Breaking the Ice

The Role of Scholarly Exchange in Stabilizing U.S.-China Relations

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Scott Kennedy
Wang Jisi

A Report of the CSIS Trustee Chair in Chinese Business and Economics
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The Trustee Chair in Chinese Business and Economics at CSIS provides unparalleled thought leadership for the policy community by examining China’s economy and its commercial relationship with the United States and the rest of the world. We go beyond the headlines to examine China’s sectoral trends and industrial policy, the behavior of its companies and financial institutions, and the political economy of public health and climate governance. With our rigorous empirical and data-driven research, we put forward proposals for how the United States and others can adopt smart policies in an era defined by both deep interdependence and strategic competition. Our analysis is shared with the policy community, business stakeholders, and the public through reports and commentaries, interactive digital content, events, and direct engagement with decisionmakers. We aim to generate new ideas and conversations among officials, industry leaders, and scholars.
Dedicated to Karen Syence Kennedy and Xia Weixia
Acknowledgments

This report, and the larger project in which it fits, emerge out of the simple idea that extensive in-person communication is necessary, even if not sufficient, for stable U.S.-China relations. We have co-hosted an online dialogue of experts since early in the pandemic. While this is a valuable stop-gap measure, online exchanges are not a substitute for face-to-face communication. U.S.-China relations did not originally deteriorate because of limited direct contact, but stabilization and improvement of ties are highly unlikely without renewing in-person connectivity.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who shared this vision with us. Helena Kolenda and Yuting Li of the Henry Luce Foundation immediately appreciated the reasoning behind our plans and provided irreplaceable funding and encouragement. We are deeply grateful to the Luce Foundation for their financial and intellectual support. Our home institutions, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Peking University’s Institute of International and Strategic Studies (IISS), gave their full support to this project and its broader goals. We are grateful to their respective leaders, CSIS president and CEO John J. Hamre and IISS president Yu Tiejun, for their foresight and leadership.

Travel during the pandemic was amazingly complicated and difficult. Although we collectively have traveled hundreds of times between the two countries, the pandemic created unprecedented obstacles, large and small, including obtaining visas, procuring airplane tickets, arranging meetings, and dealing with Covid-related testing requirements and quarantines. We could not have completed the trips without extensive support from each other and our respective teams.

Key personnel from CSIS’s Trustee Chair in Chinese Business and Economics include Associate Director Alyssa Perez (former), Associate Director Elyse Huang (current), Research Associate Maya Mei, and Program Coordinator Matthew Barocas. At Peking University’s IISS, many thanks go to Project Coordinator Xu Bei, Research Associate Hu Ran, Deputy General Secretary Sun Yilin, and Research Associate Zhao Jianwei. In addition, Assistant Professor Chen Muyang at Peking University was a congenial traveling companion and shared the burden of coordinating activities, taking notes, and developing our analysis.

We appreciate the support of both the United States and Chinese governments for facilitating this pair of trips. They helped with providing visas, and senior officials on both sides made themselves available for consultations before, during, and after the visits. We also are indebted to the hundreds of individuals in the United States and China who met with us, individually and in groups, for informal discussions as well as formal events. Their generosity of time and energy reaffirmed the underlying premise of the project: in-person, face-to-face interactions are far more valuable than online meetings.

A note on the authorship of this report: we co-wrote the introductory and concluding sections, but each is the sole author for the chapters about their respective trips, Wang Jisi’s to the United States and Scott Kennedy’s to China. We have received additional help from our research teams and from CSIS’s Dracopouous iDeas Lab, but we alone are responsible for the final product and any remaining errors.

Finally, although we are scholars, we are people first. Both of us are the products of our families and the communities in which we live. We dedicate this report to the two individuals most responsible for bringing
us into this world and nurturing us not only as children but as adults—our mothers. Karen Syence Kennedy was not particularly interested in China; in fact, she was deeply worried about China’s human rights situation and the risks of traveling there. However, she inspired her son with her own lifelong love of international travel, an unending curiosity, a fierce tenacity to face challenges, a commitment to excellence, and a duty to be empathetic toward others. She fell ill as this project was being conceived, struggled courageously through the period of travel, but passed away as this report was being written. Xia Weixia, Wang Jisi’s mother, who passed away in 2003, was a librarian at Peking University. She attended a Christian high school in Suzhou City in southern China and married Professor Wang Li, a distinguished linguist who obtained a doctorate from the University of Paris. She was very strict with their children’s education and would have been excited to know that one of their sons would soon move back to Peking University campus to teach, where she had lived for 49 years. Both have departed this world, but they have left indelible marks on their communities and each of us, and for that we are eternally grateful.
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Executive Summary

Over the last decade, particularly in the last five years, U.S.-China relations have deteriorated dramatically to levels of animosity not seen since the late 1960s. Expectations by some that bilateral relations would improve under the Biden administration have not come to fruition. Instead, views in Washington and Beijing have further hardened. The growing consensus about the nefarious intentions of the other side and support for more hawkish policies in the policy communities in both capitals are in large part due to specific steps each side has taken against the other and the broader shift in their respective foreign policies.

Yet it also appears that another source of worsening ties is the physical isolation the two countries have had from each other for the last three years. Less connectivity is not only a product of worsening ties, it also has contributed to the decline of relations. As a result, this report’s authors—Scott Kennedy and Wang Jisi—decided to carry out a pair of extended trips aimed at resuming direct engagement with the scholarly and policy communities of both countries. The goals included resuming their own field research, setting a precedent for other scholars, and advocating among both countries’ policy communities about the importance of in-person visits and exchange.

Wang Jisi visited the United States on two occasions, in February–March 2022 and in November 2022, and Scott Kennedy visited China in September–October 2022. Both met with a wide range of individuals, including government officials, foreign embassy representatives, company executives, scholars, and journalists. They also had ample opportunity to observe broader societal developments in the places they visited. To this project’s best knowledge, they are the only two scholars from policy think tanks to visit the other country’s capital during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in both countries (March 2020–December 2022).

This report begins by putting the authors’ plans in the broader context of fraying U.S.-China relations and
examining the implications limited connectivity has had on ties. Chapter 2 discusses Wang Jisi’s trips to the United States, including his impressions of American society and politics and the perspectives he heard about China, the bilateral relationship, and China’s role on the world stage, including with respect to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Chapter 3 summarizes Scott Kennedy’s trip and his observations about China in the last months of zero Covid and perspectives he heard about bilateral ties. The final chapter contains their overall conclusions and policy recommendations.

Negative perceptions of the other side have hardened substantially over the past few years, and relations seem to be caught in a worsening vicious cycle. To interrupt this dynamic and reduce their mutual estrangement, the authors offer five recommendations:

1. Both the United States and China need to commit as a foundational policy to restoring direct connections across the entire span of the two societies.

2. It is in the self-interest of both governments to resume and expand dialogue, and neither side should erect unnecessary conditions to doing so or severely constrict the topics for discussion.

3. In addition to the resumption of regular communication between the executive powers on both sides, members of the two countries’ legislatures and local governments should also resume visits.

4. The U.S. and Chinese governments should find a solution to the stalemate over restrictions on the number of journalists allowed from the other side and limitations on their reporting activities.

5. Both governments should commit to the full resumption of in-person scholarly ties, including students, university professors and administrators, think tank experts, scholarly publication editors, and foundation leaders.
The Path to and from Estrangement

The Deterioration of U.S.-China Relations

For over four decades, from the early 1970s to mid-2010s, the United States and China had surprisingly stable ties. Despite different political and economic systems, contrasting views of the international order, and the occurrence of several crises, relations proved to be anything but “fragile,” as one analyst characterized them in 1992.¹ Ties endured in part because of the large gap in relative power, but also because of mutual perceptions of common interests and a sense that the remaining significant differences could be effectively managed, if not resolved.

In the process, the two countries became highly interdependent. From 2000 to 2022, two-way bilateral trade in goods and services rose from $125.2 billion to $802.1 billion, while direct investment rose from $4.8 billion in 2000 to $14.2 billion in 2021 (see Figure 1.1). According to the Rhodium Group, at the end of 2020 the total financial relationship surpassed $3.6 trillion.² Similarly, over the last couple of decades, two-way travel skyrocketed from a few thousand passengers in the 1980s to 15.2 million passengers in 2019. And in the same year, there were 369,000 Chinese students in American universities and over 11,000 American students studying in China. Central to these trends, leaders in Beijing generally saw their country’s integration into many aspects of the existing international order as in China’s self-interest, and the United States felt confident that integrating China into the rules-based system and global economy would facilitate constructive interaction and reduce the chances of conflict.
But over the last decade, particularly in the last five years, relations have deteriorated dramatically, to levels of animosity not seen since the late 1960s. The specific timing and reasons are open to debate, but since at least 2016–17, it has been clear that discord has become more open and has overshadowed areas of cooperation. The Trump administration’s imposition of tariffs and subsequent sanctions on Chinese companies in response to what it saw as China’s continued unwillingness to marketize its economy signaled a shift in U.S. strategy away from trying to integrate China into the global economy. Although the two sides reached the Phase One deal in January 2020, there was already a strong sense that the era of engagement and integration was ending and that it would be difficult if not impossible to restore.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic only a week after the signing of the Phase One deal accelerated and hardened the worsening of ties. In its final year, the Trump administration focused on China as the source of the pandemic and its apparent choice to withhold critical medical supplies from the rest of the world. The Trump administration then instituted a series of penalties against China, among them expelling journalists, closing China’s consulate in Houston, and imposing sanctions in reaction to Chinese policies concerning Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Beijing likewise expelled American journalists from China, closed the U.S. consulate in Chengdu, attacked the United States and others for “meddling” in its domestic affairs, and adopted a range of laws and regulations giving it clearer legal authority to sanction U.S. firms and nationals.

Expectations by some that bilateral relations would improve under the Biden administration have not come to fruition. Instead, views in Washington and Beijing have further soured. The Biden administration has reaffirmed the original conclusion of their Trump administration predecessors that relations are defined by “strategic
competition.” However, even the Chinese government routinely criticizes the United States and its alliance system and calls for substantial changes to global governance and the international order. Public opinion polls of Americans and Chinese show a huge drop in positive views toward the other country. In both capitals, the policy debate has increasingly focused on fears of economic overdependence, political subversion of the other side, and the possibility of military conflict.

The Consequences of Limited Direct Contact

The growing consensus about the nefarious intentions of the other side and support for more hawkish policies in the policy communities in both capitals are in large part due to specific steps each side has taken against the other and the broader shift in their respective foreign policies. Yet it also appears that another source of worsening ties is the physical isolation the two countries have had from each other for the last three years. While commercial ties have attenuated to some extent, particularly Chinese direct investment in the United States, the collapse in people-to-people connectivity is unmistakable. The number of flights between the United States and China fell by 95 percent between 2019 and 2021, the last year for which full-year data is available, and the number of travelers has similarly dropped from 15.2 million to 496,000 (see Figure 1.2). According to Chinese and U.S. government sources, the number of Chinese students in American universities fell from 369,000 to roughly 290,000 in 2022, while the number of American students in China dropped to between 300 and 400, a level not seen since the 1980s. Moreover, in-person scholarly exchanges among professors and think tank experts, once a staple of communication, have all but disappeared. Instead, exchanges have been relegated to online meetings.

Figure 1.2: U.S.-China Total Air Passengers (millions)

Not only have societal ties been frayed, but government-to-government communication has withered. Large-scale fora such as the Strategic Economic Dialogue and the subsequent Strategic and Economic Dialogue are distant memories, and communication between cabinet-level and working-level officials has dramatically dropped, including among those holding economic, political, and security portfolios.

Less connectivity is not only a product of worsening ties, but it also contributes to the decline and hardening of relations for several reasons. First, without direct interactions and observation, both sides are more dependent on written sources of information, including official statements and domestic media. Both tend to be more biased and ideological than what one may learn through direct communication. Both countries could theoretically rely on their own foreign correspondents, which would help fill the gap, but both sides have expelled a large number of journalists, depriving one another of valuable eyes and ears on the ground.

Second, less direct communication, especially in private, makes it much harder to understand the origins and motivations of the other side’s policies or the range of views on each side. Relatedly, it is more difficult to see the domestic origins and social context of policies, which are much harder to ascertain when traveling within the other country is not possible. One consequence is a tendency to assume the worst of the other side’s intentions and that policies are locked in and not open to change.

Third, and relatedly, it becomes harder for both sides to explain to the other the sources of their own bilateral policies and how they link to their relations with others and with broader foreign policy objectives. This impacts how the other side can most effectively provide reassurance in order to stabilize ties.

And finally, lack of direct communication over an extended period results in a broader estrangement and detachment that makes it far more challenging to empathize with the other side’s circumstances and find a path to constructive ties over the longer term. This has been obvious during the past three years, with the United States and China experiencing the pandemic in different ways and on different timelines. When the United States was suffering a huge spike in cases and deaths in 2020 and 2021, China was not. And when China went through several lockdowns in 2022 and exited zero Covid near the end of the year, the United States—along with the rest of the world—had already opened up and had difficulty understanding China’s circumstances. The estrangement translates into a sense that increasing mutual understanding is almost impossible and encourages a sense of fatalism about the trajectory of ties.

**Our Collaboration: Purpose and Plans**

It is this growing sense of estrangement and fatalism that has dismayed the authors and motivated their decision to launch this collaboration. Over the past three years, they hosted a regular dialogue of foreign policy experts to discuss U.S.-China relations. Although that has helped get beyond official talking points and maintain some foundation of communication, online exchanges can only achieve so much. As far as the authors know, no other experts from policy think tanks in Beijing and Washington visited the other country during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020-December 2022).

As a result, the authors decided to carry out a pair of extended trips aimed at resuming direct engagement with the scholarly and policy communities of both countries. Goals for these trips included resuming their own field research activity, setting a precedent for other scholars, and advocating within the policy communities about the importance of in-person visits and exchange.

Wang Jisi went first, visiting the United States over five weeks in February and March 2022, dividing his
time between Washington, New York, Boston, and Dallas. Scott Kennedy was originally scheduled to make his return visit in April 2022, but he postponed the trip because of the U.S. government’s notice advising Americans not to travel to Shanghai because of the city’s ongoing lockdown at the time. After a short delay, he visited China for six weeks in September and October 2022, spending five weeks in Beijing and one week in Shanghai. Both went through extended quarantines upon arriving in China—Wang when returning to China and Kennedy when arriving in China. The following month, in November 2022, Wang Jisi made a brief follow-up visit to the United States, visiting New York and Washington, D.C., for 10 days.

Although there were some differences, the authors’ itineraries shared much in common. Both had numerous meetings with scholars, officials, and business executives in both formal and informal settings. Both saw old acquaintances who they had known for many years and also met some people for the first time. They were also able to walk around unsupervised on their own to observe people going about their daily lives. Importantly, they were able to compare what they saw and heard with their many previous trips, examining the physical settings, people's behavior, the media, and the general atmosphere.

Substantively, both authors attempted to pay close attention to a range of issues: developments in domestic life and society (particularly how people were responding to the pandemic), views about the U.S.-China relationship in general and on key issues, explanations about relative responsibility, and the possibilities for stabilizing and improving ties.
Trips to the United States

By Wang Jisi

Challenges and Opportunities of Traveling to the United States

THE FIRST TRIP IN EARLY 2022

I have been to the United States more than 100 times since 1984. One of my last trips to the United States in the pre-Covid period dates back to August 2019, when I participated in the China Forum sponsored by University of California at San Diego (UCSD) in La Jolla. More than half of the U.S. participants there were either retired U.S. officials or are now serving in the Biden administration on its China-related work. After that, for more than 24 months, my connection to these and other U.S. colleagues was reduced to emails, occasional phone calls, and several video conferences.

In December 2020, one of my best friends and mentors, Ezra Vogel of Harvard University, passed away. We had exchanged dozens of email messages in the previous few months and had co-organized three video conferences with support from Peking University and Harvard. With deep sorrow and nostalgia, I wondered how much longer people like Ezra and myself would have to wait until we were able to see each other in person. Beyond personal sentiment, we had a lot of work still to be done in deepening China-U.S. mutual understanding, and the bilateral relationship was only becoming more toxic.

Naturally, I was thrilled to have received an invitation from CSIS to be its guest in early 2022 and to learn what happened in the United States from 2020 to 2022. To my happy surprise, my application for this trip was endorsed by the Chinese authorities, and the process went relatively smoothly. I guessed that my credentials as a veteran U.S. watcher in China could easily justify the need to make such a visit. Additionally, I was holding a 10-year, multiple-entry U.S. visa. But I had already retired from my professorship at Peking University, which made the official approval a bit complicated. I was very grateful to Peking University’s International Cooperation Department and School of International Studies (SIS) for their special arrangements. Professor
Chen Muyang of SIS kindly agreed to join me on the whole trip and helped with appointments and note-taking. Her efficiency, spirit, and professional knowledge were extraordinary.

Still, three big challenges lay ahead before departure and during the trip. First was personal safety, in particular precautions for Covid-19. At the time, the pandemic was still rampant in the United States, where reportedly over one million people had died of the disease or related illnesses. My family, friends, and colleagues feared the possible consequences of traveling from what they saw as the world’s safest country (China) to the most dangerous place in the world (America). I am diabetic, aging (74), and considered susceptible to Covid-19. I did not believe the rumor in China at the time that so many people died of Covid-19 that streets in American cities were full of coffins. My personal life as a shepherd and manual worker from 1968 to 1978 prepared me to face hardships, both psychological and physical. I told myself and others that the probability of my catching Covid-19 was smaller than being hit by a bike or motorcycle on my university campus or on Beijing’s streets. In any case, I had to take precautions. My office got a pack of protective clothing, face shields, and masks to take on the plane. These went unused, except for the masks.

I was also warned of the worsening safety situation in the United States, where there had been shootings in the streets and acts of prejudice against Asians and Asian Americans. It was not my top concern, but I learned on this trip something that was worrisome, which I will discuss below.

The second challenge was the enormous budget. Business-class airfare, hotels and other expenses combined for total budget over $65,000—for only one person. Fortunately, I was able to afford the cost using savings from my institute (due to limited activities and travel in the past two years) and support from a couple of business friends concerned about China-U.S. relations.

Third, I faced the unpredictability of traveling amid quarantine measures in China. My itinerary changed several times because of canceled flights. My thanks go to Minister Counselor Jing Quan, Ambassador Qin Gang, and other colleagues at the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C., and the Chinese consulate in New York, all of whom took pains to solve the problems of obtaining air tickets, taking PCR tests in designated places, and handling other logistics before returning to China. My original flight back to China was delayed by 10 days, and I flew to Dallas to catch my return flight to Shanghai.

Altogether, I spent 35 days in Washington, D.C., New York City, Boston, and Dallas. On my way home to China, I traveled to Shanghai and then Chengdu, staying in quarantine hotels. I flew from Chengdu to Beijing and isolated myself in my country house for two weeks until I finally could be reunited with my family. The quarantine period in China lasted 42 days, 7 days longer than my visit to the United States.

Upon my return, I was frequently asked a question: “Was your visit worth all the troubles you experienced?” My answer was definite: “Yes, this was mission accomplished.”

THE SECOND TRIP IN LATE 2022

My second trip to the United States was shorter—November 7 to 17, 2022—and sandwiched in between visits to the United Arab Emirates and Germany. I was happy that Professor Yu Tiejun succeeded me as president of IISS in September, and I was given the title of its founding president without any substantive responsibility.

I had three stops on this U.S. tour: New York City, Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and Washington, D.C. The Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) invited me as a member of its delegation to conduct an unofficial dialogue with a distinguished group of retired U.S. government officials, businesspeople, and scholars. Because of pre-existing commitments, I was able to join only one session of the dialogue in New
York on November 10. My activities on the second trip were similar to the first one, and CSIS again hosted me in Washington, D.C. Zhang Yike, a PhD candidate in Yale’s Department of History and formerly a research assistant at IISS, did a superb job of assisting me in making appointments and taking notes.

Ambassador Qin Gang entertained me with dinner at his residence on November 14 and gave me valuable advice on doing research on China-U.S. relations. He was soon after promoted to be China’s foreign minister.

The timing of this trip coincided with the summit meeting between President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden in Bali, Indonesia, on November 14, which marked the first interaction between the two top leaders after the United States held its midterm elections and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its 20th National Congress. It was also their first in-person meeting in several years. The high-profile summit was said to be a positive signal that the two sides would take steps to push their relationship back to the track of stable development. My discussions with U.S. interlocutors during the trip were focused on the future of bilateral ties. Although a few senior officials responsible for China policy joined the U.S. delegation in Bali, I was able to hold productive meetings with the officials still in Washington, who made sobering remarks.

The highlight of the trip was the public event at CSIS on November 15, called “A Washingtonian in Beijing.” Over 100 people attended the event in person and many more watched online. Scott Kennedy recollected his experience of traveling to Beijing and Shanghai and answered my questions about his impressions. It was an intriguing conversation between the two of us, followed by a lively discussion with the audience. CSIS held a dinner that evening attended by a group of people concerned about China-U.S. relations. Representatives of the U.S. Department of State and the Chinese embassy in Washington made positive remarks about the event.

Few people on the streets and in public spaces of the cities I traveled to still wore masks. The chaos and panic of the pandemic looked like something of the past as compared to my memories of the first trip seven months before. However, China was in a strikingly different world as far as Covid-19 was concerned. When my wife and I boarded the plane from Berlin to Beijing on November 26, to our astonishment all the flight attendants were wearing full protective clothing and did not serve any hot or fresh food during the 12-hour flight. We landed in Dalian instead of Beijing and stayed in a quarantine hotel for nine days. When we finally arrived in Beijing, the zero-Covid policy abruptly ended, and life gradually returned to normal.

The Mission and the Plan

The mission of my first trip was clearly defined by the invitation letter from CSIS president Dr. John Hamre, which stressed that CSIS understood how important the U.S.-China relationship is to the future of global affairs and that CSIS is committed to renewing direct interaction between the two countries as soon as possible.

It was perhaps the first endeavor of this sort made by two People’s Republic of China (PRC) social science scholars since the outbreak of Covid-19. Professor Chen Muyang and I were thus greatly honored and privileged. We arrived in Washington, D.C., on February 7, 2022. My first meeting was with Ambassador Qin Gang and his colleagues at the Chinese embassy, and Scott Kennedy joined the meeting as well as the dinner. Ambassador Qin showed a great resolve to face the challenges he encountered and hoped for a better image of China in the United States. Other Chinese diplomats I met on this occasion and otherwise on the trip also showed sobering but encouraging spirits and a good understanding of where problems and opportunities lay in the bilateral relationship.
Over the course of the entire trip, we had over 70 group meetings and individual conversations with current and former U.S. officials, think tank experts, university professors, businesspeople, and representatives from China-related institutions such as the U.S.-China Business Council and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.

The mission of my second trip was to cement the collaboration program between IISS and CSIS. Scott Kennedy and I intended to visit with each other in 2023 and possibly beyond, and we explored the possibilities of bringing Chinese and American experts together physically and holding conferences in Beijing and Washington in turn. The second trip also provided opportunities for me to exchange views and information with American interlocutors in ways that were similar to the first trip.

Impressions of the United States

I took this opportunity to pay attention to issues in American society and U.S.-China relations. With regard to the former, I focused on three questions that have been hot topics back home in China.

ARE U.S. POLITICS DYSFUNCTIONAL, AND IS AMERICAN SOCIETY FRAGMENTING?

China’s U.S. watchers and political observers are well aware of some salient features of U.S. politics in recent years, among them—political polarization (caused partly by the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the Capitol Hill riot on January 6, 2021), racial tensions (reflected in the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-Asian hate crimes), controversy about gun control and gun-related violence, the inability to control the spread of Covid-19 until 2022, and deepening distrust of the political establishment and leaders. In our conversations, when I raised these issues, a number of U.S. counterparts admitted the existence and exacerbation of these problems. Among them, older Americans tended to express deeper concerns than younger interlocutors. One leading expert on international politics told me that as a result of this internal strife, his next book would be on U.S. domestic political debates rather than American foreign relations.

Meanwhile, others were less certain that the dysfunction and turmoil would be permanent. Some U.S. colleagues argued that with generational changes and assimilation of new immigrants, American society might become gradually more united. Identity politics might be less visible in the younger generation because children are now raised in multicultural and multiethnic surroundings. Some others pointed to a few episodes in U.S. history, such as the Great Depression, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal, to illustrate that there were darker days in U.S. politics and that American society has proven to be resilient. They said there were reasons for them to remain confident about America’s destiny.

My general impression during these two trips was that Americans were less certain about the future of their nation than I found on previous visits due to the gloomy events of the last few years, especially the failure to effectively cope with the Covid-19 pandemic. Political divisions were regrettably deepening, intensified by social media. Spectacular posters of Black Lives Matter in the streets of Washington, D.C. and New York City counterpoised with the growing prominence of white nationalism, giving me the vivid impression that societal cohesion was threatened by “cultural wars.”

I do fear U.S. politics could be nastier and dirtier in the coming years. I ask myself, however, are these phenomena commonplace in other parts of the world as well nowadays? It is often reported in China that public opinion polls in America indicate that the majority of American people do not think their country is
moving in the right direction. I have no doubt about the truth of these reports. In my readings of U.S. politics for decades, however, I have never seen at any particular moment that most Americans thought their country was moving in the right direction.

My second trip, taken after the midterm elections, witnessed a certain degree of optimism among U.S. interlocutors, most of whom leaned toward the Democratic Party. They pointed out that the majority of voters seemed to have passed the stage of doubting the validity of the presidential election in 2020, which Donald Trump said was “rigged.” The midterm elections went more smoothly than the 2020 elections. A few American friends told me that the result and the process of the latest elections enhanced their confidence in U.S. democratic institutions and the rule of law, especially in contrast with recent political developments in some of what they called “repressive” states. The passing of the peak of Covid-19 infections in the United States and signs of economic recovery also served to boost U.S. confidence.

**IS THE UNITED STATES A SAFE COUNTRY?**

My personal safety was never threatened during my stay. But two things I witnessed or heard made me ponder. First, in CVS stores, I noticed that many products, such as cosmetics and pharmaceutical goods worth more than $40, were locked behind glass shelves or counters, apparently to guard against shoplifters. I, personally, do not recall seeing this before in my countless visits to CVS in other various large U.S. cities before 2019. And second, when I took a walk in Central Park in New York City, I found that the statue of Christopher Columbus was surrounded by cement piles, presumably to prevent people from damaging it. Very close to Columbus was William Shakespeare’s statue, which was not protected. It was obvious who would hate Columbus and would want to pull the statue down. I confess I was scared by bad memories about the old days in China when cultural relics were destroyed.

**IS THE UNITED STATES A DECLINING POWER?**

It has become conventional wisdom in China that the developing world, represented by China, is rising on the global stage, whereas the developed world, led by the United States, is declining. This is captured in the Chinese catchphrase, “the East rising, the West declining” (dongsheng xijiang). While most Americans I talked to during the trip acknowledged the United States’ political disunity and a number of challenges their nation faces internally and externally, they tended to point out China’s deficiencies and weaknesses as well as the United States’ comparative advantages over China. Compared to my earlier interactions with U.S. colleagues, Americans were less confident about U.S. capabilities but were also more critical of China’s overestimation of its own power. A couple of U.S. colleagues contended that China’s triumphalism was “dangerous” because it would lead to aggressive behavior abroad and tensions with the United States.

My own take is that the United States has been declining in comparison with China. Because the developed world is weakening in terms of its share of global GDP and global population vis-à-vis the developing world, the United States, as the leading power in the developed world, is in relative decline. However, when weighing U.S. power in comparison with other major players in the world, including Japan, Russia, Germany, Britain, and France, but excluding China and India, its relative measurable material capabilities have gotten stronger in the last decade. In particular, the United States’ technological edge and economic potential are striking. One of China’s cultural traits is that one should be modest and prudent. I think we should follow that tradition and refrain from boast ing.

Aside from Washington, D.C., I traveled to New York City, Boston, and Dallas and was impressed by the improvement of infrastructure in New York City, especially the renovation of Penn Station, and the booming
economy in Texas. My impressions may have been superficial, but the potential and motivation that have driven the United States in the past are still there and appear likely to endure.

At the time of my second trip, the Russian invasion of Ukraine had been underway for eight months. Russia under President Vladimir Putin had failed to achieve its original war aims, however the goal was defined. The United States was able to mobilize all of its allies and most of its partners to condemn Moscow’s “aggression” and support Ukraine’s resistance. Differentiated policies and approaches between the United States and European powers did not prevent Washington from being capable of keeping the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) under its stewardship. Only a small part of U.S. intelligence, technological prowess, and military aptitude had been shared with Ukraine in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, but they had already demonstrated formidable superiority over Russia.

U.S. Views about the Bilateral Relationship

ATTITUDES TOWARD CHINA

All of the Americans with whom I spoke, regardless of their profession and background, took it for granted that China is a strong power that the United States should reckon with seriously. But their assessments of China’s strength and trajectory varied. Expectantly, those who were seen as “hawkish” toward China did not see a rosy picture of its future, while those who had business interests with China did not usually depict a disappointing trajectory. However, as compared with their assessments in 2019 or earlier, both schools of thought lowered their expectations of China’s economic growth, political unity, and societal morale.

As compared to 2019 and earlier, both U.S. political elites and the general public held demonstrably more negative attitudes toward China. Washington has attempted to make a largely futile distinction between the CCP and the Chinese population in its narratives. However, in my reading of the media and anecdotal encounters with individuals of Chinese origin living in the United States, that distinction has not made much of a difference. The change of attitude has been caused by multiple occurrences in recent years, among them the spread of coronavirus allegedly originating from Wuhan, China, the suspicion that many Chinese in the United States are spying for the PRC, reported “human rights violations” in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, China’s sympathy toward Russia in the Ukraine conflict, Beijing’s saber-rattling activities over the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea, China’s “unfair” trade practices and economic policies that hurt the U.S. economy, and so on. In particular, the deterioration of the China-U.S. relationship has contributed to the damage to China’s image in the United States.

In my conversations with U.S. colleagues, it was not difficult to discern a certain degree of “political correctness” they had to observe when talking about China. One interlocutor mentioned McCarthyism in the early 1950s as a reference. I was not sure where this sense of insecurity among Americans came from. It would be safe to denounce the PRC’s political system, the CCP’s domestic and foreign policies, and its ideology, as well as to disparage China’s economic performance. But one might run the risk of being regarded as a “panda hugger” if the individual openly portrayed the PRC in a positive manner. However, this pressure on commentators and intellectuals to keep in line with “mainstream” thinking on China varied in different settings. One distinguished China scholar teaching at a top U.S. university remarked privately that he might have lost his position if he had moved to a more conservative university in the American South.

The U.S. business community also seemed to feel the same political constraint as populist nationalism rose up and Washington’s China policy became tougher. Protectionism was the tide of the day. As in many other parts
of the world today, national security is thought to be more essential to the nation than economic interests. One eminent business leader told me he was still making “big money” in mainland China despite worsening U.S.-China ties, but he would not disclose this fact for fear of being pressured and disrespected from American society at large.

**U.S. SUBSTANTIVE VIEWS ABOUT THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP**

All of the U.S. interlocutors I talked to thought that both China and the United States should be held responsible for the downward spiral of the bilateral relationship. On the U.S. side of the issue, quite a few interlocutors pointed to the inconsistencies in U.S. policy toward China, including the conspicuous contrast between the Trump administration’s high-handed trade policy and the Biden administration’s hesitation to lift tariffs. Partisan politics have resulted in competition among U.S. politicians to show their toughness on China. On a few occasions, President Biden has made remarks regarding the U.S. commitment to the defense of Taiwan that were deemed “off the mark,” only to be “corrected” or clarified later by other policymakers and spokesmen.

That said, most complaints about the worsening of the relationship were directed to the Chinese side. Interestingly, unlike China’s denunciation of “U.S. hegemonism” that is basically related to U.S. external behavior, U.S. observations of China that I noted during the trips usually began with China’s domestic front. One observer remarked after the CCP’s 20th National Congress that the party’s legitimacy is grounded on three pillars: ideology (from Marxism all the way to Xi’s Thought), sustained economic growth, and nationalism. When ideological indoctrination encountered greater resistance, and economic growth slowed down quickly due to Covid-19 and policy failures, nationalism had the potential to be more vehemently inflamed. Therefore, he added, Beijing would redouble its efforts to take over Taiwan by military means. Some interlocutors analyzed the backgrounds and personalities of the new Politburo Standing Committee, trying to detect possible changes of domestic and foreign policies as they came into office. Generally, those who were concerned about U.S.-China relations looked to China’s internal trends for their understanding of its foreign relations.

While our conversations focused on China and the bilateral relationship, many U.S. observers discussed broader international surroundings. Before my second trip, I traveled to Abu Dhabi to attend a conference on Middle East affairs, and after my visit to Washington, I stopped in Berlin and interviewed Germans. In both Abu Dhabi and Berlin, as well as in the United States, I met with a few U.S. international relations specialists and retired diplomats. A general impression was that global trends in the last decade or so have undergone dramatic transformations. The sanguine assessments widespread in the Western world from the 1990s to the 2000s about globalization and democratization were gone. Anti-globalization and democratic backsliding were observed in many parts of the world, including in the West.

The “rule-based world order,” advocated by the United States in global affairs in general and in its interaction with China in particular, is not only challenged by China and its strategic partners such as Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Cuba, but also by a number of other developing countries such as India, South Africa, and Brazil (the leftist politician Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had won the Brazilian presidential election before I arrived in New York in early November). “Strongman politics” and authoritarianism had successfully come back to the world. Several “strongmen” have sustained their predominance at home in countries such as Egypt, Turkey, India, Russia, Belarus, Hungary, and Cambodia. A leading U.S. Middle East specialist told me privately that his colleagues in the foreign ministry of an Arab state watched RT (Russia’s leading English-language news channel) more regularly than U.S. television programs, which meant they might have strong reservations about U.S. values and the United States’ international role.
Although the United States has been able to shape up or strengthen partnerships—including the Indo-Pacific, four-nation Quad (involving the United States, India, Japan, and Australia), the Five Eyes intelligence partnership (involving Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States), and AUKUS (a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States)—all largely aimed at constraining China’s international activities in the Asia-Pacific region, the Americans I listened to did not show much confidence that the United States would be able to outcompete China, especially in the international economic realm. They recognized that China was a larger trade partner than the United States with most countries in the world, including many U.S. allies. Meanwhile, in the arena of global security, the United States was still a dominant power. Therefore, the China-U.S. strategic competition, in their view, would go on for many years, or even decades, on the regional and global scenes.

I spent some time discussing bilateral economic and technological issues with U.S. interlocutors. While the volume of bilateral trade continued to grow in the past few years, mutual investment has slowed because of political impediments. I attempted to explain that, as far as I know, Huawei was quite autonomous in running its business abroad and remained popular in many countries, but my U.S. colleagues insisted that there was evidence that Huawei, TikTok, and other Chinese information technology (IT) companies serve as policy instruments of the CCP, the People’s Liberation Army, or China’s intelligence agencies. It would be hard to prove to them otherwise. U.S. sanctions against Chinese high-tech corporations, particularly in the semiconductor supply chain, would harm Chinese and U.S. businesses. U.S. industrial policy, China’s AI industry, and military-civil fusion projects were also occasionally debated topics.

Russia’s massive attack on Ukraine broke out during my first trip. It triggered speculation in Washington’s policy circles regarding China’s position and possible involvement in the armed conflict. Since President Putin had just attended the Olympic Winter Games in Beijing and had a cordial meeting with President Xi on February 4, 2022, it was considered likely that Putin had informed the Chinese leadership of his plans for invading Ukraine. If that was the case, Beijing would be an “accomplice” to Moscow. If Moscow hid its plans from Beijing before it launched the so-called “special military operation,” which later events proved to be the case, the strategic partnership and mutual trust between China and Russia would not be as solid as often portrayed. In whatever case, my discussions with U.S. counterparts on the Ukraine conflict and its implications for China-U.S. relations were remarkably candid and useful to both sides, particularly because we were able to take this rare and valuable opportunity for face-to-face communication.
The Trip to China

By Scott Kennedy

Challenges and Opportunities of Traveling to China

I have not been traveling back and forth between the United States and China quite as long as Wang Jisi, but my first trip to China, as a university student, was in 1988. I have visited countless times since then and lived in-country on four occasions. Despite this long history, my decision to travel to China in 2022 was not made lightly. The Covid-19 pandemic had made me worried about leaving my home, let alone my country. On top of this, China’s zero-Covid policy presented a daunting picture, at a minimum involving an extended quarantine and regular testing, and at worst requiring an undetermined period of centralized quarantine. Hesitancy to visit China had already risen among Western scholars in the wake of the multiyear detention of Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. If the two Canadians could be held without due process, then many scholars thought they could also be vulnerable regardless of reassurances from Beijing. A 2021 survey of China experts in the West conducted by the Asia Society showed that less than half of those polled were sure they would return to China once the pandemic ended.

Despite the risks, I decided to take the trip for two reasons. First, the pandemic was particularly detrimental to my own research on China’s political economy since understanding two key issues—how economic policy is made and the genuine technological and commercial competitiveness of Chinese companies—depends heavily on interviewing Chinese officials and business executives and visiting firms. Although interviews do not provide a full picture, one can “triangulate” multiple interviews with each other, particularly over time, and compare those insights with a range of written sources.

Second, I am convinced that travel, in-person discussion, and direct observation are critical to achieving better mutual understanding, a need which applies regardless of whether the United States and China, the world’s two most powerful countries, are friends or foes. This applies not only to the need for Americans and
Westerners to understand China; it is equally valuable for the United States that the Chinese have a much more accurate picture of the United States. This is hard to obtain if Americans cannot visit China and Chinese cannot travel to the United States.

The Mission and the Plan

I wanted to answer three big questions all foreign experts face when considering travel to China: (1) could I get there, (2) could I do field research and hold meetings, and (3) could I continue to do my global job while there?

Getting to China and out among general society was more difficult than expected. I originally planned to travel in April 2022, just after Wang Jisi’s first 2022 trip, but I was forced to postpone the trip due to the Shanghai lockdown. As a result, in the spring I instead visited Taipei, Seoul, and Tokyo in order to understand their views on U.S.-China relations. Then, my first re-scheduled flight to China, via Shanghai, in mid-August was canceled as part of China’s circuit-breaker policy, in which flights arriving with positive Covid-19 cases were temporarily suspended. As a result, at the end of August, I first flew to Taipei, quarantined there for three days, and then flew on to Beijing, where I quarantined for another 10 days.

Although I did not “enjoy” quarantining, compared to other reported cases, my experience went smoothly. I was provided three good meals per day, had reliable internet access and a large window, and was able to receive package deliveries. I was tested repeatedly, and on the final day the technicians also swabbed my laptop, cell phone, a dresser, the sink, and the rug to test them for Covid-19. All came up negative, and I exited quarantine and moved to my regular hotel downtown on schedule.

Counting from the first day I left my home in early April to when I exited quarantine in Beijing, my door-to-door trip was 163 days, including 26 days of quarantine in Taiwan, Japan, and mainland China, instead of the usual 15 hours it had taken before the pandemic. Although I made it through the process unscathed, traveling with a quarantine requirement in place simply is not feasible for the vast majority of scholars, which explains why so few tried.

Some had predicted that no one would meet me, but conducting field research and arranging meetings was far less problematic than getting to China. During the five weeks I was out of quarantine, I held over 100 meetings, including giving over 20 lectures, and was able to interact with a wide range of people. Despite the sensitivities around U.S.-China relations and the purported risks of meeting with foreigners, people were quite accessible, gracious, and engaging. Even though there were disagreements—and we clashed on many issues—no one was ever disagreeable.

The only challenge to field research was the difficulty in traveling outside of Beijing and Shanghai. With travel restrictions still in place last fall, I could not be sure that if I went to another province that I would be allowed to leave. Several people I met had said that they had traveled to other cities only to be denied permission to immediately return to Beijing or forced to quarantine once back in the capital. Others were tipped off by their business colleagues in other destinations not to travel in order to avoid the same outcome. As a result, I was unable to visit companies and experts in other cities, something I would normally do.

The least difficult part of the trip was continuing my global work. I was able to maintain ongoing communication with my team back in Washington, conduct interviews with international media, and even host live online programs from my hotel. It is certainly possible that all of my meetings in China and digital communications were monitored, but I faced no particular obstacles because of my nationality.
One possible reason for being treated well was that I was the first visitor from a U.S. think tank in three years, and Beijing wanted to send a positive signal that the door to international experts was open. More than one person characterized my visit as a “trip to break the ice” (po bing zhi lu); that seems like an exaggeration since that term was last applied to President Nixon’s visit in February 1972, a trip that began the process of re-establishing ties after more than two decades of estrangement. Regardless, it certainly seemed that Beijing was intentionally trying to give the impression that international scholarly exchange is welcome.

Impressions of China

Once out of quarantine I had five weeks to hold formal meetings, have informal visits with old acquaintances, and observe changes in the physical landscape and society more broadly. My impressions are divided into observations about domestic Chinese life and U.S.-China relations. I came away with mixed reactions about the former and deep concerns about the latter.

The Omnipresence of Zero Covid

By far the dominant issue, which affected everything else I observed about life in China, was the country’s zero-Covid policies. This policy focused on stemming transmission of the virus, whereas the rest of the world, because of the Omicron variant’s high transmissibility, had shifted to limiting the negative health consequences of the virus’s spread. Consequently, China had created a comprehensive system to inhibit the virus’s spread, which included a combination of regular testing; a digital scanning process to allow only those who test negative to enter buildings, use public transportation, and travel between localities; the creation of quarantine centers for those who tested positive; and substantial barriers to traveling in and out of China for both citizens and foreigners.

The most immediate consequence of this policy was to regiment the daily lives of everyone since keeping in compliance was mandatory to leave one’s home. In order to adhere to the same policies as everyone else, I tested regularly and scanned a “health kit” app on my cell phone every time I entered a facility or used public transportation. At an individual level, this meant standing in line to test every two to three days and scanning repeatedly throughout the day.

Many people I spoke with accepted the regimen as necessary to protect society, particularly given their concerns about the efficacy of China’s own vaccine and data showing that a sizeable percentage of the elderly were unvaccinated. And the low number of Covid-19 cases and Covid-related deaths suggested that the policy did achieve its goal. The question from most was: at what cost? No one I met liked the policy or thought it should be a permanent feature of life in the country. In fact, I regularly encountered resentment in both Beijing and Shanghai about zero Covid, particularly in private settings. People told me their frustration rose since April 2022, following the full-scale lockdown in Shanghai from late March to early June and the partial lockdown in Beijing during the summer. Zero Covid was not just viewed as inconvenient and unsustainable but also as intrusive because of the phone app, which tracked one’s health status and location. And many assumed that surveillance technology would continue to be used in one way or another even after the pandemic ends.

This sense of anger rose while I was in China following news from Guizhou of a deadly bus crash.12 The bus was transporting people who had tested positive to an isolation center outside of Guiyang so that the city could assert it had successfully avoided any new cases. Those I talked with saw the crash as reflective of zealous local officials implementing a wrongheaded policy.
In Shanghai, people were not only angry about zero Covid, I found some still traumatized by the lockdown that had ended only a couple months before I arrived. Some got through the lockdown unscathed because they initially had good stocks of food and medicine, were able to join purchasing groups to buy provisions throughout the crisis, and could work online and keep up communications without much difficulty. But some told me of extremely difficult experiences, which left a deep wound in part because they believed Shanghai was so prosperous it could not possibly encounter such a dire situation.

The final startling element of zero Covid, the country’s self-imposed isolation, meant that I encountered a dearth of foreigners while in China. Compared to my last visit, in late 2019, there were far fewer foreign business executives and their families, a trimmed down diplomatic community and foreign press corps, only a handful of foreign students, and absolutely no foreign tourists. Although the comparison is not perfect, I felt as if I had left a Beijing that was on its way to becoming a cosmopolitan city such as London and returned to find a city that seemed to be trending far more toward closed Pyongyang. When I mentioned this to others, some noted they had heard others refer to China as “West Korea,” that is, western North Korea, known as one of the world’s most isolated countries—not an endearing comparison. Although Chinese are famous for their nationalistic views, they also had become used to being part of a global society, with foreign travelers and workers commonplace across the country, they had been going abroad by the millions each year, and the country had become deeply integrated into global economic and social networks. China’s isolation amid Covid-19 was deeply unsettling to them.

**UNFULFILLED ECONOMIC DYNAMISM**

I encountered individual signs of dynamism in the economy, but they were overwhelmed by the broader constraints imposed by zero Covid and growing tensions with the United States.

On the positive side of the ledger, I found entrepreneurialism in multiple arenas. A roundtable discussion with the heads of several tech start-ups yielded several examples of novel innovations in several areas of artificial intelligence, including in automated shipping ports, manufacturing, and social media. Throughout my time, I came across a wide assortment of electric vehicle (EV) brands. In Shanghai, I took a ride in a Level-3 autonomous passenger vehicle that, from this untrained eye, felt smooth and capable. Both suggested that reports about the continued explosion of EV sales domestically and their emergence as a new source of exports were accurate.

However, aside from the auto sector (which was in part supported by continued massive subsidies), I saw no other signs of vibrant consumerism. People were clearly not traveling, domestically or internationally. Road traffic and subway ridership seemed down, and business in stores and restaurants was lower than I remembered. On a Saturday afternoon walk on the Bund in Shanghai, I found far fewer tourists than in past trips. Conversations with friends suggested consumers were holding back spending because of limited opportunities and a sense of uncertainty about the future. Similarly, several of the private investors I know told me they were reluctant to make new deals because of the uncertain environment. One investor told me that China’s political leadership wanted people to suffer and did not want private firms to make money. At a store in Shanghai, the owner lamented that he had to fire over half of his team, and he was unsure of when business would return to normal. In sum, the unclear political position of the private sector, the constraints imposed by zero Covid, and tensions with the United States all combined to put a pall on future expectations. Although official data indicates that China grew 3 percent in 2022, that is not how the economy felt at ground level.
POLITICAL RETRENCHMENT

Chinese politics have never been very liberal or transparent, but in the 1990s and 2000s, there were signs of constructive change. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) accepted the idea of collective leadership, informally instituting term limits and a retirement age for senior leaders. Government agencies were given greater authority to set policies, and experts from research organizations and industry were invited to join policy deliberations. Ideological flexibility allowed for greater pragmatism, while technical expertise and economic performance were made key metrics for cadre advancement. Officialdom created some space for the emergence of civil society institutions—such as business associations, the media, philanthropic groups, and credit rating agencies—to provide public goods and some degree of accountability.

During this trip, such signs of political institutionalization and pluralization were hard to detect. Instead, Chinese politics seemed less transparent and more old-fashioned than I ever remember. I arrived a little over a month before the 20th Party Congress, held in October 2022. In previous trips, such an occasion would be an opportunity for sharing gossip and making predictions. But this time, interlocutors were clear that they were entirely in the dark about potential developments. Some suggested who they hoped, or feared, would make it on the new Politburo Standing Committee, but everyone admitted they knew little and would wait like the rest of us to see what happened.

In group sessions, we did not directly discuss domestic politics, but there were still signs of growing rigidity compared to previous years. At one event, a business executive intentionally displayed their loyalty by beginning every sentence of their comments with the phrase, “As General Secretary Xi said . . . .” No one else in the room thought this was odd, even though it seemed jarring to me. In more private situations, I heard more discomfort about a greater emphasis in the last few years on ideology, both because of the doctrinal content itself and simply because of the growing time spent in meetings discussing official speeches and documents. It is certainly possible that my contacts tend to be more liberal than most Chinese, but recent surveys show that a diversity of views have remained resilient.24

In both private and public settings, I also noticed less outright ambition to move ahead economically. I saw countless people jogging in Beijing and Shanghai, which would have been a rare sight years before. People dressed more casually on the subways and in meetings and seemed less interested in outright displays of wealth. On the weekends and evenings, I saw families going out for strolls and openly showing affection for each other. People highlighted the importance of cleaner air and water. In short, it seemed Chinese society may be going through a subtle transition, in which neither economic gain nor stability are primary goals, and a more diverse set of values add up to a broader definition of “the good life.” If so, it is an open question as to whether the CCP and the Chinese people, at least urbanites, agree with each other about what the social contract between them should be.

These observations may help explain why protests erupted in multiple cities in China in November 2022 calling on the CCP and government to end zero Covid and allow university students to return to their hometowns. No one could have predicted such an outpouring, but it makes sense given the widespread frustrations I encountered. My guess is that very few protesters want fundamental political change; instead, they just wanted their normal lives back and a greater sense of predictability about the future. What is still entirely unclear—and for which field research might not yield a clear answer—is why the leadership so quickly acceded to these calls and exited zero Covid in a matter of a few days.
Chinese Views about the Bilateral Relationship

Although the vicissitudes of Chinese domestic life presented a concerning yet mixed picture, what I saw and heard about U.S.-China relations was even more worrying. I found a range of opinions on certain issues, but there appears to be broad consensus within officialdom and much of the scholarly community on substantive policy issues and the broader dynamics of the relationship. The lack of direct, face-to-face communication is contributing to the hardening of this perspective.

In meeting after meeting, with both officials and scholars, I repeatedly heard a common set of views about the full range of bilateral and global issues that highlight how far apart China and the United States are. Most of these views would not be surprising to China watchers, but the repetition, emotional vigor with which comments were made, and additional analysis all added to the weight of the message.

There were complaints about the U.S. framing of the relationship as “strategic competition.” Several people emphasized that China did not want to replace the current international order and the United States as the world’s dominant superpower. They believed it important for the two sides to define the relationship in a constructive way; otherwise, it would not make sense for China to cooperate with a country that viewed it as a rival. Most saw “competition” as a synonym for an inherently antagonist relationship, almost akin to enemies, not as a productive mechanism that generated positive outcomes, such as with market competition.

On the Russia-Ukraine conflict, interlocutors repeatedly mentioned the eastward expansion of NATO and the alignment of Ukraine with the West as creating threats to Russian security that helped explain why Russia determined it had to take countermeasures. Some said that the United States supports Ukraine not to defend democracy but to maintain its own global hegemony, using American weapons and Ukrainian lives.

Complaints about Taiwan were animated by former House speaker Nancy Pelosi’s trip, which occurred six weeks before I arrived. Nationalist commentator Hu Xijin had suggested that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) might shoot down the plane, which prompted many Chinese to watch a livestream broadcast of her plane arriving in Taipei. No one told me that the PLA would have been justified in taking such action, but they clearly were unhappy with what they saw as an embarrassing provocation. Interlocutors stressed that her visit was part of a series of steps the U.S. administration and Congress has taken to “hollow-out” its one-China policy and that the United States has shifted from an emphasis on preventing war to openly taking sides. This includes ensuring that Taiwan permanently remains separated from mainland China and embedded in America’s security architecture for the region as a way to weaken and contain China.

Washington’s growing restrictions on technology were consistently framed as part of a larger effort to decouple the U.S. and Chinese economies, keep China from developing, and isolate it internationally. Several cited comments by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan from mid-September 2022 that the United States needs to maximize its technology lead over China, not just stay a couple generations ahead. The announcement by the U.S. Commerce Department in early October of extensive restrictions on semiconductors and related manufacturing equipment and tools was also viewed through this lens. At the same time, several interlocutors stressed the need for China to develop its own technologies and reduce its dependence on the United States. Although Chinese efforts to pursue “indigenous innovation” pre-date recent U.S. policies (and in some ways go back much further), the justification for fostering domestic advanced technologies were consistently framed as a response to U.S. restrictions.

On economics, many stressed that the United States and China have complementary economies and developed a mutually beneficial division of labor over the past two decades, which is being threatened by
U.S. efforts to shift supply chains, sanction Chinese companies, and limit commercial ties more generally. Relatedly, several said that criticism of Chinese industrial policy was unjustified given the U.S. Department of Defense’s long support of leading technologies and the passage of the CHIPS and Science Act and Inflation Reduction Act, which they see as blatant industrial policy and even more protectionist that Chinese policies. When presented with evidence that the scale of Chinese spending is uniquely high, the typical response was to mention that the Chinese government needs to spend more because China is a developing country or that the data understates ways in which the U.S. government supports American industry, such as through monetary policy to keep interest rates artificially low.\(^\text{17}\)

Although there was substantial consensus on most issues, there were two areas of international affairs where I encountered a wide range of opinions. First, although most criticized the United States and Western Europe for sending military weapons to Ukraine, some were critical of their own government’s strong support for Russia’s position and actions. They were not optimistic about Russia’s ability to win and believed that even if it did, Russia’s relations with the West would never recover, harming China because of its close association with Russia.

The second point of disagreement concerned China’s ability to withstand the U.S.-led technology restrictions and develop domestic alternatives. The higher up in the policy hierarchy I went, the more optimism I encountered that export controls and other restrictions on semiconductors and other sectors would spur on Chinese innovation and be just a temporary setback. The further down the hierarchy I went and in conversations with Chinese tech entrepreneurs, the more I heard that these restrictions would impede China’s technological progress. No one said that the solution was to change Chinese foreign policy to more clearly reassure Washington and secure a continued flow of technology (all assumed the restrictions would be hard to reverse), but there was an important difference in expectations of China’s technological future.

**Consensus around a Broader Framework**

Beyond the debate over substantive issues, even more telling is the broader framework through which the large majority of Chinese interlocutors I met with view U.S.-China relations. It would be fair to call this consensus an “echo chamber” because it appears to in part be the product of the decrease in interactions Chinese have had with counterparts in the United States and elsewhere over the past few years, one consequence of which is to reduce challenges to the conventional wisdom.

The initial underlying element is a broad sense of estrangement from the United States and the West brought about by the extended period of isolation and limited direct contact. People had a difficult time appreciating the evolving situation in the United States and the West as the pandemic unfolded. When China was operating more normally was exactly when there were greater restrictions in the United States, and life in the United States normalized in late 2021 and early 2022, just as China was imposing more lockdowns. In addition, interlocutors had found it hard to place themselves in the shoes of Americans and others who are watching developments inside China and in China’s foreign policy, particularly with regard to China’s handling of the pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and Taiwan. Although ideological differences and the Great Firewall have historically made communication challenging, physical isolation and a different periodization to the pandemic added to the problem.

The estrangement then amplified the strength and breadth of a series of views that I repeatedly encountered. The second part of this consensus was to view the United States as being motivated by the worst of intentions.
Many said they believe the aim of the United States is to not only keep itself on top as the world’s sole superpower but also to “suppress” (daya), “contain” (ezhi), and undermine the rule of the CCP. I was told that this perception about Washington’s intentions goes all the way to the top of the Chinese system. U.S. statements saying it did not have these goals were not accepted at face value, as observers pointed to U.S. criticism of China’s human rights, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong and that generally painted CCP rule as illegitimate.

Third, Chinese placed 100 percent of the blame for the decline in the relationship on Washington’s shoulders. Most of those with whom I spoke began their story of growing frictions with Trump’s launching of the trade war in mid-2018, the effort to detain Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in late 2018, and the subsequent sanctions on Huawei imposed in May 2019. Despite the Phase One trade agreement, the United States unilaterally imposed a series of penalties in 2020. Instead of returning to an era of dialogue, the Biden administration has continued the Trump approach—the only difference is its effort to coax other countries to join the United States. In their telling, today’s China is on the same path of Reform and Opening set out by previous leaders and has done nothing to deserve this treatment. Many went on to use a common phrase, explaining that “we have had [no choice] but to” (women bu de bu) respond and defend ourselves, doubling down on technological self-reliance, stepping up pressure against Taiwan, and adopting reciprocal diplomatic measures, such as closing the United States’ Chengdu consulate and expelling U.S. journalists.

The fourth part of the consensus is the view that China is winning in its struggle with the United States. Although many recognize the idea of “the East is rising, the West is falling” as overly simplistic, this meme does encapsulate a shared perception that China is still on a path of inevitably becoming a successful major power and that the United States is an empire experiencing inexorable decline. Interlocutors cited the strengths of China’s economic model, political stability, and, as of last fall, its success in minimizing Covid-19 cases and deaths. All of this they contrasted with pathologies of the United States—worsening wealth inequality, inflation, political fragmentation, crime, and a high number of Covid-19 deaths.

Fifth, it was a shared view among those with whom I spoke that the Biden administration lacks credibility to either reach a compromise with China or to enforce it within the U.S. political system. As noted, most believe the Biden administration has ill intentions toward China. But equally important, most think that even if the Biden administration itself wants to find common ground and compromise, it does not for fear of the domestic political backlash. Moreover, most think that if it did somehow manage to overcome those worries, the U.S. Congress would step in and undermine any agreement. This conclusion was reinforced by the Biden administration’s defense that it could not stop House Speaker Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan because of the separation of powers. Rather than taking solace that her trip did not mean a departure from the United States’ one-China policy, Chinese observers concluded that the U.S. executive branch can no longer control Congress, which could counter any arrangement made between the administration and China. Moreover, interlocutors opined that even if domestic political pressure did not immediately forestall compromise, the next U.S. presidential election could, as the candidate of the other political party could very well overturn the decisions of the current administration.

Finally, the consequence of this series of analytical conclusions was a sense of fatalism about the trajectory to relationship. Although many believed it was important to expand direct communication, most were pessimistic that sufficient common ground could be found to avoid a continued deterioration in ties.
Summary

My experience reinforced my view that although traveling to China is difficult, doing so is valuable. Defying the predictions of some, people from government, business, and academia were eager to meet and exchange views. Chinese interlocutors both offered their own views and listened intently to mine. Although people did not change their core views during these exchanges, it allowed for probing assumptions, analyses, and conclusions and offered the chance to identify a range of opinions.

I also regularly encountered what appeared to be a genuine desire to avoid military conflict and find a path toward peaceful coexistence. That said, mounting frictions over several years, reinforced by the isolation created by the pandemic, has left Chinese estranged from the United States and more fatalistic about the trajectory of the relationship. As a result, achieving a successful reset that would stabilize ties will be extremely difficult.
Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The Difficulty of Escaping the Vicious Cycle

It should go without saying—but it deserves restating—travel between the United States and China and the accompanying meetings, field research, and observation are critical for increasing mutual understanding of the two countries. The value accrues to both the traveler as well as those they meet.

The pandemic took a large human toll within the United States and China but also hurt the relationship between the two countries. Although the origins of U.S.-China tensions predate the pandemic, the longevity of the pandemic and lack of direct communication reinforced and magnified tensions.

The authors found a similar dynamic in both countries. A rise in estrangement reinforced fears about the other sides’ motives and strengthened the impression that the other side is fully to blame for the downturn in ties. Both sides believe they are weathering the conflict better than the other in the short term and will be better positioned in the long term. Neither sees the other as having much credibility to make a deal that addresses their own core concerns or sticks within their political systems. As a result, there is a sense of fatalism in both Beijing and Washington about the trajectory of ties.

The dynamic within both countries looks like two vicious cycles (see Figure 4.1). This translates into a stalemate—and, in fact, spiraling tensions—that go even further than the typical “security dilemma,” in which each side takes steps to defend itself which in turn generate insecurity for the other, who then responds in kind.18 The authors encountered a series of increasingly entrenched views on both sides that have been reinforced not only by the specific actions of the other side but by their respective isolation from each other.
One core conclusion that comes from of the authors’ visits and interviews is that assertions that one side or another is entirely to blame, and hence solely responsible for taking steps to improve the relationship, are ill founded. Interrupting the vicious cycle of worsening ties requires both sides to take steps to address the others’ concerns.

In early November 2022, Presidents Biden and Xi met in Bali, Indonesia, their first face-to-face meeting in several years. Although they disagreed on a range of substantive issues, they did appear to agree on the value of direct communication and instructed their respective administrations to expand dialogue, beginning with a meeting between U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken and Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang. Their consultations were conceived as the first step in further communication involving other agencies and lower levels of the bureaucracies.

As documented in previous chapters, the authors’ respective visits impressed upon them the difficulty of engaging in such a process. As a result, they were not surprised that the balloon incident reinforced negative perceptions on both sides and, at least temporarily, interrupted efforts to establish a floor under the relationship.

**Policy Recommendations**

Breaking the ice that has built up in the relationship will take a lot more than trips by two scholars. Instead, what is needed is a series of intentional steps taken over several years. It is in that spirit that the authors offer several recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders in both countries to consider.

1. **Both the United States and China need to commit as a foundational policy to restoring direct connections across the entire span of the two societies.** Doing so is central to reducing tensions and creating a pathway toward peaceful coexistence. Even those who see the other as an implacable foe
should support resuming travel between the two countries since being more knowledgeable about the other side is valuable regardless of one’s goals.

The end of China’s zero-Covid policy in December 2022 makes realization of this goal entirely feasible. Both sides should commit to accelerating processing of visa applications for the full range of non-immigrant travelers, including tourists, students, scholars, and workers. In addition, restoration of direct U.S.-China airlinks for airlines of both countries should be increased in an expedited way.

2. **It is in the self-interest of both governments to resume and expand dialogue, and neither side should erect unnecessary conditions to doing so or severely constrict the topics for discussion.** By canceling Secretary Blinken’s initial trip to Beijing, Washington has signaled that dialogue can only occur when there is not a crisis. Beijing has also said that the U.S. description of the relationship as “strategic competition” and its criticism of Beijing’s actions create an atmosphere inconducive to dialogue. The authors submit that the high possibility for crises and negative views make dialogue more urgent than ever. Moreover, it is important to be willing to discuss a wide range of issues, including both areas where there are substantial disagreements as well as those areas where productive cooperation is possible.

3. **In addition to the resumption of regular communication between the executive powers on both sides, members of the two countries’ legislatures and local governments should also resume visits.** Congressional delegations (“Codels”) to China have long been an important avenue for members of the U.S. Congress, both the House and Senate, to engage in fact-finding missions in order to better understand the country. Although less frequent, deputies to China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) have also benefited from visits to the United States. Delegations from states, provinces, and cities should also be encouraged to resume. Both Xi’s CCP leadership and the Biden administration should facilitate such trips and give deference to the delegations in setting their itineraries.

4. **The U.S. and Chinese governments should find a solution to the stalemate over restrictions on the number of journalists allowed from the other side and limitations on their reporting activities.** It is critical for properly accredited U.S. and Chinese journalists to be permitted to serve as correspondents in the other country and to be able to carry out their duties within the bounds of the law and without harassment, a position to which both governments have long committed.

5. **Both governments should commit to the full resumption of in-person scholarly ties, including students, university professors and administrators, think tank experts, scholarly publication editors, and foundation leaders.** Many of these steps can be taken immediately or within a few months. At the same time, the two governments should create a Track 1.5 dialogue, involving both government officials and representatives of their respective scholarly communities, to discuss several elements of scholarly engagement. Potential issues include: (1) expanding opportunities for study abroad programs and language training; (2) fostering the integrity of transnational research, including the funding of research, collection of data, protection of intellectual property, and review process of scholarly publications; (3) strengthening norms related to field research and access to written materials, including archives; and (4) ensuring the safety and legal protections of members of the scholarly community when traveling between the two countries.
About the Authors

Scott Kennedy is senior adviser and Trustee Chair in Chinese Business and Economics at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. A leading authority on Chinese economic policy, Kennedy has been traveling to China for over 35 years. His specific areas of expertise include industrial policy, technology innovation, business lobbying, U.S.-China commercial relations, and global governance. Recent publications include: *It’s Moving Time: Taiwanese Business Responds to Growing U.S.-China Tensions* (CSIS, October 2022); (with Gerard DiPippo and Ilaria Mazzocco) *Red Ink: Estimating Chinese Industrial Policy Spending in Comparative Perspective* (CSIS, May 2022); (with Jude Blanchette) *Chinese State Capitalism: Diagnosis and Prognosis* (CSIS, October 2021); *China’s Uneven High-Tech Drive: Implications for the United States* (CSIS, February 2020); and *Global Governance and China: The Dragon’s Learning Curve* (Routledge, 2018). His articles have appeared in a wide array of policy, popular, and academic venues, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *South China Morning Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *China Quarterly*, and *China Journal*. From 2000 to 2014, Kennedy was a professor at Indiana University (IU), where he established the Research Center for Chinese Politics and Business and was the founding academic director of IU’s China Office. Kennedy received his PhD in political science from George Washington University, his MA in China studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and his BA from the University of Virginia.

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Endnotes


