

## **The United States and China: Past, Present and Future Interactions**



This edition of *Political Perspectives* focuses on the historical and contemporary relations between the United States and China. Five authors approach key aspects of those relations, from varying and yet largely complementary viewpoints. Their collective purpose is to contribute to debates surrounding the past, present and future of Sino-American interactions, and to advance our understanding of what we should consider their significance to be. Indeed, with the modern-day 'rise' of China and the United States' enduring position as sole global superpower, they lend their voices to an increasingly substantial arena of popular and scholarly concern. The authors are nationals of numerable countries and continents, providing a truly international perspective towards the issues raised.

The theme of the edition is purposefully broad - both theoretically and empirically - to reflect the myriad ways in which Sino-US relations have always been, and continue to be, multifaceted and highly complex. The aspects of their relations interrogated range from the potential for Sino-American conflict, to their pertinence across the wider Asian region and in Africa, to the role of societal discourse and representation in shaping and steering the course they take. Most importantly, such an eclectic span of interests and inquisitions facilitates an appreciation of how those relations constitute perhaps the most salient and consequential of the early twenty first century. In March 2011 President Barack Obama affirmed: 'As one of the world's fastest growing economies, our relationship with China is one of the most critical of the 21st century...Continued cooperation between our countries will be good for America; it will be good for China; and it will be good for the world' (Woolley and Peters, *Presidency Project* [online]).

Andreas Bøje Forsby from the Danish Institute for International Studies opens the debate with an examination of present-day Sino-American power politics. While this is a traditional domain of realist International Relations (IR) scholars in particular, Forsby

argues, an alternative constructivist approach can be more usefully adopted in order to inform upon the future directions of Sino-US bilateral relations. Specifically, the paper identifies and explicates a number of 'markers' of Chinese identity which, together, ensure (at least in part) that China can be regarded not just as a new challenger to the dominant Western Liberal Order, but as a culturally *non-Western* challenger to that order and the international status quo. This is important, Forsby contends, because state identities shape national interests. In the case of China, such a constructivist-led analysis introduces the possibility that Beijing will increasingly embark upon a 'Sino-centric' path of foreign policy which inevitably contrasts with the Western Liberal Order and produces potential friction. Put differently, traditional realist IR approaches to Sino-American power politics neglect to incorporate those identity processes which are crucial to an understanding of the contemporary 'rise' of China and the potential policy responses of the United States.

The second paper is my own contribution to the edition. The aim of the analysis is to demonstrate the significance of discourse and representation to the study of Sino-American relations broadly, and to US China policy in particular. I suggest that while material forces not unimportant, ideational forces must also be considered. The paper argues that certain American ideas, or images, about China have remained remarkably constant over time, despite suggestions to the contrary in the wider literature. It isolates the idea of Uncivilised China as one such notably durable concept. It also asserts that Uncivilised China is that which has, for centuries, existed in some form within American imaginations as a construction from understandings about a fundamentally more civilised United States. Further, the paper demonstrates how this construction has repeatedly served to enable and legitimise American foreign policies towards China. I show this by exploring three historical case studies of moments in which Uncivilised China has appeared especially prominent within American imaginations and which has served to frame US China policy. Ultimately, the paper is designed to expose the centrality of ideas to Sino-US relations and the gaps in our understanding which remain.

The third paper is by David Jones of the University of Warsaw. Jones examines the increasingly intensive interactions between the United States and China in Africa. He points to an established Western, and particularly American presence in Africa and to a rapidly increasing presence of China. This has culminated in what Jones refers to as a 'competitive convergence' on the continent in recent times. He argues that sites of Sino-American competition include weapons sales and the acquisition of natural resources. As especially powerful and influential international actors, China and the United States, the paper suggests, will intensify their competitive practises in the future. The author argues, however, that the establishment and intensification of Sino-American competition in Africa will most likely contribute towards peaceful and cooperative relations in the long

term, as their interests become more intertwined and their futures more mutually dependent.

The fourth paper is by Ananya Chatterjee of the University of Reading. Chatterjee moves beyond the immediate scope of Sino-American bilateral relations to analyse the additional role of India in what she refers to as a 'strategic triangle'. This triangle, Chatterjee argues, has emerged in the post-Cold War era and must be afforded attention because it represents perhaps the most globally-significant of modern times, in such particular arenas of interest as terrorism, nuclear weapons proliferation and the environment. The paper suggests that the Sino-Indo-US triangle is still evolving and in many ways asymmetrical and potentially unstable. As such, while relations appear broadly to be improving and while the three powers would benefit in the long-term primarily through cooperation rather than conflict, Chatterjee demonstrates how and where it is possible for the triangle to encounter disruption.

The final paper is by Hung Ming-Te and Tony Tai-Ting-Liu of the National Ching Hsing University. Their focus also extends beyond the realm of Sino-American bilateral ties to explore their significance within the context of the South-East Asian region. In particular, they focus upon how their interactions there impact upon the contours of contemporary US foreign policy. The paper argues that South East Asia has become a principal site of an expansion of Chinese influence. This, the authors argue, ensures that it represents a key area of potential friction between Washington and Beijing as the United States has traditionally enjoyed comparative regional dominance. The paper is not intended to state definitively whether or not the United States and China will resort to hostile acts in the region. It is designed to highlight and explicate a number of key potentialities within another site of increasing strategic importance in which Sino-US interactions are undoubtedly becoming increasingly intensive.

With specific reference to China, Thomas J. Christensen argues: 'Power is what matters and what matters in power is one's relative capabilities compared with those of others, especially other great powers' (Christensen, 2001: 6). There can be little doubt that the United States, more than any other, is that which Christensen has in mind when he refers to 'other great powers'. Indeed, the literature on Sino-American relations, particularly within the discipline of IR, is significant and increasing. The purpose of this issue is to provide that literature with a number of unique and productive insights. Above all, it is to enhance our knowledge base and help encourage and generate future enquiry.

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