

One of Ezra Vogel's last intellectual initiatives was a collaborative effort with Chinese scholars on a joint statement calling for managed competition and greater U.S.-China cooperation. At the time of his passing, Ezra had yet to complete the statement. As a tribute to Ezra and to his commitment to U.S.-China cooperation, Michael Szonyi and Robert Ross have edited Ezra's final draft for clarity and concision, while seeking to remain true to his efforts and his vision for U.S.-China relations. Because Ezra's objective was to develop a U.S.-China consensus statement on cooperative relations, his statement does not address some of the more contentious and sensitive international and domestic issues in U.S.-China relations. While cognizant that not everyone in our scholarly community will agree with his approach, we have chosen to maintain this aspect of the statement in the spirit of remaining faithful to Ezra's original intent.

We invite colleagues who support the sentiments of Ezra's vision for U.S.-China relations to add their name to the statement. Our Chinese partners will also release the statement in an appropriate forum and invite comments from their colleagues.

Toward Better Management of U.S.-China Rivalries, December 2020

By a group of Harvard University and Peking University Faculty

In 2020, U.S.-China relations reached their worst point since the re-opening of relations in the early 1970s. Instead of cooperating to cope with the coronavirus, we blamed each other for the origins. Instead of cooperating to maintain stable international economic relations, we carried on a trade war and disrupted the supply lines of companies, creating uncertainties for businesses around the world. Instead of increasing the number of news reporters in each country who could promote mutual understanding, both countries imposed new restrictions that limit the number. Scholarly contact has been greatly reduced. Tensions over Taiwan and in the South China Seas have increased. The risk of conflict of devastating consequences to both countries has also increased. None of these developments is in the interest of either of the two countries.

Given the broad-based competition and rising tensions between the two countries, and the different perspectives of the leaders and the public in the two countries, it is unrealistic to expect great progress in improving relations in the near future. However, the arrival of a new administration in the United States in January 2021 provides an opportunity to make adjustments in the management of the relations that would reduce the risk of conflict and increase cooperation to pursue common interests.

Political forces in both countries will make it difficult to promote cooperation with the other. Incoming President Joe Biden will be under pressure

to ensure that he is not seen as weaker than his predecessor in dealing with China. He is unlikely to remove the trade barriers without some concessions by China to remove restrictions on U.S. companies in China. Many American leaders believe that China treats American companies unfairly and, despite some recent improvements, has been lax in protecting intellectual property. Chinese officials believe they are in a strong position in dealing with the United States and should not yield to U.S. complaints. Chinese officials also believe the United States seeks to interfere with Chinese businesses throughout the world. Yet the two countries can avoid a vicious cycle of potentially endless further restrictions that would harm both.

We can begin by 1) cooperating in areas that are of clear mutual interest, 2) taking steps that prevent our relations from getting worse, 3) agreeing on some basic principles to govern international institutions.

Cooperating in areas of Clear Mutual Interest

a. Reopening of Contacts that have been removed 2016-2020.

To deal with on-going issues between the two countries we need enhanced contacts at four levels: a) top leaders, 2) senior diplomats and military leaders dealing with major issues, 3) working level diplomats and specialists in various locations – in China, the United States, and in international institutions, and 4) at the private sector between business groups, academics, students, and other groups of private citizens.

Top leaders: Fortunately Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, and Joe Biden, incoming President of the United States, have had numerous hours of contact when they were both vice presidents. They can set the general tone for relations between the two countries, begin to set the agenda for working-level cooperation on various issues, and lay the basis for addressing key policy issues.

Political and military leaders: Fruitful meetings are already taking place between military representatives of the two countries on how to avoid accidents. Conversations should proceed on how our countries can avoid conflict over other issues, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Western Pacific, and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and Northeast Asia. The United States can reduce Chinese concerns about their security in the waters around China, while China should reassure the United States and other countries about freedom of navigation in East Asian waters.

Functional-level contacts: Expert dialogues between experts in our two governments have all but ceased, including contacts on health care, climate change, nuclear proliferation, energy security, international drug trafficking, and human trafficking. These contacts should be re-opened quickly. This includes the re-opening of the Chinese Consulate in Houston and the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu, the restaffing of our respective embassies and consulates, and the revival of the Fulbright Program and the Peace Corps programs in China. Restrictions on journalist visas that have been put in place in the last several years should be removed.

b. Cooperation on environmental issues

China is currently the world's largest polluter, but it has made a commitment to be carbon neutral by 2060 and has already made rapid progress in wind and solar development and in electric vehicles. The United States has contributed more than any other country to current levels of atmospheric pollution. Biden has already committed himself to rejoining the Paris Accord. The commitment of both Beijing and Washington provides a basis for cooperation and for working with other countries to advance sharing of scientific information and advancing the control of global warming. Since air quality is now a major concern of China's leaders concerned with the environment and U.S. technology could contribute to Chinese environmental protection, the issue of air quality could be a good starting point for bilateral cooperation and for promoting world-wide cooperation to improve the global environment and combat climate change.

c. Cooperation on public health, including control of pandemics.

Many Chinese and American specialists already cooperate on health issues. The United States is ahead of China in many areas of medical science and healthcare delivery, but China is more advanced in the utilization of health data and digital healthcare. Furthermore, China's size and the prevalence of certain diseases enables it to make medical advances that could help Americans as well as citizens of other countries. Since the coronavirus is a global issue, cooperation between China and the United States is essential to provide vaccines and medications for control of the virus throughout the world

Preventing further deterioration of relations

It will take time to develop better relations between the two countries. It is important in the meantime that the two nations avoid further deterioration of relations.

The two countries must above all avoid military conflict. This will require mutual adjustment to each other's security interests and strategic restraint. Second, despite extensive conflicts of economic interests, they must maintain robust economic relations and technological engagement. And they must cooperate to sustain global financial stability. The two countries should collaborate to ensure the stability of an evolving international monetary system. Third, the two countries must maintain cooperation on humanitarian efforts and educational exchanges.

International Institutions

U.S.-China competition necessarily affects international institutions. But it is in the interest of both countries to develop international institutions that could reduce the conflicts between the two countries and find ways for the two countries to work together to promote broad-based global cooperation.

In the decades ahead, a key issue between the United States and China will be the degree to which they can work together in the international organizations and the degree to which they will establish separate organizations. Chinese officials have felt that the United States has impeded international organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund from giving China the important role that its economic success warrants.

The Chinese have taken the initiative to form and fund new organizations, including the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and new associations with individual countries. The AIIB has made an effort to be inclusive and to establish rules that conformed to international standards. The United States, fearing that the AIIB could be used to pursue national purposes chose to not join and to discourage other countries from joining. This is now widely acknowledged in the United States to have been a mistake.

China has also taken the initiative in conceiving a broad program of infrastructure assistance for countries in the Euro-Asian continental mass and beyond, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While there are valid criticisms or suspicions of some aspects of the BRI, many countries have benefited from BRI projects. The U.S. needs to take a balanced view of BRI. The U.S., China and the world would benefit from strong U.S.-China competition and collaboration in improving global infrastructure. The quality of the projects and relations between China and the United States could improve if firms from the United States could take part in joint construction projects.

The Role of Scholars

It is realistic to expect that the two governments will attempt to access secret information of the other country concerning military planning. It is also realistic to expect that each country will attempt to protect itself and its citizens against the collection activities of the other. But both governments should welcome scholars engaged in lawful, legitimate academic activities. Putting scholars and their activities at risk is deeply counter-productive to healthy relations between the two countries. We believe that scholars from the two countries can work together to contribute to U.S.-China cooperation on a wide range of shared interests.

Scholars working in the United States and China want their country to prosper, but we also realize that our own country needs the cooperation of the other country and many countries in the world. We believe it is in the interest of both countries to contain our differences and work together to form stable institutions that can manage the competition and increase cooperation between our two countries.