

Syllabus

A major geopolitical contest has broken out between America and China. It will be the main driving force of global geopolitics for the next decade or two. The main goal of this MOOC, entitled “US-China relations: Past, Present and Future”, is to deliver a deep understanding of the historical roots, the structural forces, the major misunderstandings and possible alternative policies that both drive and could drive the US-China relationship.

Week 1: China’s Century of Humiliation vs America’s Century of Triumphalism

After an introductory video explaining the purpose and structure of the course, the remaining five videos will explain how a major source of misunderstanding between America is a result of the different historical experiences of the two countries. Hence, in week 1, we will take a deep dive into their respective histories.

China suffered 100 years of humiliation from roughly 1840 to 1949. The key events included the Opium War, the sacking of the Summer Palace, the Western Settlements in Shanghai, the Sino-Japanese War, the May Fourth 1919 movement, the Japanese Occupation. This century of humiliation was probably the worst century ever in China’s history. No one can understand contemporary China without understanding the psychological impact of this century of humiliation.

America enjoyed a hundred years of triumphalism from roughly 1890 to 1990. The key events included Teddy Roosevelt’s imperialist moves, the overtaking of Great Britain as the world’s number 1 economic power, the World War II victories, the landing on the moon, the explosion of the American middle class, the scientific breakthroughs, Silicon Valley and the end of the Cold War. This century was clearly the best century in America’s history.

It is important to understand these different mindsets of Chinese and American leaders if one wants to understand the deeper sources of misunderstanding between China and the US.

Week 2: US-China relations: 1949 to 2020

Week 2 will first cover the three phases of US-China relations from 1949 to 2020. Phase 1 saw deep hostility and direct conflicts between America and China from 1949 (the year of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to 1971. This hostility should have continued between a Communist China and a Democratic America. Instead, with the surprise visit of Henry Kissinger to Beijing to meet Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in July 1971, two decades of close collaboration and partnership followed. The end of the Cold War and the June 4th 1989 Tiananmen Incident triggered

Phase III of the relations, which were characterized by ambivalence, with both cooperation and competition at play between the two powers.

By 2020, it has become clear that a major geopolitical contest has broken out between America and China. Initially, it appeared anchored to the trade war that President Trump launched in July 2018. Soon it spread to other dimensions: technology, military, political. Strategic mistakes made by both sides have led to the eruption of this geopolitical contest. China's main mistake was to alienate one of its main supporting constituencies in America, the American Business Community. America's main mistake was larger: it launched a major geopolitical contest against China without first working out a thoughtful and comprehensive long-term strategy, an insight Henry Kissinger passed to me personally when I had lunch with him in New York in March 2018. In so doing, America has ignored some key elements of geopolitical wisdom left behind by past American strategic thinkers, like George Kennan, who had formulated America's strategy against the Soviet Union at the beginning of the Cold War.

Week 3: Fundamental misunderstandings between America & China

In Week 3, we will study in depth the fundamental misunderstandings that have developed between America and China. It will build on a key strategic axiom provided by one of China's greatest strategic thinkers, Sun Tzu. He said, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

America has ignored this advice in two critical respects. First, while it is aware of its strengths, it is unaware of certain critical weaknesses it has developed. Second, while it is aware of China's weaknesses, it is unaware of the great strengths China has developed. The goal of this week is to develop a realistic understanding of each side's strengths and weaknesses.

Most Americans believe that in a contest between a dynamic, flexible democracy and a rigid, centralized communist party system, the democracy will always triumph, as demonstrated in America's victory over the Soviet Union. Yet, new realities have emerged. America, as Martin Wolf has confirmed, has become a plutocracy, leading to a "sea of despair" among its working classes. China, by contrast, is run by a meritocracy. A meritocratic system can deliver better performances than a plutocracy.

America has also wasted trillions of dollars on excessive defense spending and fighting unnecessary wars in the Middle East. Can America make U-turns? Surprisingly, it cannot. By contrast, China has been prudent and careful in both these dimensions. It's the only major power that hasn't fought a war in forty years. Many Americans believe that America has to stand up to China because it has become aggressive and militaristic. Actually, a study of the two thousand years of China's history reveals China prefers to avoid military conflicts. China's strategic culture discourages participation in wars, although it encourages preparing for them.

The goal of this week's lectures is to develop a more objective and accurate understanding of the actual behavior and behavioral patterns of America and China in the global order.

Week 4: Can America and China choose a better path?

The paradox of the geopolitical contest that has broken out between America and China is that it is both inevitable as well as avoidable. The inevitable dimension has been spelled out in the first three weeks. Week 4 will explain how this geopolitical contest can and should be avoided.

While there are 1.4 billion people living in China and 330 in America, there are still 6 billion people living outside. In the Cold War that America launched against the Soviet Union, many countries around the world joined America's side, including the West Europeans and major Third World countries, like Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia and China. This time around, in the contest against China, virtually no country has explicitly joined America's side. By looking at case studies of countries like Australia and Europe, India and Japan, this week will explain why America will find it difficult to marshal a strong coalition against China. Instead, most countries of the world are likely to develop closer trade and investment links with China and not take sides in the US-China geopolitical contest.

Bearing in mind all the points made above and in earlier weeks, this course will conclude by recommending that a wiser course of action for America to take would be to realise that fundamentally there are five non-contradictions between America and China. The term non-contradiction is not often used in Western discourse. The Western mind is used to black-and-white distinctions. One side is right; one side is wrong. The Chinese mind is different. Both black and white can be right, as spelled out in the philosophy of yin and yang.

Hence, for example, if the primary goal of America is to improve the well-being of its people and if China has a similar goal for its people, both sides can cooperate and fulfil their goals. Similarly, both sides share a common goal in overcoming global challenges, like global warming and Covid-19. Even in the area of values and civilizational differences, both sides can adopt a philosophy of live and let live.

The strategic goal of this course therefore is to enable the students to engage in deep reflection on this major geopolitical contest that has broken out. Deeper reflection will show that a wiser course of action for both sides would be to avoid an outright zero-sum geopolitical contest and thereby improve the well-being of their own people and the six billion who live outside. In short, huge stakes are at play in this contest. A course like this is absolutely critical and vital now.

Reading List

The following is the full reading list for “US-China Relations: Past, Present and Future”. These resources will complement the main video lectures for the course. The main text for this course will be *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy*. The necessary excerpts will be uploaded for all learners, and Verified Learners will get a soft copy of the full book. In addition, there will be a selected list of *required* and *optional* readings. Do read the *required* readings before the start of the week, except for those marked with an *, which you will read alongside the video lectures for the week. The *optional* readings are for further learning, and will build on the points made in the video lectures. Links for open-access to the readings will be provided. The longer readings will also have the key pages marked in red, if you do not have the time to read the entire reading. As you go through the course, do refer regularly to this list to ensure that you are on track with the readings.

Text

- Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy
 - Excerpts will be provided from pages which are part of the required reading
 - Verified Learners will have access to a PDF of the full book
 - A physical copy of the book can be bought at <https://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/titles/kishore-mahbubani/has-china-won/9781541768123/> and all major bookstores

Week 1: China’s Century of Humiliation vs America’s Century of Triumph

Required

- *Monique Ross and Annabelle Quince, “Modern China and the legacy of the Opium Wars,” *ABC*, 2 September 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-02/modern-china-and-the-legacy-of-the-opium-wars/10172386>
- *Harold Evans, “The 20th century belongs to America,” *Irish Times*, 20 September 1999, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/the-20th-century-belongs-to-america-1.229289>

Optional

- Angus Maddison, “Chinese Economic Performance in the Long Run: 960-2030 AD,” Development Centre Studies, OECD, 2007
 - Accessible at <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/Maddison07.pdf>.
 - *Read pages 15-20*

- Alison Adcock Kaufman, “The “Century of Humiliation,” Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order” *Pacific Focus* 25, no. 1 (2010): 1-33.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2010.01039.x>
 - A summary can be read at
<https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.10.11Kaufman.pdf>
- Ezra F. Vogel, *China and Japan: Facing History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019.
 - Chapter 3: Responding to Western Challenges and Reopening Relations, 1839-1882. Pp. 65-99.
 - Chapter 7: Political Disaster and the Road to War, 1911-1937. Pp. 203-247.
- China’s Century of Humiliation - documentary
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6INqNwFF20
- Fairbank, John K. "" American China Policy" to 1898: A Misconception." *Pacific Historical Review* 39, no. 4 (1970): 409-420. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3637779>
- Luce, Henry R. "The American Century." *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 2 (1999): 159-171.
 - Accessible at <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mlassite/discussions261/luce.pdf>
 - [Read pages 167-171](#)

Week 2: US-China relations: 1949 to 2020

Required

- Has China Won (HCW)
 - Chapter 1: Introduction
 - **Read excerpt: “ten unthinkable questions for the US”*
 - Chapter 2: China’s Biggest Strategic Mistake
 - *Read pages 25-38*
- Campbell, Kurt M., and Ely Ratner. "The China reckoning: how Beijing defied American expectations." *Foreign Aff.* 97 (2018): 60-70.
 - Can be accessed at
<https://china.usc.edu/sites/default/files/campbell%20and%20ratner%202018%20the%20china%20reckoning.pdf>
- Mike Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World’s Future”, 23 July 2020
<https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>

Optional

- Di, He. "The most respected enemy: Mao Zedong's perception of the United States." *The China Quarterly* 137 (1994): 144-158. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/655690?seq=1>
- Cohen, Warren I. *America's response to China: a history of Sino-American relations*. Columbia University Press, 2019.
 - Chapter 8: Rapprochement – At Last
- Skidmore, David, and William Gates. "After Tiananmen: The struggle over US policy toward China in the Bush administration." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1997): 514-539.
- Jisi, Wang, and Hu Ran. "From cooperative partnership to strategic competition: a review of China–US relations 2009–2019." *China International Strategy Review* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1-10.
- Mike Pence, "Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy Toward China", October 4, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/>
- Michael Posner, "Weiqi: The game that holds China's key to world domination." *The Globe and Mail*, 10 June 2011. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/munk-debates/weiqi-the-game-that-holds-chinas-key-to-world-domination/article598664/>
- Stephen Roach and Shan Weijian, "The Fable of the Chinese Whistleblower", Project Syndicate. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-charges-against-china-covid19-alternative-facts-by-stephen-s-roach-and-weijian-shan-2020-05>
 - can also be accessed at <https://www.chinausfocus.com/society-culture/the-fable-of-the-chinese-whistleblower>
- Henry Kissinger. *On China*. New York: Penguin Press, 2011.

Week 3: Fundamental misunderstandings between America & China

Required

- HCW:
 - The Assumption of Virtue
 - *Read pages 183-192*
 - Should China Become Democratic?
 - *Read pages 152-162*
 - *"Memo to Comrade Xi" excerpt
- John Mearsheimer, "Introduction," In George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (2012).

- An excerpt can be found at <https://books.google.com.sg/books?id=M6xOd-CO7zQC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- *Read pages xvi-xxviii*
- Marvin Zonis, “The Faltering Veil of Legitimacy in the United States”.
<http://marvinzonis.com/posts/the-faltering-“veil-of-legitimacy”-in-the-united-states>
 - Accessible at
<http://web.archive.org/web/20200920084157/http://marvinzonis.com/posts/the-faltering-“veil-of-legitimacy”-in-the-united-states>
- Cunningham, Edward, Tony Saich, and Jessie Turiel. “Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time.” Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation (2020).
 - Accessible at https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/final_policy_brief_7.6.2020.pdf
 - *Read pages 1-4*

Optional

- Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (September 2014): 564–581.
 - Accessible at
https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf
 - *Read concluding section, “American Democracy?”*
- Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Theda Skocpol, and Jason Sclar, “When Political Mega-Donors Join Forces: How the Koch Network and the Democracy Alliance Influence Organized U.S. Politics on the Right and Left,” *Studies in American Political Development* 32, no. 2 (2018): 127–165.
 - Accessible at <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/ahertel/files/donorconsortia-named.pdf>
 - *Read pages 75-77*
- Jean Fan, “The American Dream is Alive in China,” *Palladium Magazine*, October 2019.
<https://palladiummag.com/2019/10/11/the-american-dream-is-alive-in-china/>
- Pankaj Mishra, “Flailing States,” *London Review of Books*, 16 July 2020, <https://lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n14/pankaj-mishra/flailing-states>

- Joseph Stiglitz, “How Did China Succeed?”, 14 September 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iaw4n9IZDdc>

Week 4: Can America and China choose a better path?

Required

- HCW
 - Chapter 8: How will other countries choose?
 - Conclusion
- Dino Djajal, “Why Trump’s Anti-China Policy Falls on Deaf Ears in Southeast Asia”, *The Diplomat*, 15 October 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/why-trumps-anti-china-policy-falls-on-deaf-ears-in-southeast-asia/>
- Fuying, “Cooperative Competition Is Possible Between China and the U.S.” *New York Times*, 24 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/24/opinion/china-us-biden.html>
- Kanti Bajpai, “China and India: A New Diplomacy,” *Asian Peace Programme*, 01 July 2020, <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/app-essay-kanti-bajpai/>.
- Michael Vatikiotis, “The Biden Era: challenges and opportunities for Southeast Asia,” *Asian Peace Programme*, 21 November 2020, <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/app-essay-michael-vatikiotis/>.

Optional

- Wang, Jisi, ““Marching Westwards”: The Rebalancing of China’s Geostrategy.” In *The World in 2020 According to China*, pp. 129-136. Brill, 2014.
- Lee Hsien Loong, “The Endangered Asian Century.” *Foreign Aff.* 99 (2020): 52. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2020-06-04/lee-hsien-loong-endangered-asian-century>
- Gideon Rachman, “A new cold war: Trump, Xi and the escalating US-China confrontation” *Financial Times*, 5 October 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/7b809c6a-f733-46f5-a312-9152aed28172>
- Hugh White, “America or China? Australia is fooling itself that it doesn't have to choose,” *The Guardian*, 26 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/nov/27/america-or-china-were-fooling-ourselves-that-we-dont-have-to-choose>
- Chas Freeman, “After the Trade War, a Real War with China?”, 12 February 2019, <https://chasfreeman.net/after-the-trade-war-a-real-war-with-china/>

- Allison, Graham. *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.
 - For excerpts, see <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/06/what-xi-jinping-wants/138309/> and <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/> . See also <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/war-between-china-and-united-states-isnt-inevitable-its-likely-excerpt-graham-allisons>
- Martin Jacques, “From Follower to Leader: The Story of China’s Rise”, 21 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Psyy4KqEKtA>