

The Sino-U.S. National Identity Gap and Bilateral Relations

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The national identity gap between China and the United States has become increasingly apparent. Under Xi Jinping, China has sought to reclaim its historical greatness and proclaimed itself to be a responsible great power that offers a credible alternative to Western values, while also promoting increasingly authoritarian policies at home, complete with extensive repression in Xinjiang and renewed state control of the economy. Assertions of U.S. national identity were somewhat muted under Donald Trump, confused by the battle between those who supported the administration's "America First" policy, its transactional approach to foreign affairs, and its deemphasis on human rights and democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy, and those who worried about the global repercussions of an isolationist, nativist policy. For a time, the United States seemed more preoccupied with its trade war with China than with claims that the United States should act as the global protector of human rights and democracy.

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated already tense Sino-U.S. relations and called both countries' national identities into question. While China had, as of spring 2021, succeeded in keeping its COVID-19 outbreak remarkably small, the damage caused by its initial suppression of medical reports, along with successful virus mitigation in a number of non-authoritarian states, called into question its claim to be a responsible world power on the basis of its pandemic performance. Meanwhile, the Trump administration failed to protect U.S. citizens from catastrophic death tolls and prevented the United States from taking a leading role in resolving this global crisis. In January 2021, the Biden administration took office with a focus on swiftly ending the pandemic, while also reasserting the traditional U.S. global leadership role.

When combined with its assessment of U.S. power after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and of U.S. domestic social and political instability evident throughout 2020-2021, the pandemic has strengthened China's perceptions of the United States as a country in decline, and of China as a "risen" great power that should now play a major role in shaping the global order. At the same time, although U.S. policy towards China remains firm despite the presidential transition, the underlying rationale has shifted from the "America First" approach of the Trump administration to the democratic values-infused approach of the Biden administration. As the world struggles to move beyond the pandemic, the national identities of China and the United States are increasingly defined in opposition to each other and seem likely to drive an ever more challenging bilateral relationship in the coming years.

Chinese National Identity

Since coming to power in November 2012, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has emphatically asserted China's role as a responsible great power with the right to play a decisive role in global governance structures. Early in his leadership, Xi urged his country to achieve the "China Dream" of "the great revival of the Chinese nation."² This identity of rejuvenated greatness, which synthesizes historical legitimacy and inevitability with civilizational and economic superiority, has been consolidated into "Xi Jinping Thought" and permeates China's foreign policy.

In his 2017 speech to the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping argued that “socialism with Chinese characteristics” had entered a “new era,” and could serve as a political-economic model for states that “want to speed up their development while preserving their independence.” He promised that this new era would be one “that sees China moving closer to center stage” in international affairs. The key implementation of this approach in foreign policy was in the establishment of “a community with a shared future for mankind.” China pledged to advance not only its own interests, but those of others around the globe, and to “forg[e] a new form of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation.”³

The PRC’s new identity as an economic powerhouse has gradually replaced its longstanding identity as the leader among developing states.⁴ China’s economic boom catapulted its GDP per capita from \$377.39 in 1993 to \$10,216.63 in 2019 (in current U.S. dollars), landing it solidly among the ranks of upper middle-income countries.⁵ In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world’s second-largest economy, a position that China believes supports its quest to take a more active role in global economic governance, particularly in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008.⁶ China’s identity as an economic juggernaut underlies its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, which funds infrastructure projects around the world in an effort to increase regional and global integration. China’s interest in global trade also led to jarring dissonance during the Trump administration: while the United States advanced protectionist policies, the Chinese repeatedly declared their support for multilateral free trade agreements. The recently concluded RCEP negotiations indicate Chinese support for regional trade agreements; importantly, the agreement is the first to include China, Japan, and South Korea.

China increasingly sees itself as “already risen,” rather than “peacefully rising,” and is starting to reap the rewards.⁷ China is no longer biding its time, but is instead more assertively seizing global influence. In the Chinese view, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and failed U.S. policy in the Middle East exposed cracks in U.S. global primacy.⁸ Donald Trump’s election, on an isolationist platform, reinforced the sense that the U.S.-led era is nearing an end. While only recently China insisted its aims were limited to regional influence, over the past several years it has increasingly asserted its global influence. With the successful creation of the AIIB and the BRICS-organized New Development Bank, as well as the successful conclusion of RCEP, China is starting to rewrite the rules of the international system.

China’s identity as a “risen” great power informs both its views of its place in the international system and its relationship with the United States. In a 2020 roundtable in *Guojia Anquan Yanjiu*, Chinese analysts agreed that the world is shifting from the unipolar moment of the post-Cold War era to a new era of multipolarity. Ultimately, these analysts believe the world will be characterized by “two superpowers” (China and the United States) and “many strong powers,” but they differ in their views of whether the world has yet reached this stage and, if not, when it is likely to do so.⁹ The Chinese government’s view of its relative equality to the United States was on full view during the tense opening session of the March 2021 U.S.-China meeting in Anchorage, Alaska. In his opening remarks, Chinese Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi twice asserted that “China and the United States are *both* great powers” (大国, translated in some sources as “major powers”) that bear important global responsibilities; his deliberate emphasis on “both” (都) was clear in the recording of the event.¹⁰

The Impact of China's National Identity on Its Perceptions of U.S.-China Relations

China views itself as a “risen” great power with the right and responsibility to shape the global system. Its growing confidence in its own political-economic model and its skepticism of the U.S. model are particularly evident in three aspects: 1) its analysis of the shift in the relative power of China and the United States brought about by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis; 2) its assessment of U.S. domestic unrest in light of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and the 2021 Capitol Insurrection; and 3) its views about the implications of Chinese and U.S. management of the COVID-19 pandemic for post-pandemic global relations.

The 2008-2009 Global Financial Crisis

Many Chinese analysts perceive the 2008-2009 Global Financial Crisis as a turning point that revealed the fundamental failures of U.S.-style capitalism and demonstrated that the United States is in decline. The importance of the Global Financial Crisis as a turning point is evident in the prominent role it plays in Chinese analysis as an indicator of world-historical time. It is common for articles on the global world order to distinguish between “2008年金融危机以前” (before the 2008 financial crisis) or “2008年金融危机以后” (after the 2008 financial crisis), much in the way Chinese analysis commonly divides time into before and after reform and opening (改革开放以前; 改革开放以后) and U.S. articles talk about “the post-Cold War era” or “post-September 11th” foreign policy. The frequency with which the Global Financial Crisis is used to orient the reader in time indicates exactly how crucial a turning point Chinese analysts believe it to be.

Chinese observers believe that the Global Financial Crisis supports their long-held position that the U.S. model of capitalism is inferior to the Chinese “socialist market economy.” The crisis was set off by the failure of mortgage-backed securities enabled by excessively loose mortgage practices that allowed borrowers with dubious credit histories or limited incomes to borrow enormous sums of money; when the housing bubble burst, these borrowers went “underwater” because the amount owed on the mortgage exceeded the value of the property. U.S. observers had long criticized China for its “excessive” savings rate and urged it to increase consumer spending; as it turned out, the U.S. economy—and then that of much of Europe—was brought down by a system that made it far too easy for homebuyers to consume beyond their means. U.S. GDP growth was -0.137 percent in 2008 and -2.537 percent in 2009, before rebounding; in the European Union, which was hit slightly later, GDP growth was .0645 percent in 2008 and -4.326 percent in 2009. By contrast, China flourished. Although China has never since achieved the peak GDP growth of 14.231 percent it reached in 2007, its GDP growth in 2008 and 2009 was 9.651 percent and 9.399 percent, respectively, indicating that its growth continued at a rapid pace despite the trans-Atlantic crisis.¹¹

Notwithstanding the subsequent recovery in the United States and the European Union, Chinese analysts believe that the Global Financial Crisis indicated the fundamental failures of the neoliberal model, both as an economic philosophy and also as a political philosophy that emphasizes human rights, democracy, and freedom. Da Wei and Zhou Wuhua contend that the deep flaws of neoliberalism have become increasingly evident since the

2008 Global Financial Crisis: namely, the inequitable distribution that has occurred within developed countries. This inequitable distribution has produced clear “winners” and “losers” within the United States. As the American public became increasingly critical of neoliberalism, both on the right and on the left, they began to cast China as the scapegoat for domestic U.S. economic problems, undermining bilateral relations. Meanwhile, the U.S. government, which has urged China to undertake liberal economic reforms for the past several decades, has objected to China’s emphasis on state direction of the economy in accordance with its establishment of a “socialist market economy.”¹² The implication is clear: while the U.S. neoliberal model has faltered, the Chinese economic model has been clearly more successful at maintaining rapid, more equitable growth.

By demonstrating weaknesses in the U.S. model, Chinese analysts believe the Global Financial Crisis opened up an opportunity for China to emerge as a new global economic power. The Belt and Road Initiative, first announced in 2013 as a response to the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” had by 2020 grown to include project negotiations and agreements with more than sixty countries and Chinese expenditures of approximately \$200 billion.¹³ The Trump administration’s protectionist policies brought China an opportunity to position itself as a global defender of the rules-based multilateral free trade system. While some worry that China is engaging in “debt-trap diplomacy,” others have praised its efforts. South African trade negotiator Faizel Ismail contends, “China’s response to the U.S. attempts to contain its rise and force it to converge to the Western liberal capitalist model has produced interesting ideas and insights towards building an alternative form or forms of multilateralism that are based on values and create the building blocks of a new global governance for the 21st century.”¹⁴ He praises the Belt and Road Initiative, quoting, uncritically, Chinese government assertions that this policy advances free trade and a “rules based, open, transparent, inclusive and non-discriminatory” global economy.¹⁵ By the start of the 2020s, China had convinced an increasing number of global policymakers to take a careful look at its vision of the global economic order—one that contrasts with the model traditionally posed by the United States.

Social and Political Unrest in the United States

Chinese leaders are also increasingly confident that China has developed a demonstrably superior political model to that of the United States, even as Xi has implemented more authoritarian policies.¹⁶ (If Chinese analysts feel differently, they are no longer at liberty to say so.) China has long condemned U.S. assertions of “universal human rights,” arguing that this imposes Western values on a global audience and insisting that rights to subsistence and development are equally as important as the civil liberties often prioritized by Americans.¹⁷ Recent events in the United States have provided Chinese observers with an opportunity to argue that the U.S. political system has failed to ensure equal human rights for all of its inhabitants. In a 2020 article published in the wake of the protests following the murder of George Floyd, Xie Tao contended that U.S. national identity is based on three components: white supremacy, democratic supremacy, and global hegemony (all of which are challenged by the rise of China).¹⁸ In the March bilateral meeting, Yang Jiechi pointedly told the U.S. delegation, “The challenges facing the United States in human rights are deep-seated. They did not just emerge over the past four years, such as Black Lives Matter.”¹⁹ He then suggested that the United States get its own house in order before criticizing other countries’ human rights records. These Chinese critiques are, in many ways, reminiscent

of the Cold War, when, Doug McAdam argues, “locked in an intense ideological struggle with the U.S.S.R. for influence among the emerging third-world nations, American racism suddenly took on international significance as an effective propaganda weapon of the Communists.”²⁰ Chinese interlocutors have seized on social unrest brought to the fore by the summer 2020 protests across the United States as an opportunity to point to what they see as hypocrisy in U.S. attempts to hold itself up as a model of human rights.

Chinese observers also assert that the Chinese political model is better able to ensure domestic stability, which has long been the government’s key priority. In many ways, Xie’s biggest critique of the 2020 protests is that they led to “wide-scale riots” (大规模骚乱).²¹ Xie argues that social division in the United States, based on economic disparities and “identity politics,” has led to political polarization “unseen for a century.”²² Chinese observers point to the political turmoil surrounding Donald Trump’s months-long refusal to concede the 2020 election, which culminated in the violent Capitol Insurrection of January 6, 2021, as further evidence of the disarray brought about by the U.S. political system. In his March statement, Yang Jiechi took advantage of this unrest to criticize the United States. He asserted that China and the United States each have their own “style” of democracy and that it is up to “the people of the world...to evaluate how the United States has done in advancing its own democracy.” He then contended that the Chinese leadership has strong support from the Chinese population; by contrast, he argued, “Many people within the United States actually have little confidence in the democracy of the United States.”²³ Taken together, these statements point to political polarization, the disputed election, and the Capitol Insurrection as evidence of the weakness of American democracy. But while Yang is certainly taking advantage of U.S. weaknesses to push the official Chinese narrative, it is nevertheless the case that Chinese leaders sincerely believe their political model is better able to achieve social order and political stability.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

Overshadowing all other analysis at present is the Chinese belief that the efforts by China and the United States to manage the COVID-19 pandemic indisputably show the superiority of the Chinese government’s model of governance and the view that the pandemic has hastened the power shift between China and the United States. Although questions remain about whether the pandemic might have been contained if the Chinese government had acted more quickly in response to the Wuhan outbreak, there is no doubt that its mitigation efforts have been enormously successful. As of late April 2021, China had reported a total of 103,464 confirmed cases (71.12 per million people) and 4,856 deaths (3.37 per million people).²⁴ The Chinese government established quarantine facilities to isolate infected patients. When small numbers of cases have been found, authorities have acted quickly to rapidly implement mass testing. In May 2020, the Chinese government tested between 9-11 million people in Wuhan in 10 days; in October 2020, they tested the 9 million residents of Qingdao in just five days, after a cluster of 12 cases was found.²⁵ Chinese mitigation efforts were helped by a number of factors: the government’s ability to order people to remain home during lockdowns or report to quarantine facilities, and the bureaucratic infrastructure to enforce these measures; its ability to enforce a QR system that required people to show that they are healthy before entering public places; and a public that already routinely wore face masks during flu season and on high pollution days.²⁶ The result is a country that went over a month without a report of a locally transmitted case in early 2021, and where people are largely able to go about their lives.

By contrast, U.S. efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus were a catastrophic failure. By late April 2021, the United States had reported 31,656,636 confirmed cases (96,812.26 per million) and 565,809 deaths (1,727.84 per million)—some 1,361 times the number of Chinese cases and 513 times the number of deaths on a per capita basis.²⁷ The public health directive to wear a face mask became a divisive partisan issue. Even as major urban school districts reopened their school buildings for in-person instruction in the spring of 2021, many children remained entirely remote or in hybrid instruction. The official unemployment rate of 6.2 percent remained well above the pre-pandemic rate of 3.5 percent; many people—disproportionately women—who were forced to leave paid labor to care for children were not reflected in these official statistics.²⁸ Although the accelerating rollout of COVID-19 vaccines brought hope that the United States would be able to vaccinate its way out of the crisis, it was clear that the death and devastation wrought by the pandemic had been much more widespread than in China.

With its domestic outbreak largely under control, China gained an upper hand in the so-called “vaccine diplomacy.” As of early March 2021, China had made deals to supply more than 45 countries with a total of approximately 500 million doses of its domestically produced vaccines in 2021, 25 of which had already begun their vaccination campaigns. These are largely low- and middle-income countries, and include most of the countries of South America and Southeast Asia, Mexico, Egypt, Ethiopia, Turkey, Pakistan, Belarus, Ukraine, Hungary, and Serbia.²⁹ Meanwhile, the United States was busy inoculating its own population with its three approved vaccines to blunt the spread of the virus, although it will presumably share its vaccine supply once its domestic vaccination process is complete (it has contracted for a number of doses that well exceeds the population of the United States). The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejects the concept of vaccine diplomacy, stating that the vaccine is a “global public good.”³⁰ Nevertheless, the implication is clear: when faced with a global crisis, it is China that has the capacity to provide the global public good, not the United States.

Chinese analysts contend that China’s efforts to combat the global pandemic indicate its commitment to seek multilateral cooperation to address shared challenges. According to Ruan Zongze, China championed a coordinated global approach from the very beginning of the pandemic, while the United States under Donald Trump initially adopted an isolationist “America First” policy. By doing so, Ruan argues, China demonstrated its willingness to fulfill its responsibilities as a major world power.³¹ Other Chinese observers have argued that the disparate COVID-19 experiences of China and the United States indicate that the pandemic has hastened the shift in the global power distribution that was already underway. According to Shi Yinhong, both China and the United States have suffered as a result of the pandemic. China has borne enormous social and economic costs, in part because of damage to the global economy, and the Chinese government must pull back in other areas in order to prioritize economic growth and virus mitigation. However, the United States (along with some of its major allies) has faced substantially higher political and economic costs given its failure to control the pandemic. Consequently, Shi argues, the shift in the balance of power has accelerated abruptly, which creates unprecedented opportunities for China in the military, economic, diplomatic, and ideological spheres.³²

From the Chinese perspective, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the social and political unrest in the United States that intensified in 2020-2021, and the COVID-19 pandemic, taken together, support the Chinese image of themselves as a risen power with a superior political-economic model to that of the United States, a “has-been” in decline. It is, of course, hard to determine how much of these arguments are just conveniences to support the orthodoxies of Xi Jinping Thought. Chinese analysts do not—and largely cannot—apply the same critical lens to China that they apply to the United States. It is also clearly the case that official public critiques of the United States, like that made by Yang Jiechi, are designed for a domestic audience and for global posturing. When Yang mentions Black Lives Matter, he does so not because the Chinese government strongly supports racial or ethnic minorities who make claims of discriminatory treatment at the hands of their government, but because he sees an opportunity to score points in the game of global influence by pointing to American hypocrisy. If he can demonstrate that American claims are, in fact, hollow, there is a chance that other countries may be willing to consider the Chinese claim that the values of the CCP “are the same as the common values of humanity...: peace, development, fairness, justice, freedom, and democracy.”³³ And even though international observers are no doubt aware of Chinese policies in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang, among other places, that belie these claims, they just might be willing to conclude that the United States is no better a model.

U.S. National Identity

U.S. national identity has become an increasingly slippery concept over the past several years as intense partisan polarization has made it difficult to determine whether there is even a unitary national identity to discuss. On the right, Trump’s “America First” policy challenged many of the traditional tenets of U.S. national identity, particularly the view that the United States should act as a global protector that works to advance human rights and democratic values around the globe. Voices on the left challenged Americans to rethink *who* defines the national identity, pointing out how much of U.S. foreign policy has been traditionally defined by a largely white elite. One could be forgiven for feeling a bit of whiplash as U.S. foreign policy swung in early 2021 from the xenophobic nationalism of the Trump administration to the more traditional policy of the Biden administration, which prioritized an active global role for the United States, cooperation with allies, and a commitment to international institutions. In this sense, Biden’s foreign policy will be far more consistent with that of past U.S. administrations, both Republican and Democratic.

A majority of Americans continue to support an active global role for the United States and believe that it should work to maintain its role as the sole global military superpower, although there are important partisan differences. In a 2019 Pew poll, conducted midway through the Trump administration—and just prior to the emergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic—a slight majority of U.S. adults (53 percent) agreed that “it’s best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs” while 46 percent of respondents agreed that “we should pay less attention to problems overseas.”³⁴ In the same poll, 61 percent of respondents agreed that the United States should strive to remain the sole military superpower. In both cases, there were significant partisan differences: Democratic and Democratic-leaning respondents were more likely to support an active global role for the United States and less likely to support efforts to continue U.S. global military dominance than their Republican counterparts.³⁵

Interestingly, there are signs that the view of the appropriate global role for the United States is changing. According to the poll, the youngest generation, which has come of age largely in the wake of the United States' post-September 11th foreign policy and China's emergence as a global power, is strikingly more willing to accept a future in which another country will be as militarily powerful as the United States, with 48 percent of those 18–29 years old finding such a scenario acceptable compared to only 27 percent of those 65 and older.³⁶ And while approximately 90 percent of respondents of all ages who identify as Democratic or lean Democratic agreed that “good diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace,” two-thirds of the youngest Republican or lean Republican respondents held this view as well, compared to only 38 percent of those 65 and older.³⁷ Taken together, these data suggest both a fractured view of the U.S. global role depending on party identification, and a substantial willingness among the youngest American adults to accept a more multipolar world.

Although the view of the United States as a global defender of democracy and human rights has long been a key aspect of the U.S. national identity, recent polling suggests that current support is relatively soft. When asked in a February 2021 Pew poll to identify “top priorities” for long-term U.S. foreign policy, only 34 percent of U.S. adults listed “promoting and defending human rights in other countries,” 28 percent listed “aiding refugees fleeing violence around the world,” and 20 percent listed “promoting democracy in other nations.” By contrast, more than 70 percent listed goals such as preventing terrorist attacks on the United States, reducing the spread of infectious diseases, and protecting U.S. jobs.³⁸ Whether these survey data reflect a fundamental reconceptualization by the U.S. public of the global role of the United States, or a more immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the influence of Trump's “America First” foreign policy, and a distaste for foreign intervention after the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, remains to be seen.

The Impact of U.S. National Identity on Its Perceptions of U.S.–China Relations

When it comes to U.S. relations with China, by contrast, the traditional aspects of U.S. national identity appear more robust. Americans may not be sure what, exactly, their current national identity is in a general sense, but it becomes easier to define as “not that” when faced with a Chinese “other.” A 2020 CSIS poll found that 54 percent of the U.S. public regards China as the biggest external threat to the United States, with Russia a distant second.³⁹ Anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States was notably high in 2020 due in significant part to the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump's assertions that China was to blame; a summer 2020 Pew Research Center poll found that 73 percent of Americans held a negative view of China, mirroring significant recent upticks in countries such as Australia, the UK, South Korea, and in much of Western Europe.⁴⁰ Americans widely view China as an economic and ideological threat to the United States. When asked in February 2021 to list the first words that came to mind when they thought of China, 20 percent of respondents to one poll listed human rights and another 17 percent listed the political system, responses that did not vary significantly by party identification. Of those who listed human rights, nearly half specifically mentioned a lack of freedoms, while those who mentioned the political system split between describing China's authoritarian government and its communism.⁴¹ In the 2020 CSIS poll, respondents indicated a substantial willingness

to risk other priorities in order to promote human rights in China with regard to Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, and Chinese dissidents.⁴² Together, these recent survey data suggest that the U.S. national identity as a globally active superpower that promotes human rights remains a strong influence on the public's views of China, even if this is perhaps less of a feature of general U.S. foreign policy than it once was.

Interestingly, however, foreign policy elites view China in significantly different terms than the general U.S. public, with important implications for U.S. foreign policy. According to 2020 Pew Research Center data, 62 percent of the general American public identified China's power and influence as a "major threat" to the United States, compared to only 46 percent of academic international relations experts, although similar majorities of each group agreed that the United States should promote human rights in China.⁴³ In the 2020 CSIS poll, the differences between the U.S. public and U.S. "thought leaders" were particularly noticeable when it came to questions about how much risk the United States should take on to protect its allies and partners. While both the U.S. public and U.S. thought leaders felt that it was important for the United States to take on substantial risk to defend other countries, U.S. thought leaders were willing, on average, to accept more risk. On a scale from 1 ("take no risk") to 10 ("take significant risk"), U.S. thought leaders rated Japan at 8.86 (compared to 6.88 among the U.S. public), Australia at 8.71 (compared to 6.38), South Korea at 8.60 (compared to 6.92), and Taiwan at 7.93 (compared to 6.69).⁴⁴ These differences are important because, although U.S. public opinion plays a role in shaping Congressional resolutions, elite views largely shape the foreign policy approach of the executive branch.

Although the Biden administration was still developing its foreign policy approach and China policy in early 2021, it was already apparent that it would revert to a more traditional understanding of U.S. national identity in which the United States plays an active global role in promoting human rights and defending democracy. In a February 2021 speech at the State Department, Joe Biden explicitly connected the threat posed by China to the two countries' ideological differences, declaring, "American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States." Later in the speech, he described China as a challenge to U.S. "prosperity, security, and democratic values." To successfully manage this competition, he argued that the United States must work together with its allies and partners, and must pursue "diplomacy rooted in America's most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity."⁴⁵ The vision of a foreign policy rooted in a U.S. identity as a strong defender of global freedom was clear.

This approach was further on display in U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's opening remarks at the March 2021 bilateral Sino-U.S. summit, where he made clear that the United States was returning to its allies-focused, rules-based, globally involved approach, in which human rights would be a priority. Referencing his recent trip to meet with his counterparts in South Korea and Japan, strategically timed to occur just prior to the Sino-U.S. summit, Blinken asserted the Biden administration's commitment to "leading with diplomacy" and strengthening the multilateral "rules-based international order," while rejecting the "might makes right and winners take all" alternative. He further asserted that U.S. interests in Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—human rights and civil liberties concerns

to the United States, but “internal matters” to the Chinese—are inextricably tied to “the rules-based order that maintains global stability.”⁴⁶ His statement was a clear indication that the traditional U.S. national identity would inform the Biden administration’s foreign policy approach.

In the early months of the Biden administration, the defense of human rights appeared likely to play an important role in U.S. policy toward China. English-language reporting about Chinese internment camps in Xinjiang and the intensive surveillance of the Uyghur population has grown widespread since 2017, drawing extensive condemnation from the American public. Although the Trump administration’s foreign policy took a wavering approach to human rights in general, days before leaving office the Trump administration banned the import of cotton and tomatoes from Xinjiang.⁴⁷ On January 19, 2021, outgoing U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explicitly denounced China’s treatment of its Uyghur population, as well as other ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang such as Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, as a “genocide,” and drew a direct line between the Nazi concentration camps and contemporary Chinese government behavior.⁴⁸ This policy approach continued under the Biden administration. The State Department’s *China 2020 Human Rights Report*, released in March 2021, denounced the Chinese government’s “genocide and crimes against humanity” that target Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups living in Xinjiang. Consistent with Pompeo’s statement, the report referenced a host of infractions, including arbitrary imprisonment, forced sterilization, torture, forced labor, and restrictions on freedom of religion, expression, and movement.⁴⁹ Blinken repeatedly condemned Chinese government acts in Xinjiang, including during his confirmation hearings in January 2021, when announcing sanctions against two Chinese officials under the Global Magnitsky Act in March 2021, and in an interview on *Meet the Press* in April 2021.⁵⁰

Similarly, the U.S. commitment to democratic values was central to its continued support for Taiwan. In mid-April 2021, the Biden administration sent an unofficial delegation of former high-level officials (headed by former U.S. Senator Chris Dodd and former Deputy Secretaries of State Richard Armitage and James Steinberg) to Taiwan. The visit, which occurred shortly after the 42nd anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act, was designed to demonstrate “U.S. commitment to Taiwan and its democracy” and occurred as Beijing has repeatedly sent its warplanes into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone.⁵¹ Days later, in the U.S.-Japan summit statement released on the occasion of Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide’s visit to the White House, Biden and Suga declared, “We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues”—a sentence that seemed innocuous, but which observers quickly noted marked the first time the two countries had mentioned Taiwan in a formal summit statement since 1969 (when the two countries still formally recognized the ROC as the government of China).⁵² These steps came as survey data suggested gradually increasing support among the U.S. public for military action to defend Taiwan—the flip side of growing concern about the security threat posed by China.⁵³

The Biden administration’s commitment to a values-driven policy toward the Indo-Pacific region more broadly was also evident in its emphasis on the Quad relationship between Japan, the United States, Australia, and India. Although the Quad originated as a response to the 2004 tsunami, the Trump administration brought new life to this diplomatic arrangement in 2017 as a response to the emergence of China as an influential power

in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁴ In March 2021, Biden joined the first leader-level Quad meeting (held virtually because of the pandemic). Although the joint statement, in keeping with previous work by the Quad, did not explicitly mention China, the specter of China was clear in the leaders' declaration that "we strive for a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion."⁵⁵ The upgrading of the Quad to the leadership level indicates the value the Biden administration places on a unified democratic response to regional strategic concerns posed by an authoritarian China.

Likewise, the Biden administration's emphasis on a democratic values-driven foreign policy infused Biden's summit with Suga, where concerns about China's role in the Indo-Pacific underlay nearly every element of the discussion. Biden's decision to invite Suga as the first foreign leader to visit the White House signaled both the importance of the U.S.-Japan relationship and the priority the administration places on Northeast Asia. References to the two countries' shared democratic values—and the contrast, both implicit and explicit, to those of China—were a persistent feature of the visit. In his remarks at the joint press conference, Biden referenced the two countries' "shared values, including human rights and the rule of law," and promised, "We're going to work together to prove that democracies can still compete and win in the 21st century."⁵⁶ For his part, Suga affirmed that "Japan and the U.S. are allies that share universal values, such as freedom, democracy, and human rights" and reported that he and Biden had agreed that universal values would constitute a key component of each country's "frank dialogue with China."⁵⁷ The official summit statement declared both that democratic values are central to managing global threats and that continued U.S.-Japan partnership would strengthen each country's democracy.⁵⁸ The United States under Biden appeared poised to implement a democracy-infused foreign policy toward China—both by framing its alliance relations as a coalition of democracies facing a shared authoritarian challenge and by bringing democratic values and human rights more to the forefront in its direct dealings with China.

Conclusion

It is hard to predict to what extent the Biden administration will be able to reassert a dominant U.S. role in global governance after four years of the Trump administration's isolationism and "America First" policy, while facing a rising and increasingly confident China and domestic confusion about what the future global role of the United States should be. Nevertheless, as the Biden administration implements its China policy, it is clear that the view that the United States plays a fundamental role in protecting the global order will be foundational. Upon taking office, the administration has quickly taken steps to improve relations with traditional allies, such as South Korea and Japan, which were sometimes viewed more as security free-riders and less as strategic regional partners by the Trump administration. U.S. participation in the Quad leader-level meeting demonstrates the view that a robust U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific is crucial to prevent China from dominating the region. Just ahead of the April 2021 Leaders Summit on Climate, hosted virtually by the United States, the Biden administration announced ambitious new greenhouse gas emission-reduction targets, signaling renewed U.S. leadership on a crucial global challenge the United States had largely abandoned when the Trump administration announced its

intention to leave the Paris Agreement and regarding which China had positioned itself as the “responsible great power.” The United States appears likely to take a more active role in global institutions because it recognizes that whoever writes the rules of the global order gains power.

The Biden administration’s belief that U.S. foreign policy should reflect its democratic values will permeate its approach to China, which it views as a challenge not just for strategic reasons but because of its authoritarian political structures. Greater U.S. focus will turn to Hong Kong (where dramatic pro-democracy protests in the wake of a crackdown by Beijing drew the American public’s attention in 2019), Xinjiang (where the mass detentions of Uyghurs in forced labor camps are drawing alarm), and Taiwan (a perennial flashpoint, with growing concerns that China’s increasing military power will allow it to seize control of the island in the medium-term). U.S. suspicions and mistrust of China will also make cybersecurity a priority; the United States is concerned both with China’s growing capacity to disrupt U.S. networks and with its increasing ability to collect private information on individuals and track their activities, as it has done in Xinjiang.

As the United States adopts a democratic values-infused policy towards China, it will encounter a China that is increasingly confident in the superiority of its political-economic model. Facing what it perceives to be a United States in decline, China will be more inclined to believe that its growing power enables it to implement an alternative vision of global relations—its calls for a more egalitarian, “win-win” global order belying its increasingly restrictive political environment back home. Although declarations of a new Cold War are overblown at present, it seems clear that the two countries’ national identity gap is hardening: the Biden administration is defining the United States by its democratic values, while the Xi regime has reinforced China’s authoritarian tendencies. These identities will prove central to the two countries’ bilateral relations in the years ahead.

Endnotes

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- ¹¹ China's GDP growth has steadily declined since then: Its 5.95 percent growth in 2019 was the lowest since 1990, when it was hit by post-Tiananmen sanctions, but remains well above that of the United States (2.161 percent) and the European Union (1.554 percent). See, World Bank, "GDP Growth (Annual %) – United States, China, European Union," 2021.
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- ²¹ Xie Tao, “Meiguo zhengzhi bainian da bianju yu 2020 nian daxuan,” 4. This wording is significant; the characterization of the demonstrations as “riots” versus “protests” was very contentious in the United States.
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- ²⁴ World Health Organization, “WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard,” April 25, 2021, <https://covid19.who.int/>; Hannah Ritchie, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, Diana Beltekian, Edouard Mathieu, Joe Hasell, Bobbie MacDonald, Charlie Giattino, Cameron Appel, and Max Roser, “Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) – The Data,” April 24, 2021, *Our World in Data*, <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-data>.
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- ³⁴ The polling data revealed a significant partisan split, with 62 percent of those who identified as Democratic or lean Democratic supporting an active global role compared to only 45 percent of those who identified as Republican or lean Republican. Conversely, 54 percent of those who identified as Republican or leaning Republican agreed that the United States should be less attentive to global problems, compared to 38 percent of those who identified as Democratic or lean Democratic. See Pew Research Center, “In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions: 6. Views of Foreign Policy,” December 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/6-views-of-foreign-policy/>.

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