

OPEN QUESTIONS

for better China-US ties



US historical view was at the heart of Washington's turn towards an increasingly confrontational China approach because the US wanted to maintain its hegemony, or at least delay its own decline, a view largely in line with that of the Chinese government. Do you agree?

I have great respect for Dr Yang and am sorry to say that I largely agree with his analysis. Empathy is the basis for successful diplomacy and the current American government is foreign to it.

You said in the past that the US should reduce weapon sales to Taiwan to pressure Taiwan into negotiations with Beijing, and "Taiwan is an established American foreign policy success story that appears to be nearing the end of its shelf life". Last year, you said the US had wasted opportunities created in 1972 for a peaceful accommodation between Taiwan and the mainland, while urging Washington to use its influence to push Taiwan to accept a negotiated settlement with Beijing. Could you explain your rationale behind those policy recommendations?

The Taiwan issue is the legacy of the Chinese civil war, the Korean conflict and the Cold War. It did not begin with the US opening to China in 1971-72. But the Shanghai Communiqué and the two later joint communiqués were premised on "a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves". The United States has accepted every agreement the two sides of the strait have made but they have not settled their differences. In my view, it would serve the interests of the United States as well as the China mainland and Taiwan for them to do so but US policies, pronouncements and actions have instead served to bolster resistance to cross-strait rapprochement.

Some in Washington now justify their opposition to the unification of China on dubious strategic grounds. Instead of stepping back to let the Chinese parties address their differences through political dialogue, the US has acted to stiffen Taiwan's resistance to this. The issue is now regarded by most Americans as purely military and treated as such by the authorities in Taipei. I think this is a mistake that is likely to end in tragedy for all concerned but see no prospect of it changing in the near future.

How will the 2024 US presidential election affect sino-US ties and Taiwan's future? You said the transition between the November election and the inauguration in January could be the most dangerous period as countries, including China, may find it "tempting" to challenge the US if it turns chaotic again. What do you suggest the US and China should do to avoid such a scenario?

The United States is in the midst of a mounting constitutional crisis that will come to a head with the November 5 elections and the transition to the January 20 inauguration of the next president. Those in Beijing who have come to believe that there is no longer a path to peaceful reunification and that the only feasible way to end the division of China is to resort to force might see this period of confusion in Washington as an opportune moment to do so. This would, in my view, be a tragic mistake. The civilian government in Washington may disintegrate at the end of this year, but the US Armed Forces will not, and the American people would not fail to direct their anger at China were they to regard it as responsible for a war over Taiwan.

Beijing admits it is facing the most challenging external environment due to the feud with the US-led West and rising tensions over the South China Sea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other geopolitical hotspots such as Ukraine. Do you have any advice for the Chinese government on how to fix its image problem, settle the territorial disputes with its neighbours and "tell China stories well to the world"?

China can no longer maintain a low profile, as Deng Xiaoping urged. Nor can it avoid taking a leadership position on occasion.

But it can and should recognise that, as a great power, its statements and actions can evoke fear as well as admiration by other countries, including its neighbours. That is why "observe calmly, secure the Chinese position, and cope with affairs calmly" remains good advice. If China is seen to be overbearing, it will cause other countries to organise themselves against it.

Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon meet during the historic visit to China in February 1972. Photos: Xinhua

In another context, the late Saudi Arabian King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz offered relevant counsel: "If you want to be loved, do something lovable." China's reputation was tarnished by its successful mediation of rapprochement between his country and Iran. China advocates the resolution of international disputes through diplomatic dialogue. It would benefit by making well-prepared proposals for the resolution of its own disputes with Southeast Asian countries.

As probably one of the last "panda huggers", you have worked tirelessly to promote engagement with China. But with the marginalisation of China-friendly, pro-engagement experts in the US, do you think there will ever be a "next Kissinger" between China and the US, who enjoys political influence in both countries and is willing to serve as Beijing's backchannel to the White House?

I have many Chinese friends and I am an admirer of Chinese culture, but I do not argue for better US-China relations to benefit China but to serve the interests of my own country. Great Britain handled the loss of its global hegemony to the United States gracefully, yielding privileges it could no longer sustain while ensuring that the transition was as much to its advantage as possible.

I believe that there is no reason for China and America to be antagonists and that, with strategic vision and skilled diplomacy, we too could manage a peaceful transition to a relationship grounded in equality and mutual benefit.

I see the alternatives as dire, including a possible trans-Pacific war that could devastate both countries, while destroying Taiwan's hard-won democracy and prosperity. It is a shame that advocacy of an approach that would leverage rising Chinese wealth and power to the benefit of the

United States should be derided as "panda hugging". It is not.

It is important to recognise that Henry Kissinger began as someone not just ignorant of China but, like many Europeans of his age, contemptuous of it and opposed to it. It took a direct encounter with China to transform him into an admirer of Chinese statecraft and a respected adviser on the management of Sino-American relations. The circumstances made the man. Future circumstances may yet restore respectful cooperation between the Chinese and American political elites as both recognise the many ways in which both countries could gain from that.

Ambassador Freeman, even your critics have spoken highly of your "exceptional intelligence" and "superb language skill". But you have also paid a high price for your contrarian views on topics, mostly concerning China and Israel, which may have cost you some great career opportunities, including the chair of the National Intelligence Council nearly 15 years ago. Do you have any regrets?

I did not enjoy the political mugging the Israel lobby administered to me. On the Israel-Palestine issue, I have long been in the position of someone denying the car keys to a drunk, trying to avoid the enablement of self-destructive Israeli behaviour. Such behaviour is now a blatant global scandal that has made Israel a pariah state. America's continued enablement of this behaviour has done enormous damage to my own country's prestige.

When I was appointed to the National Intelligence Council (NIC), I was accused by my detractors of being a "realist". I describe things as I see them rather than as our political elite or influential interest groups would like them to be, and I have a long record of declining to tell the powerful what they would like to hear.

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US intelligence community what I was recruited to do.

I could not hope to improve the credibility or efficacy of US intelligence analysis while under constant attack from the Israel lobby or anti-China ideologues. I had not sought the position I was offered, was very reluctant to take it, and did so only when I was told my country demanded my return to public service. I would not have lasted long in the position.

The aggressive actions of the security services in [China and the US] are the major deterrent to mutual exchanges of students. They badly need to be reined in

In my view, the Israel lobby did me an inadvertent favour by convincing me to withdraw my acceptance of it.

As the former ambassador to Saudi Arabia and a long-time Israel critic, you have been critical of the powerful Israel lobby in the United States and US policy towards Israel, which you said "had embraced Israel's enemies as our own", resulting in Arabs "equating Americans with Israeli as their enemies". You once said Israel was holding US foreign policy hostage due to its "anti-Iran paranoia" and said Israel was carrying out "a mass lynching" in Gaza, "in utter disregard of international law and in a completely inhumane fashion", and that the only thing Israel had done for the US was "get us into trouble". Your views have been criticised by many as not balanced and biased against Israel. What's your response to the criticisms?

I began, like most Americans, as an admirer of what I had been led to believe Israel was. It took subsequent direct experience of its racism, belligerence and inhumanity to its captive Arab population to alter my favourable opinion of Zionism.

I believed in "the right of Israel to exist" until I realised that this meant no one else had the right to exist between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. Israel's strategy of ethnic cleansing has now extended to genocide in Gaza. I would object to that even if my own country were not funding it and excusing it, which it is. It is inexcusable.

What advice would you give to scholars of US-China ties and tomorrow's diplomats? China's leading US specialist Wang Jisi warned that American studies in China were "too weak" compared to Chinese studies in the United States, which may have negatively affected China's decision making vis-à-vis the US. What do you think should be done to address this problem?

When I joined the US Foreign Service it was in part because I foresaw the creation of the irrational geopolitical geometry of the 1960s by a US opening to China and wanted to be part of that drama. It only as a spear carrier on the stage.

The older generation of Chinese-language officers had been persecuted by demagogues in the US Congress and intimidated by Cold Warriors in the Department of State. Even more of them had never lived among Chinese and had mediocre language skills. I fear that, in the current atmosphere, we are likely to regress to a similar situation, in which the China of our nightmares replaces the China of the real world and in which our academics, think tank researchers, and government specialists on China are fearful of challenging the conventional ignorance of our political class.

Wang Jisi is right to be concerned. The millions of Chinese who have studied in the United States may not have a perfect understanding of my sometimes-inscrutable country, but they have a far better-informed view than the mere thousands of Americans who have studied in China have of China.

I do not agree with Secretary of State [Anthony] Blinken about very much, but he is right to call out the danger that American views of China will become ever less grounded as there are fewer Americans on the ground among Chinese.

The aggressive actions of the security services in both countries are the major deterrent to mutual exchanges of students. They badly need to be reined in.

A gathering of teachers and students from China and the United States in the city of Shijiazhuang, Hebei province, earlier this month.

