

OPEN QUESTIONS

Strategic vision is the key

CHARLES 'CHAS' FREEMAN interpreted for then American president Richard Nixon during his historic 1972 Beijing trip to meet Mao Zedong. Freeman has served in the US Foreign Service and state and defence departments, and was the United States' ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf war. In the latest instalment of our OPEN QUESTIONS series of interviews with global thought leaders, Freeman discusses with SHI JIANGTAO the history of China-US relations and where it might go from here amid the two countries' intermediate 'adversarial antagonism' stage and as the United States' presidential election in November looms

How would you compare and rank the incumbent and past US presidents and their handling of China since president Richard Nixon? What's your impression of Chinese leaders from Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping?

Nixon was a devious and manipulative politician who became a statesman with a sophisticated understanding of geopolitics. His opening to China reflected that evolution. More recent presidents are ideologically unsympathetic to China, uncomprehending of the developing global order, and in denial about the rapid retreat of US global influence.

I never met Mao Zedong. (Nixon did not take anyone from the Department of State to his meeting with the chairman on February 21, 1972.) Mao Zedong had a force and energy which none but men of equally great spiritual conviction could withstand. His animal appetites, we now know, matched his intellectual vigour. He was an object of adulation to his subjects and of mingled admiration and dread to his subordinates and intimates.

Deng [Xiaoping]'s embrace of eclectic modernisation is the basis of China's return to wealth and power

While Mao lived, the brilliance of his personality illuminated the farthest corners of his country and inspired many would-be revolutionaries and romantics beyond it.

Few indeed loved chairman Mao's style of governance, but all but a few of those who despised it most loved the People's Republic he had founded more, and hated him less than they feared him.

Had he been less insistent on grand and impractical visions, his ideas would not have convulsed his country as desperately as they did, nor would they have been as thoroughly discredited.

Had he not driven his country mad with attempts at sudden, violent change, China would not, however, be as devoted to domestic tranquility as it now is, nor would it have so easily accepted the international order it

once rejected but in which it now prospers.

Had Mao died earlier, his ideas might have fared better in the new China. He would certainly be seen by history as a greater man.

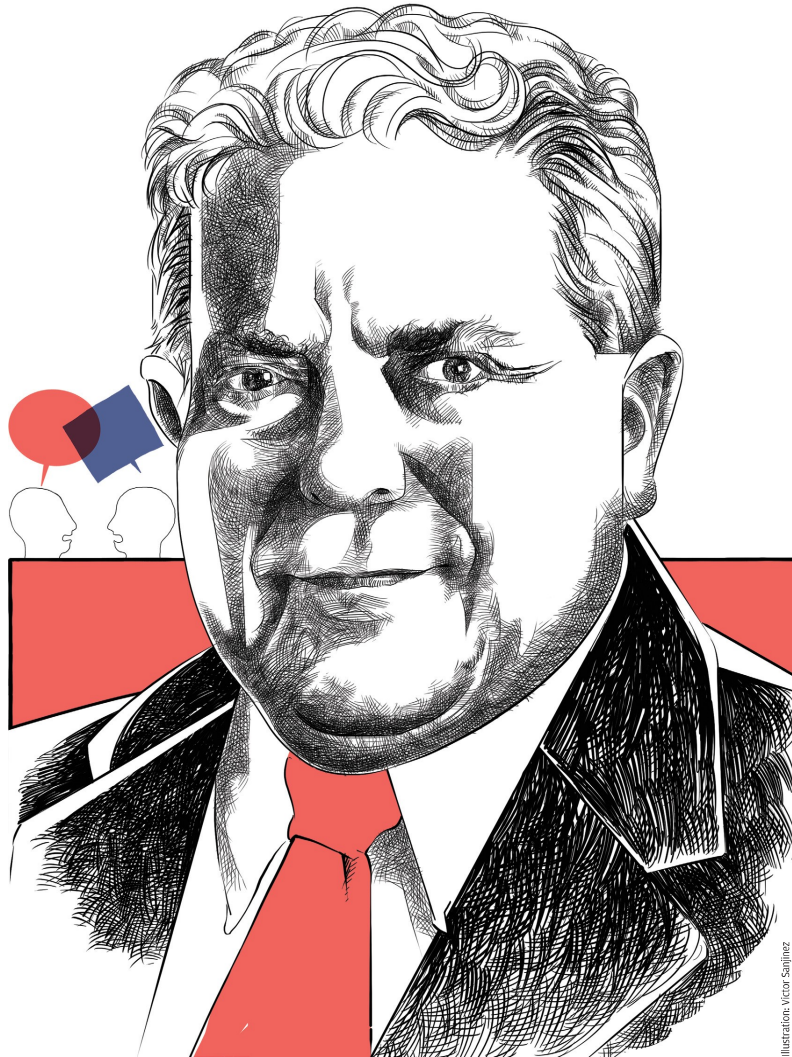
As it is, Mao is likely to be remembered as a great military strategist and a good poet who was a failure in the crafting of a sustainable order in the country he sought to liberate from its past as well as from its foreign and domestic oppressors. Had he succeeded in his multiple attempts to eliminate Deng Xiaoping's political influence, the world might still worry about the consequences of China's backwardness and disgruntlement about the international status quo, not its rapid advance as a leading participant in the quintessentially capitalist process of globalisation.

But Mao did not succeed in doing in Deng, and China and the world are greatly the better for that. Zhou Enlai was a brilliant diplomat whose graceful manners and tact concealed his ruthless realism. I had many interactions with him and agree with the late Dag Hammarskjöld that he epitomised the most refined aspects of Chinese civilisation. Zhou was a great man, not least because he was willing to satisfy himself with the role of a faithful counsellor and servant of Mao Zedong and new China, while softening its harshest tendencies with compassion for the Chinese people and loyalty to his subordinates.

Mao Zedong, like first emperor of China Qin Shi Huang, both conquered and transformed China. But the current Chinese system only partly retains the political-economic model for society that he favoured. The real creator of modern China was Deng Xiaoping. He is likely to go down in history as the equivalent of Jihan dynasty emperor Li Jiaqiang, the man who built on his predecessor's politico-military achievements to create a successful Chinese political economy and world order. Deng's embrace of eclectic modernisation is the basis of China's return to wealth and power.

Xi Jinping has inherited a modernised, powerful China as well as the traditions of both Mao and Deng. These are solid foundations on which to build and surmount the challenges currently facing the country, the region and the world.

You said US-China ties had moved from healthy competition in the past to the era of hostile, "very unhealthy



Illustrations: Victor Santiniez

This is an era in which middle-ranking powers have no overlords, insist on their right to chart their own course, and reject subjugation by great powers. It is nothing at all like the Cold War

competition". With US-China ties trapped in a downward spiral and hardening public perceptions towards the other in both countries, are you concerned that a new cold war is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, with the United States and its allies – such as Europe, Japan, South Korea – on one side and China, Russia, Iran and North Korea on the other? How far away are we from the disastrous enmity stage that you described?

Competition can take at least three forms. Rivalry is healthy because it stimulates those engaged in it to improve their own performance so as to be able to outdo each other. Enmity envisages the annihilation of an opponent and is very dangerous, especially in the nuclear era. In between these two extremes is adversarial antagonism, in which competition relies less on self-improvement than on hamstringing an adversary – inhibiting or reversing its progress rather than progressing oneself. The United States and China are now in the intermediate stage of adversarial antagonism.

But I do not agree that the world can be divided in the way your question posits. China, Iran and Russia have little in common other than opposition to the threats they perceive from the United States and their commitment to a world order based on the principles of the United Nations Charter and the rule of international law rather than US hegemony. China is a world power. Russia is a great power. Iran is a regional power. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a masterless outlaw in world affairs. American and British portrayal of these four countries as some sort of "axis" ignores the many differences between them.

It is noteworthy that, with the exception of those long aligned with the United States, the world's countries almost all refuse to choose between

America, China or Russia. Countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia that once cleaved to the United States no longer do so. Nato is far from unanimous in its views of world or even European affairs. Many countries are hedging against possible abandonment by their former American protector. Few nations have chosen to align themselves with Iran and none rely on North Korea.

This is an era in which middle-ranking powers have no overlords, insist on their right to chart their own course, and reject subjugation by great powers. It is nothing at all like the Cold War.

As a veteran China hand, you have been fairly critical of American diplomacy towards China in the past decade. To what extent do you think decision makers in Washington should be blamed for the deterioration of US-China ties?

Neither country is without blame. Both have made mistakes. The invective that [former] secretary of state [Mike] Pompeo directed at China was matched by Chinese Wolf Warrior diplomacy, which was equally repellent and counterproductive. But the trade and technology wars were launched by the United States, not China, and it was the United States, not China, that crippled the World Trade Organization and insisted that dubious national security considerations replace comparative advantage and economic factors in governing international trade.

China continues to negotiate market opening with other countries. The United States has embraced protectionism and stopped doing so. American policy towards China now consists largely of sanctions intended to cripple Chinese exports and technological progress.

Chinese scholar Yang Jiemian said last year that a self-centred, "narcissistic"



Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger (left) talks with President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in December 2016. Photo: EPA