

Sino-US relations in the twenty-first century

Events: In a remarkable coincidence, during November 2012 the world's two major powers, the USA and China, made important decisions about the shape of their senior political leadership within days of one another. On 6 November, the US presidential election was held. This resulted in victory for the Democratic incumbent, President Barack Obama, over his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney. On the day after the US elections, the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began, charged with carrying out China's once-in-a-decade renewal of its political leadership. By the end of the Party Congress, Xi Jinping had been appointed General Secretary of the CCP. In March 2013, the National People's Congress confirmed him as president of China.



Significance: The significance of individual political leaders, or, for that matter, of the nature of a political regime, for foreign policy remains a key issue of debate. While liberals argue that the internal organization of political power may have profound implications for a state's external behaviour, realists and critical theorists are much more likely to explain foreign policy in terms of structural factors, such as the balance of power, global capitalism or patriarchy. However, whether they shape their own, and thus their state's, destinies, or their destinies are shaped for them by broader forces, what will the world of Obama and Xi look like? In particular, how will Sino-US relations develop as the twenty-first century unfolds? Neorealists have issued dark warnings about the implications of a power transition, when an 'old' hegemon is challenged by a rising or 'new' hegemon (Mearsheimer 2001, 2006). This is because, confronted by a rising or major power, other states tend to 'balance' (oppose or challenge that power for fear of leaving themselves exposed), rather than 'bandwagon' (side with that power by 'jumping on the bandwagon'). China will therefore adopt an increasingly assertive, if not aggressive, foreign-policy stance, as its growing economic strength creates an appetite for political and strategic power. This has, for example, been reflected in increased conflict with Japan and other states over disputed islands in the East and South China Seas. The USA, for its part, has acted to constrain rising China, and, in the process, to consolidate its own hegemonic position, through its 'pivot' to Asia, announced by the

Obama administration in 2010. Under this, the USA has bolstered its defence ties across Asia and expanded its naval presence in the Pacific.

However, this pessimistic image of intensifying great-power rivalry, as a stubborn USA confronts an ever-more ambitious China, can be questioned for a number of reasons. First, and most importantly, Sino-US relations are unfolding within a context of historically unprecedented levels of interdependence, brought about, in large part, by globalization. The USA and China both benefit enormously from transnational production patterns and the existence of an open trading system, developments that would be put at risk by worsening Sino-US relations, and especially by the prospect of war. Apart from anything else, the two countries are bound together by the fact that China holds much of the USA's sovereign debt. Second, the stark military imbalance between the USA and China (US military spending continues to dwarf China's) means that any inclination China may have to 'balance' against the USA will be confined to the adoption of 'soft' (non-military) balancing strategies rather than 'hard' (military) ones. China will therefore continue its 'peaceful rise', emphasizing trade rather than war. Third, rather than having an appetite for challenging and displacing the USA, policy-makers in China appear to recognize the benefits that China derives from continued US hegemony. This allows China to concentrate on its primary goal of economic development while the USA shoulders the structural and institutional burdens of maintaining the existing global system.