

China and the 2016 US Presidential Debates: Curiosities and Contradictions

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In the United States, Democratic and Republican candidates are sparring for the prize of formal nomination for the 2016 presidential election. As ever the contest will be fought and won principally over the economy, employment, taxes, welfare and others, along with issues more reflective of the particular sensitivities of the day. These currently include gun control (when this represents a personal crusade of the sitting president) and race relations (in the wake of high-profile violence suffered by Afro-American communities).

Few, if any, presidential elections in US history have been won or lost over China, even in the modern era. The elections of 2004 and 2008 for example were respectively defined in large part by the War on Terror and the financial and economic crash. China featured somewhat more prominently in 2012, and while other international issues such as the continuing turmoil in the Middle East will be strongly debated, its presence will likely be heavier still in 2016.

The reasons why American politicians and voters are so concerned



about China's economic and military 'rise' may appear obvious, but the logic is worth questioning. This is because the China being debated even at this early stage of the 2016 presidential elections is surrounded by a number of curiosities and contradictions. In this case, what can we read into how China is currently being—and is still to be—represented in the build up to the election of 2016? Is a hardened US stance towards China now inevitable? Perhaps most important of all, what can and should the next US president do to help ensure that this most consequential of relationships continues along broadly cooperative, rather than conflictual, lines?

Talking tough

It remains too early to say exactly who will contest the upcoming presidential election; by December 2007 Hillary Clinton had long held a large polling lead over her competitors, before Barack Obama secured the Democratic nomination in June the following year. There are front runners however. In her return to the race Clinton is again a leading candidate, and indeed the current favourite to win the presidency. For now, Bernie Sanders stands as her only credible Democratic rival. On the Republican side Donald Trump and Ben Carson enjoy healthy leads over their numerous party rivals. However, Marco Rubio is a strong debater with the potential

to generate more popular support, and Ted Cruz remains in the contest.

The Democrats have had comparably little to say about China, but they have essentially followed a safe, centre-left party line: their focus has mainly been on criticizing Beijing's record on human rights and the loss of American jobs. Hillary Clinton has had an uneasy relationship with China since singling out its neglect of human rights, particularly those of women, in the 1990s. Later as Obama's Secretary of State she trod more carefully, but recently labelled China "shameless" for hosting a UN conference on women's rights after detaining female rights activities.¹ She has also accused the Chinese of trying to "hack into everything that doesn't move in America".²

Bernie Sanders is sometimes accused of lacking a clear foreign policy vision, but in such debates he has identified China as a currency manipulator and a leading cause of American job losses. Another Democratic candidate, Jim Webb—who recently pulled out of the race—labelled China aggressive, arguing that "resolving" Washington's relationship with China is the United States' "greatest strategic threat".³

On the Republican side the discourse is more audible and less forgiving. In reference to the US trade deficit with China, for example, Donald Trump

accused Beijing of, among other things, “the greatest theft in the history of the United States”⁴ and that if he becomes president China would “be in trouble”.⁵ He has also previously denounced China for “raping” the US of jobs.⁶

Ben Carson recently published an article entitled, “This is how to compete with China”. The headline was followed by a photograph of an American aircraft carrier. Carson accused China of intimidating its neighbours, wreaking havoc in world stock markets, intellectual property theft and cyber warfare.⁷ Marco Rubio has called China’s leaders “tyrants”, grouping them with North Korea and radical Islamists.⁸

The same old debate?

In the grand scheme of things, such pantomime mud-slinging towards China is unremarkable. News outlets and periodicals such as Fox, CNN, The National Interest, Newsweek and many others have long bombarded Americans with articles on China’s military advancements which are now so numerous and frequently recurring that they are difficult to keep track of. Worse, in a never-ending race for attention, sensationalism and fear-mongering are valued commodities. Also striking is that while China’s historical relations with Japan and its other near neighbours are

equally or even more revealing about the direction of Chinese foreign policy, writers and journalists present a military build-up designed so specifically with the United States in mind that they can appear little short of paranoid.

Mid-term elections, senate hearings and other political events—not least presidential elections of the recent past—also see American politicians perpetuate and capitalise on widespread public concerns over a rapidly ‘rising’ China.

In many ways then, a building crescendo of hostility towards China in the run up to next year’s election is so predictable that it borders on the mundane. In certain noticeable ways however the rhetoric is particularly bellicose this time around.

In part this is because an especially crowded Republican field has motivated those involved to be even bolder and more hawkish than usual, to make themselves heard by an undecided electorate. In addition, with such an unusually outspoken—and leading—competitor, some are doing all they can to ‘out-Trump Trump’.

Among the Democrats Hillary Clinton is also increasingly keen to distance herself from Obama’s cautious China policies. As the leading architect of the United States’ ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalance’ to Asia in 2011, Clinton is known to favor a

more assertive approach towards China. However, she will likely face testing questions in the coming months about why she failed to implement a tougher strategy during her time as Secretary of State.

In addition, Obama's approach towards China has been widely criticized not only as unduly cautious but as overtly weak. A significant proportion of Americans (around 50 percent in 2012) agree, and while in previous years China has most commonly been accused of intangible and somewhat unquantifiable transgressions such as cyber-hacking, currency manipulation and general aggression, its provocative construction of islands in the South China Sea has given this election's candidates a physical manifestation of what they see as Obama's lack of authority over Beijing.

Challengers on both sides therefore see this election as a timely moment to depict themselves as a disciplinary hand on China and the dangers it is said to present.

The China threat(?)

While in the US, as elsewhere, foreign affairs are almost always less decisive to election outcomes than the most salient domestic issues, the two are never entirely disconnected. Indeed, with the impact of 9/11 on Americans more profoundly psychological than material, concerns over national security remain inextricable from

contemporary mainstream political debate. Combine this with enduring, almost instinctive American fears of those considered enemies of freedom and democracy, along with the widespread belief that China has overtaken an economically declining United States, and 'rising' communist China—simply by its very existence—can be packaged up and presented as an incoming perfect storm set to batter the nation.

Yet the logic of this picture, while seemingly uncomplicated, masks a number of curiosities and contradictions.

The first is that, by most measures, the US is not in decline. Its share of global GDP has fallen in recent times (from around 24 percent in 2000 to around 19 percent today), while China's has increased rapidly (to around 15 percent). However, the United States' soft/cultural power is still arguably by far the most extensive; the dollar remains the defacto global currency; its environmental concerns are much less severe than China's; its (controversial) adoption of 'fracking' is set to make it a net exporter of energy; demographically it has no such problems as low fertility rates, a rapidly aging or poorly educated population etc., and so on.

The story is the same when written in economic and military terms. The US has returned to healthy annual growth rates; it

continues to attract by far the most inward investment; and it boasts high levels of innovation and technical expertise thanks mainly to a tertiary education system which still dominates global rankings.

Meanwhile, American arms expenditure accounts for around 40 percent of world total (compared to roughly 10 percent by China), enabling it to sustain its essentially unrivalled advancement of military hardware and technologies. With its more than 50 formal international security agreements (compared to China's one), the US also has a plethora of channels through which to exert its still growing military power, not least in East Asia where it still dominates the security environment. In many ways, then, it could in fact be argued that the United States itself is a 'rising power'.

Second, in the grand scheme of things—and despite unrelenting opinions to the contrary—China has actually done relatively little to convince Americans that it constitutes a threat to US national security. Beijing is investing vast sums of money on its military capabilities, but capabilities are very different to actions and intentions. Thus while China's island building programme in the South China Sea—which has recently done much to raise alarm—is aggressive and belligerent, it is unusually so. It is also taking place some 12,000 kilometres from the mainland

United States. This is not to downplay the seriousness of the situation nor exonerate China of blame, but simply to observe that it does not immediately and directly impact upon *US* national security.

The programme may or may not be indicative of a new direction for China under President Xi Jinping, whose foreign policy approach is often described as more confident and assertive than those of his immediate predecessors. However, most experts agree that China's growth and modernisation over the past 30 years, along with its integration into the structures of US-led global governance, has been largely peaceful and cooperative. Having gained so much from these structures and with a trade surplus over the United States of well over \$200 billion per year, it is unsurprising that China's motivations for aggressively overturning them remain low. What this means is that while China invests vast sums of money in its military, and while it behaves in ways which rightly attract criticism, it represents a character in a very particular story being told. For example, China also invests very heavily in health, education, transport, energy and myriad other areas. China, in short, is rapidly developing across the board (though with faltering growth rates for the past five years, less so than before).

However, the China we see in the current US election debates—as

elsewhere—is a more one dimensional (militarily, economically) ‘rising’ China. Never mind that China now spends more on domestic security—on monitoring and policing its own people—than it does on its offensive capabilities; if one ‘knows’ that China poses a direct threat to the United States, one sees evidence for it everywhere.

Certainly, China engages in unnecessarily provocative actions and as a result contributes to this story itself. This was seen in September 2015 when Beijing staged an imposing parade of military hardware. Yet the parade was intended for domestic as well as international audiences: to reassert the government’s authority and competence at home when the economy is slowing down, and to remind Tokyo (on the 70th anniversary of its defeat to China in the Second World War), that China could repel any Japanese remilitarisation.

So while this type of spectacle encourages such imagery as a reawakened Chinese dragon which seeks conflict with the American bald eagle, a more appropriate symbol would be a frill-necked lizard which uses impressive displays of size and strength to keep potential predators at bay.

Reading the rhetoric

From this curious logic of the China ‘threat’, what can we read into the often forthright and hostile rhetoric of the 2016 US presidential election campaign?

In the first instance there are grounds to be optimistic. Historical campaign trails are littered with the combative words of candidates and nominees who talked as tough as possible on China before moderating their stance once formally selected to run, and again once they entered the White House. Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton each pursued this strategy to completion. For the most part, American politicians understand that aggressive China policies are likely to invite equally aggressive responses from Beijing.

Having said this, with Hillary Clinton long adopting a generally more hawkish stance towards China than Obama, and with the Republican Party pushing itself further to the political Right, the signs are that the next president will look to adopt a firmer stance towards Beijing.

What is concerning however is not so much what the candidates are individually saying, but what they are collectively not saying. Specifically, each is unwilling, and effectively unable, to critique and think independently of the dominant discourses which frame societal

understandings of what China ‘is’. Indeed, as extreme as their rhetoric may sometimes appear, its logic is broadly in line with wider public opinion. A recent poll found that 88 percent of Americans consider China’s economic power either an important (36 percent) or critical (52 percent) threat to US interests. Eighty seven percent considered China’s military power an important (41 percent) or critical (46 percent) threat.⁹

Thus today’s candidates are trapped within, and indeed contributors to, the dominant story of an increasingly threatening China and, by extension, that of a benevolent and well-intentioned United States. The story is now so ingrained and its truisms so robust in fact that they are almost impossible to rationally contradict. For example, each candidate subscribes to the idea that China’s physical ‘rise’ correlates with new aggression and expansionism. Yet, as already noted, China’s unprecedented growth and modernization over the past 35 years or more has offered little evidence of this.

Many—including Clinton, Trump, Rubio and others—point to China’s new islands in the South China Sea as vindication of that worldview, but choose not to balance the argument by noting, for example, that China has formed no anti-US coalition with potential sympathizers such

as Russia, Iran and Syria; established no military bases abroad; and chosen only to develop a very limited long-range ‘blue water’ navy. Beijing could have sought to expand China’s presence into North Korea, arguably its only ally. Instead, it has sustained only lukewarm relations with Pyongyang and, in any case, shares comparatively more military-military contact with Washington.

Because the ‘rise’ of China is considered inevitably disruptive, the logic goes, the US is tasked with preserving regional order. Certainly, a heavy and sustained American presence across East Asia has helped maintain relative stability there. However, the possibility that this presence might also be disruptive and provocative is rarely considered; domestic debates today are not over whether the US helps to maintain the peace or not, only over the size of a presence the US can afford.

Yet, if China offered Central and Latin American states protection from US aggression; began moving troops and military equipment to Guatemala and Mexico; routinely patrolled international waters around California, Florida and New York—even in the name of peace; or stated its intentions to advance ‘universal’ Chinese values throughout the Americas, Washington would denounce Beijing as

needlessly aggressive and seek to repel the intrusion.

None of today's presidential candidates would dare point to these types of hypocrisy which have long pervaded US foreign policy in Asia, from the justified fear that it would spell an immediate and widespread political backlash.

This is not to say that China poses no potential threat to the United States. Neither is it to argue that China is a model of international cooperation and diplomacy. Its territorial claims in the South China Sea are excessive and its island building programme is unnecessarily incendiary. Beijing should also do more to promote human rights and personal freedoms; place greater emphasis on diplomacy over unilateralism; limit its engagement in cyber-warfare and support dialogue aimed at demilitarisation and denuclearisation, among other things. It finds ways to bend international rules and norms to their limit, and occasionally beyond. But of course, such criticisms can be directed as forcefully towards the UK, France, India, Australia and many others, not least the United States.

Thus when Ben Carson—echoing the opinions of many—argues that the US must act as “a deterrent to Chinese aggression”, he enters a conversation in which a ‘rising’, disruptive China must be managed or controlled by a more

responsible and benevolent United States. The logic and parameters of the conversation itself are never seriously questioned. It is therefore unsurprising that US election debates over China are so consistently narrow, with every candidate essentially arguing the same point at slightly different volumes.

How to follow Obama?

Today's presidential candidates are working to set themselves apart from the outgoing president, but they will face many of the same challenges with which he was presented. Indeed, Obama's achievements in maintaining largely cordial relations with Beijing present his successor with some valuable lessons. Importantly though, he or she will be unable to ‘manage’ or ‘deal with’ China in the ways so vocally claimed; politicians frequently talk up their abilities to bring about change while using the art of misdirection to hide their fundamental inability to do so, and the course of China's ‘rise’ is all-but beyond the control of the White House.

The next president will, however, remain central to determining the future of US-China dynamics, the world's most consequential and far-reaching bilateral relationship. His or her political options are also more numerous than suggested by the tone of the conversation today. As

already noted, elevated capabilities are not the same as an elevated threat, and it is here that next year's victor can and should inject new life and new optimism into a relationship which, although broadly productive and cooperative, remains punctuated by dangerous flashpoints, tensions and hostility.

While Obama's approach was a generally healthy one, American politicians should start thinking differently about China to help ensure that those tensions are gradually eased. When in 2013 Xi Jinping proposed that the US and China embark on a 'new kind of great power relationship', the idea was resisted by Washington. But the next American president should recognise that this is precisely what the US and China already have.

Primarily, this is because although some like to argue that we are entering a new Cold War, such a notion is deeply misleading. The US and China are highly economically and financially interdependent; they communicate regularly across a multitude of diplomatic channels and their militaries conduct joint exercises. Their intensive cultural exchanges are epitomized by the several hundreds of thousands of Chinese students at Americans schools and universities and by the many that choose to stay.

Yet while the world has changed American political discourses—and, it must be stressed, those in China—have not evolved as quickly. If Washington is serious about working with China as a valued partner, as it is so often claimed, it should demonstrate a willingness which has not been entirely evident so far.

This means recognizing that China's physical 'rise' does not automatically make it a threat, and from there promoting the kind of relationship which makes the prevailing story about 'rising' China seem more problematic and unhelpful than it does compelling and common sense. Obama has done this to a degree, but in the end failed to prevent the logic of the story from becoming resurgent once more.

Some would argue that Obama's cautious accommodation of China effectively amounts to weakness, and that this has resulted in an expansion of China's influence such as in the form of new islands in the South China Sea. But this is to overlook or deny the limits of Washington's influence. Moreover, in the Cold War zero-sum language which continues to haunt modern day US-China relations, accommodation and weakness are too often presented as synonymous. This then masks the *need*, rather than the option, for the US and others to engage in forms of accommodation; it is far from weak to accept that China is now so much

more economically and politically significant, and more globally influential, that accommodation works for the benefit of all.

While China will continue to do things with which the United States disagrees, the solution is not more aggression and shows of military strength. (This, of course, applies equally to a newly capable China). The United States' considerable—and now gradually intensifying—presence throughout the Asia Pacific means that it retains an unrivalled base of power and influence from which to exert authority. Equally however, this does not mean that Washington is able to rely on entirely unconditional support.

During the Cold War the United States, by simple virtue of being the United States, enjoyed a close network of alliances in its efforts to contain an opposing ideology. Today, with many Asian nations so reliant upon China and because they enjoy close diplomatic relations with Beijing, the US must tread more carefully than in the past to ensure it doesn't start to become perceived as an overly-meddlesome outsider. The next occupant of the White House must be sensitive to this development, particularly as the US 'rebalance' to Asia—which along with broad support has generated some regional

concern—adapts and progresses under his or her direction.

Ultimately then, while it appears likely that the 45th president of the United States will broadly favor a somewhat more assertive approach towards China, the rhetoric of today's candidates alone is not indicative of a newly hostile and combative approach from Washington. This is not simply because relations between Washington and Beijing are more interdependent and cooperative than the observations of many suggest, but because the options available to the next American leader are more extensive and less confrontational than each candidate currently feels able to admit.

In this high-stakes election contest of perceived authority, none is willing to cede ground to their rivals by appearing weak. What must change from now on is not so much the policy but the outdated and dangerous discourses which equate American compromise and accommodation with weakness, and in turn that 'weakness' with the inevitability of 'threatening' Chinese strength.

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Endnotes

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