



China and America: The Great Divergence?

May 25, 2014

By Robert Sutter

Robert Sutter is Professor of Practice of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington, D.C. His most recent book is *Foreign Relations of the PRC: The Legacies and Constraints of China's International Politics since 1949* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2013). This article is a revised version of a paper he delivered at a conference on "The Great Divergence? Economic Integration and Political Conflict in Asia," cosponsored by FPRI and the Reserve Officers Association, held in Washington, D.C. in October 2013.

Abstract: While there have been many sources of tension in U.S.-China relations since the Cold War, they have been held in check generally by circumstances that have inclined the governments to cooperate. Yet, the relationship remains multi-faceted and fragile, and various frameworks and forecasts—like the contemporary “Great Divergence” framework, which speaks to the apparent disjunction between economic and security affairs—have proven to be incomplete and incorrect.

This article begins by comparing the flaws in the Great Divergence framework with earlier frameworks, or predictions, regarding U.S.-China relations since the end of the Cold War.¹ It then assesses the context of contemporary U.S.-Chinese relations, finding that pragmatic engagement is likely to endure and giving the reasons why. In particular, projected conflict over security issues between the United States and a more assertive China actually is held in check by major constraints that are unlikely to weaken soon. The relationship nevertheless will remain fragile as underlined by the finding that Sino-American convergence of economic

¹ Evan Feigenbaum and Robert Manning, “A Tale of Two Asias,” *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 20, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/30/a_tale_of_two_asias.

interests, emphasized by the Great Divergence, has eroded badly in recent years and become a major source of friction between the two powers.

The Great Divergence and Earlier Flawed Frameworks and Forecasts

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War destroyed the strategic framework for the Sino-American cooperation initiated by U.S. President Richard Nixon and Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong. The crises associated with the twists and turns in relations since that time have caused policymakers, strategists and scholars in both the United States and China to try to establish firmer bases for cooperative relations; or at least establish better understanding of the different elements in the relationship. The resulting frameworks and forecasts often proved useful in comprehending relations and motivating policy; however, other times, they were misleading or flawed, achieving mediocre results.²

A surprising and acute military crisis in the Taiwan Strait during 1995 and 1996 prompted reassessment by China and the United States. The Clinton Administration worked positively to engage an alienated China. Both sides eventually agreed to emphasize common ground and play down differences in pursuing a “strategic partnership.” But crises over the U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and strident domestic opposition in the United States scuttled the strategic partnership.

The George W. Bush Administration came into office openly critical of the Clinton Administration’s China policy and wary of cooperative partnership with China. Forecasts focused on serious trouble ahead. Those projections were proven wrong; they overlooked strong imperatives on the Chinese side, as well as on the Bush Administration’s side, to avoid confrontation and ease tensions. Pragmatic cooperation in the following years saw prevailing assessments switch to the positive. It was commonly asserted that the United States and China had become “friends” and “comrades,”³ soft-pedaling profound differences such as the ongoing buildup of Chinese forces to deter the United States in the event of a Taiwan contingency and various U.S. responses. Meanwhile, the idea of China as a “responsible” superpower, raised an optimistic vision of close Sino-American relations sustaining international order and norms that proved to be unrealistic.⁴

² David Shambaugh, ed., *Tangled Titans* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

³ Victor Cha, “Winning Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov.-Dec. 2007, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/58454/victor-d-cha/winning-asia>.

⁴ Robert Zoellick, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility,” Sept. 21, 2005, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1127661>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1127661>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)