

SUMMARY REPORT OF THE STRATEGY & SECURITY SOCIETY'S TALK:

SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS: WHAT SHOULD WE BE
LOOKING OUT FOR IN 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of Glasgow's Student Strategy & Security Society invited Mr. Michael Kugelman, Deputy Director of the Asia Program and Senior Associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center, for a talk on Sino-American Relations in present and future times. The war in Ukraine has not reduced the importance of the topic of Sino-American relations. Firstly, Mr. Kugelman explained the existing continuity in their approach to China of Presidents Biden and Trump, and how this approach has been by-partisan and pragmatic. Then, he discussed the possible future impacts of the war in Ukraine on the relationship, highlighting several scenarios. Firstly, we could see an ease in Sino-American relations as Russia supplants China as the primary enemy. Secondly, the sanctions imposed on Russia could push it into China's arms, further empowering China and strengthening the Sino-American rivalry. Thirdly, Mr Kugelman explored another perspective: that competition was bad for both actors as they would reap little benefits from it, at the cost of a difficulty to cooperate in common objectives like the fight against climate change.

BACKGROUND

Mr. Michael Kugelman is Deputy Director of the Asia Program and Senior Associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center, being the leading specialist on Afghanistan, India and Pakistan's relationships with the US. He has a masters in Law and Diplomacy from Tufts University and a BA in International service from the American University. He is a regular writer for Foreign Policy weekly South Asia brief and is an author for War on the rocks which is a Texas National Security Review.

PART I

THE CONTEXT

SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS TO DATE

CONTINUITY BETWEEN AMERICAN ADMINISTRATIONS

Mr. Kugelman started explaining how little had effectively been done differently since President Biden took over from President Trump. Trump's hostility towards China, as shown in the National Security Strategy released in 2017, was maintained in the Strategic Approach to China in 2020, highlighting the need to 'counter' China. Essentially, both administrations have continuously stressed the importance of mitigating effective and possible Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. This was further shown in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian clashes of 2020 and the consequential backlash against China.

CHINESE DIPLOMACY AND ITS EFFECTS ON AMERICAN PERCEPTION

Mr. Kugelman explained that the antagonism between the two countries persisted as the 'Chinese Wolf Warrior diplomacy' (an aggressive style of coercive diplomacy) was perceived in Washington as a real threat, particularly as China failed to mediate or play a role in the negotiations between the US and North Korea.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TWO ADMINISTRATIONS

Mr. Kugelman explained that the few differences that existed between the two administrations essentially were the results of President Biden's push for more democratisation within the objectives of American foreign policy. He also recalled that the Taiwanese de facto ambassador had been invited, for the first time ever, by the White House to the inauguration of President Biden.

COLLABORATION IS STILL A NECESSITY

As universal threats like climate change are imminent, the need for cooperation between countries is crucial. Mr. Kugelman explained how the American relationship with China was thus forced to take into consideration the necessity to keep the relationship stable enough that it would not hinder the diplomatic efforts required for the fight against climate change; essentially restricting the tools available to handle the Chinese.

PART III

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

WHAT WE'RE SURE OF: NOTHING

Mr. Kugelman argued that at this point in time, there was no way to know exactly what the repercussions of the war in Ukraine would be on Sino-American relations. Despite the uncertainty, he proposed a series of different scenarios

GENUINE DE-ESCALATION

As Russia becomes the n1 public enemy, there is a chance of an ease between the US and China. With China out of the public and legislative eye, there will be less internal pressure to be antagonistic. Besides, China could prove central to diplomatic attempts at conflict resolution in Ukraine. It is plausible that conflict de-escalation would severely depend on Chinese sway towards Russia. However, this scenario is more likely in a context in which the war lasts longer, or if Putin starts other conflicts in Eastern Europe. Otherwise, the focus may resume to China rather quickly.

ESCALATION

Mr. Kugelman argued that the invasion makes it likely that the Russians will try to get closer to the Chinese. The sanctions effectively cut Russia from the West's economies, and by pleading for help in China, Russia would give a lot of leverage to the CCP. Mr. Kugelman said that it is possible that this leverage could be used to get Russia to support Chinese claims in the Indi-Pacific, and particularly the South China Sea. However, Mr. Kugelman argued that so far the Chinese had not clearly shown whether, and the extent to, they supported the Russian invasion. It has indeed made some efforts to de-escalate. Furthermore, if the sanctions and the overall deterrence do not prove sufficient, it is possible that China may see the invasion of Taiwan as more plausible. Of course, so far, the attack has not proved to be a success. However, Mr. Kugelman argued, one should be wary of thinking that China would be hurt as badly by economic sanctions as Russia because of how much more prevalent its economy is, and how connected its international economic ties are.

SHORT-TERM RELAXATION

Mr. Kugelman noted that while there could be a relaxation of Sino-American tensions while the conflict lasts, it is unlikely that this relaxation would persist as the long-term goals of the countries are too different to be compatible. However, Mr. Kugelman argued that this was not a new Cold War since the two countries and their economies were never completely separated. Even in the way third parties are influenced by both, they are often close to China economically but remain closer to the US for security issues, notably.

COOPERATION WILL PREVAIL

Mr. Kugelman presented an argument that both countries were losers of direct and indirect confrontation, which directly complicates cooperation in fields in which both countries have mutual interests. Perhaps contrary to popular belief, these are numerous counter terrorism, infrastructure, climate change, and even sometimes International Relations (notably in Afghanistan). Mr. Kugelman said that China had not mistreated the US to the extent that the relationship would be doomed.

THE POSSIBILITY OF WAR

Referring to the famous Thucydides trap, Mr. Kugelman argued that war was not imminent, but that the probable triggers were, among others, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan. he stated that, while there would be no obligation for it to do so, it was plausible that the US would support that country militarily, unlike in the case of Ukraine.

PART III

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

- What are your thoughts on the de-facto recognition of Taiwan, and the appointment of Katherine Tai (who has both American and Chinese nationalities) ?

The Biden administration is not going to be a pushover on trade. Even if there was a turnover of staff, there nonetheless was no change in policy. President Biden said there would be no trade deal without labor rights and environmental considerations. It remains an interesting point nonetheless.

- Both Russia and Ukraine are among the top countries in terms of exports of wheat, is it likely that we will see food shortages, and how would that impact China, reliant on food imports ?

Indeed, China is facing domestic food production issues and thus is reliant on imports. It will be interesting to see how this develops, and whether, or the extent to which, China will be impacted.

- Is the Chinese superpower simply a facade ?

China is not going to fail. It is/will be the superpower it aims at being. It's always bounced back from challenges, notably economically. China can be 'brutally efficient' (literally) which does give them an advantage in opposition to democracies. For instance, India struggles significantly more. Besides, China does not face any immediate threat (yes, the US, but the US will not go to war with China).

- We saw China trying to expand into the Arctic, is that alerting the US ?

Chinese expansion into the Arctic is cause for concern for the US, albeit not quite as much as in the South China Sea. It is still quite unclear what the Chinese strategy in the Arctic actually is. It could become a long-term issue, though.

- What types of tools does the US have in their arsenal to use against China, as trading competition is deemed a national security concern ?

They are non-military in nature. They would be the tools associated with the Indo-Pacific policy, like the International Development Finance Corporation: meant to provide support to infrastructure projects as a way of countering China. The limit is that the US cannot do anything about the years of Chinese investment in the economically developing world. Again, unlikely that the US is going to be bringing any more military capacity to the Indo-Pacific, particularly as the war in Ukraine rages on. But, there are also more imaginative tools, notably QUAD and its vaccine strategy: India massively producing vaccines, Japan and the US paying for them, and Australia helping to spread them around, all to compete with the Chinese vaccine diplomacy.



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