

## Thoughts on China and American Elections

The current presidential campaign will be the eleventh U.S. presidential election since Richard Nixon began America's opening to the People's Republic of China. It is the sixth election in which an elected incumbent seeks a second term. On one of those six occasions (1972), China policy arguably worked to the advantage of the incumbent; twice (1984 and 2004) it figured little or not at all in the contest; and in three instances (1980, 1992, and 2000), the challenger tried to make a case that the incumbent had not stood up for American interests and values against Beijing.

It is not yet clear how Barack Obama's policy toward China will feature in the 2012 campaign. There has been no huge China controversy under Obama thus far, as there was under Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush. However, China's revival as a great power poses greater challenges for the United States than ever before.

Chinese leaders and analysts have developed a certain confidence about American presidential elections. They have concluded that even if a challenger adopts an anti-China stance during the campaign and then wins, he will moderate his position once he takes office and learns the complexity of

### AUTHOR



Richard C. Bush III  
Senior Fellow,  
Foreign Policy

Director,  
Center for Northeast Asian  
Policy Studies

The Michael H. Armacost  
Chair

issues that infuse the relationship and takes account of interest groups that favor constructive ties. In short, the quadrennial struggle for the American presidency has only temporary consequences for U.S. policy toward China. Therefore Beijing need not overreact to campaign rhetoric, because given sufficient time, all will be well.

This year may prove the Chinese logic correct once again. If Barack Obama wins a second term, he will likely continue what from Beijing's perspective have been balanced and positive relations. And whatever the Republican challengers say during the campaign, the Chinese likely believe it will mean little or nothing in the long run. China has survived such hiccups in the past when it was relatively weak, and it can certainly survive another, in part because it is much stronger today than it was even in 2008.

Then again, the next president may not revert to type. Kenneth Lieberthal and Jonathan Pollack demonstrate that conflicts of interest are becoming more prominent in the U.S.-China relationship, and the areas for cooperation are shrinking. The growth of China's economic, diplomatic, and military power has called into question the four-decade-old assumption that the bilateral relationship produces mutual benefit. Those who argue that Chinese prosperity has come at the expense of America's and that Beijing will challenge the U.S. role in East Asia get a wider response than ever before. In 2012 both Obama and his opponent may well "run against" China.

Lieberthal and Pollack properly pay attention to the tendency in both Beijing and Washington to read malign intentions into the actions of the other. Mutual mistrust then makes it harder to forge areas of bilateral cooperation and manage points of difference, which both capitals say they wish to do. Lieberthal and Pollack are correct that the new leaderships in each country (China is having its own transition in 2012–13) should place a high priority on reducing this mutual mistrust. This is true whether or not the American political elite take their advice to get the domestic house in order. And the Chinese and American governments have both acknowledged publicly that strategic mistrust is a problem, though each targets different issues. For China, it is Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang; for the United States, it is potential conflict in new security domains: maritime, cyber, and space. Mistrust can stem from different sources, and some present deeper problems than do others.

First and simplest are cases of pure misunderstanding. One side takes an action that the other concludes has malign intent when in fact none exists. China believes it has not been able to complete the unification of Taiwan because of U.S. obstruction, while

Washington believes China has not given Taiwan an offer that its people feel is worth considering. Second are cases in which one party commits or intends to act in a way that is not harmful to the other but has problems in implementing its course of action, and is then thought to have negative motives. China's periodic and failed pledges to protect the intellectual property of American companies fall in this category. So does the case of the Rumsfeld Pentagon's unwillingness in the early 2000s to carry out President George W. Bush's instruction to resume military-to-military exchanges. Third, at times the two sides may legitimately share the same objective but differ on how to achieve it and thus may conclude that actually it is the objectives that differ. Differences between Washington and Beijing over North Korea and Iran have had this character. Finally, in some instances the United States and China really do have conflicting goals. The People's Liberation Army is building capabilities to extend China's strategic perimeter away from the east and southern coast. That is a traditional area for patrol and surveillance by the U.S. Navy and Air Force, which Washington believes contributes to regional stability.

These distinctions have several implications for U.S. policy on China. First of all, how to reduce mistrust depends on its source. Dialogue is useful for rectifying simple misunderstandings and may help to improve implementation and align means and ends. In fact, the United States and China already have a lot of dialogue. Such mechanisms may be less useful when goals are in conflict. In that case, the best option may be to establish conflict management and risk reduction mechanisms.

Reducing mistrust does obviously depend on leaders forging common understandings. But if they have problems ensuring appropriate implementation, it may only reinforce mistrust.

Domestic factors besides implementation difficulties also have an impact. Analytic agencies in each country can misperceive the motives of the other. Leaders in each may shy away from correcting negative public opinion about the other. Experts in each government who have a benign view of the motives of the other may have too little power to shape policy. Some agencies in each government, particularly the militaries, may see a value in feeding uncertainty and mistrust in the other.

The optimistic vision for U.S.-China relations in the next administration is that the two countries, along with other major powers, can cooperate to tackle the major challenges to the international system. That will have the positive side effect of encouraging each to have a benign view of the other's intentions. But that vision will be

difficult to realize in the existing climate of mistrust. It will be even more difficult if China believes that the United States needs China more than China needs America, and vice versa. If the next administrations in both Washington and Beijing wish to reduce mistrust, as they should, they will have to be smart in the way they go about it.