believes that the ball is in the U.S. court and prefers to hold a "wait-and-see" attitude.

Throughout the election, the Chinese government refrained from making direct comments on — and showed no preference for — any candidate or political party in the United States. During the transition period between November 8, 2016 and January 20, 2017, the Chinese government closely observed the development of the U.S.' domestic politics and managed to establish contacts with the President-elect's key advisers. On December 12, 2016, Mr. Geng Shuang, Spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, confirmed that when State Councilor Yang Jiechi stopped in New York en route to Latin America, he met with some of the key advisers to the new president including Michael Flynn, President Trump's pick for national security adviser (who was later replaced by retired Lieutenant General Herbert McMaster due to a confidentiality crisis). Both sides exchanged views on China-U.S. relations and major issues of common interest.¹⁴ As Dr. Henry Kissinger pointed out at an event hosted by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations on December 5, 2016, "At this moment I have been impressed at the calm reaction of the Chinese leadership (to the telephone conversation between President-elect Trump and Taiwan leader Tsai Ing-wen on December 2, 2016), which suggests a

¹⁴"Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on December 12, 2016," Chinese Foreign Ministry, December 12, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1423512.shtml.

determination to see whether a calm dialogue can be developed.”¹⁵ Moreover, the Chinese government and official media have been stressing on cooperation since President Trump took office. All these indicate that China is patiently waiting for the Trump administration to team up and set forth its major policies.

However, China's wait-and-see attitude does not mean that it is simply sitting idly. On the contrary, the Chinese government has been striving for more communication and cooperation with the Trump administration. On December 2, 2016, President Xi met with Dr. Kissinger in Beijing, expressing China's willingness to work closely with the United States at a new starting point to maintain close high-level exchanges, promote development of win-win economic and trade ties, expand substantial cooperation in various areas, and strengthen coordination on major global and regional issues.¹⁶ In fact, China has already taken many efforts to enhance pragmatic exchanges with the United States in political, economic, and other fields.

In the meantime, China has been all the more committed to what it sees as critical to future China-U.S. relations and sustainable development of the world, such as the upholding of existing global governance institutions, adherence to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and firm support for economic globalization while trying to overcome its shortcomings, and spurring on regional cooperation. All these will improve the overall environment under which China and the United States interact. For when the world economic situation gets better, not only will both countries benefit directly, but the possibility of economic frictions between them will likely be reduced as well.

China has made many efforts to carefully navigate its relationship with the U.S. through President Trump's transition period.

¹⁵“Video: Leaders Speak: Secretaries of State,” National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, December 5, 2016, <https://www.ncuscr.org/content/video-leaders-speak-secretaries-state>.

¹⁶“Xi meets Henry Kissinger, Discusses China-U.S. Ties,” Xinhua News, December 2, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-12/02/c_135877048.htm.

While the Chinese government endeavors to turn challenges into opportunities for China-U.S. relations, the Trump administration should fully recognize such efforts and goodwill and take constructive measures accordingly. To be more specific, China and the United States need to enhance their communication and coordination of policy options on four levels.

Above all, both countries need each other for achieving their respective domestic agendas. As Professor David Lampton commented in late November 2016, "Of all the shared interests between China and America, the greatest is our common need for national development and renewal."¹⁷ For China to fulfill its "Dual Centennial Goals" and the "Chinese Dream" as mentioned above, maintaining a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with the United States is absolutely necessary. Likewise, to "make America great again," the United States also needs China's huge market, financial support and cooperation on various global and regional issues. For example, Mr. Jack Ma, the famous Chinese billionaire and Alibaba CEO, met with President-elect Trump on January 9, 2017 and pledged to create a million jobs in the United States through Alibaba's e-commerce platform. With regard to the strong economic interdependence between China and the United States, and to the fact that revitalizing the U.S. economy seems to be the top priority on President Trump's domestic agenda, it will be wise for both countries to enhance their economic cooperation mainly on such issues as resettlement of trade terms, coordination of financial policies and joint exploration into the viable approaches to economic restructuring.

On the bilateral level, both countries must make every effort to enhance their mutual strategic trust, so that their bilateral relations will basically stay on the right track. As President Xi said to President-elect Trump in their telephone conversation on November 14, 2016,

Since the establishment of China-U.S. diplomatic relationship 37 years ago, bilateral relations have been continuously moving forward, which has brought tangible benefits to the two peoples and also promoted world and regional peace, stability and

¹⁷David Lampton, "Strategic First Principles in U.S.-China Relations," *China-US Focus Digest*, December 2016, p. 10, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/d/file/digest-magazine/2016-12-12/d7692ad179259ef9518929048b7d57d8.pdf>.

prosperity. Facts have proven that cooperation is the only correct choice for China and the U.S.¹⁸

To foster more strategic trust, China and the United States should adhere to the basic principles of non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation; in addition, they need to manifest more sincerity and goodwill by respecting each other's core and vital national interests. Equally important, they must continue with their strategic dialogue so as to minimize uncertainties and the unpredictable in their bilateral relations.

On the regional level, most of the interactions between China and the United States take place in the Asia-Pacific region. Over the years, they have undergone many tests concerning the South China Sea issue, the North Korean nuclear issue, and the changing dynamics of the China-U.S.-Japan relationship, to list only a few. Some of the issues might go away with the Obama administration, such as disputes over the exclusiveness of the TPP, for President Trump has signed an executive order

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to withdraw from the trade deal. Yet more issues will stay — for instance, the U.S.-led alliance system and deployment of the THAAD system — while new issues may pop up under new circumstances. Effective management of Asia-Pacific affairs, therefore, should not be issue-driven, rather, it calls for top-level planning from regional countries, especially China and the United States, as well as a comprehensive framework for enhanced bilateral and regional cooperation.

Other than the Asia-Pacific, China and the United States should also readjust their interaction related to other regions. To be more specific, they need to facilitate the economic restructuring and upgrading of Latin America and the Caribbean, make joint efforts to create a new model of trilateral or multilateral cooperation for implementing the UN 2030 Agenda

¹⁸"Xi Jinping Holds Telephone Talks with US President-elect Donald Trump," Chinese Foreign Ministry, November 14, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx-662805/t1415809.shtml.

in Africa, and explore ways to promote the China-U.S.-Europe cooperation to generate new momentum to the world economy and sustain progress in science and technology.

On the global level, both countries share broad common interests and essential responsibilities in maintaining world peace and stability, as well as promoting global development and prosperity. Over the past decade, they have garnered remarkable achievements in global governance, especially with regard to tackling the global financial crisis, addressing climate change, combating epidemics, and reforming the existing international institutions like the Group of Twenty (G20), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. Hopefully, after the transition period, the Trump administration can rekindle its enthusiasm toward global governance and join China and other major countries in providing more global public goods, for that is the true essence of global leadership.

Conclusion

The election of President Trump represents the beginning of a new era of U.S. domestic and foreign policies. Thus, we need to look at China-U.S. relations with new thinking and from new perspectives. In particular, we need to develop new concepts and theories for better knowledge of the fundamental dynamics that drive future China-U.S. relations, and employ those conceptual principles to guide the actual management of challenges and problems in the bilateral relationship.

Admittedly, the Trump administration is deliberating its China strategy and policies in a very different way from its predecessors. Some of President Trump's pronounced or intended policies toward China have posed serious challenges to China-U.S. relations. For example, the potential change of the long-held "one-China" policy, that President Trump asserted to be "negotiable" in a television interview, could shake the very foundation of China-U.S. relations and lead to disastrous consequences.¹⁹ In the near future, the Trump administration will also likely make an offensive against China on economic or the South China Sea issues. Their damaging effect to China-U.S. relations and regional stability should never be underestimated.

¹⁹"China Rejects Trump's Suggestion to Negotiate with Taiwan," Sino-US. com, January 16, 2017, <http://www.sino-us.com/35/10155894001.html>.

However, it does not mean the end of the existing world order. Instead, the election of President Trump enables China and the world to re-ponder the root causes of the new situation and strive for new solutions. Given their overwhelming weight and global influence, China and the United States must try their best to avoid the devastating results of confrontation and conflict, which would leave no winners but only losers across the world; enhancing conceptual matching-up and pragmatic cooperation is indeed their only choice. Fortunately, the initial communication between President Xi and President Trump appears to be both positive and substantive. After all, the China-U.S. relationship has withstood various kinds of tests since President Nixon's visit to China nearly half a century ago.

As time passes, more positive signs are beginning to unfold regarding future China-U.S. relations: President Trump has become more careful of his rhetoric and actions concerning China since his phone call with Tsai Ing-wen. He nominated Iowa Governor Terry Branstad, an old friend of President Xi, as new U.S. ambassador to China, which is interpreted by the Chinese as an important gesture of goodwill. Also, President Trump seems to have little interest in ideological issues and has adopted unconventional notions on geopolitics and geo-strategies, thus making it possible for China and the United States to work on more sensitive issues like regional military buildup and the U.S.' alliance system.

At the time of this writing, China and the United States are only starting to match up to each other's thinking and actions. It is of crucial importance for both countries to maintain the overall positive trends of communication and cooperation between them through the first rounds of tests for their bilateral relationship. That does not only serve the interests of China and the United States, but will also benefit the whole world in the long run.