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Remarks to the Harvard College China Forum 2020



Chas Freeman Jr. is an American diplomat and writer. He served in the United States Foreign Service in many different capacities over the course of thirty years. Most notably, he worked as the main interpreter for Richard Nixon during his 1972 China visit and was the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 1989 to 1992. He is a co-chair of the U.S. China Policy Foundation and a Lifetime Director of the Atlantic Council.

I have spent much of the past fifty years trying to help the United States benefit from a sound, mutually advantageous relationship with China. I wish both countries well, but I confess I remain primarily concerned about my own country and its future. The sharp deterioration in Sino-American relations is, unfortunately, part of a larger process of American estrangement from the world beyond our country's borders. Frankly, I'm alarmed by this.

But I've been asked to speak about US-China relations, not self-destructive American protectionism and xenophobia directed at countries other than China.

Obviously, American frustration with China is not new, but the way in which it now expresses itself is unprecedented. It was the United States, not China that launched a trade war and sought to shut down investment and suppress technology exports and exchange. The Trump administration has carried out a vituperative campaign against Huawei and the Belt and Road Initiative. Prominent American politicians have begun a holy war to close Confucius Institutes and to stigmatize Chinese students in American universities as "spies." Meanwhile, Washington has escalated naval patrols in China's near seas that Chinese find disrespectful and provocative. Most ominously, the Trump administration has chipped away at the US-China understandings that have kept the peace in the Taiwan Strait. And now China has become the coronavirus scapegoat of choice for the Republican Party in this year's election campaigns.

China's responses to American hostility were initially restrained. But Beijing is now responding in kind. This is very unwise. China's loss of self-restraint and self-control is costing it both prestige and respect, not just in America but elsewhere. China, like the United States, is in the process of gaining a reputation for infantile name-calling, invective, and preposterous accusations rather than skillful diplomacy, reasonableness, and the dignified conduct of relations with other countries.

President Trump's efforts to downplay the pandemic crisis and his failure to take early protective measures like expanded testing have led to huge numbers of deaths and what

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looks to be a coming depression on the scale of the 1930s. China appears, for now, to have contained the virus.

Rather than look dispassionately at the reasons for each country's response, Washington has framed the pandemic as a contest between democracy and authoritarianism. This may be ideologically satisfying to Americans, but it has inadvertently set up a contrast between America's ineptitude in meeting the challenge and China's relatively effective performance. This comparison misstates the causes of the performance gap and needlessly discredits democracy while exalting "authoritarianism."

The contrast is not between ideologies but between state capacity, leadership, and citizen trust in government. The United States now scores poorly on all these factors. Americans have disinvested in government and social capacity even as societies like China, Germany, south Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan have built strong human and physical infrastructure. Whether they were democratic or not, all these and other societies planned ahead and developed surge capacity. They also taught their citizens to value government services and to expect the best of their civil servants. When the time came to do so, their public servants rose to the occasion.

The explanation for America's poor showing against the pandemic is not its democratic system of government but the failings of its current politics and policies. Among democracies in general, differences in performance reflect the contrast, on the one hand, between populism that disrespects expertise and corrodes the competence of government and, on the other hand, a citizenry respectful of expertise and insistent on competent government.

Let's be clear. The world admires Chinese efficiency. It does not admire China's exclusion of its citizens from the right to participate in choosing its leaders, criticize its leaders' mistakes, or sustain distinctive religious and cultural identities in its outlying regions. In recent decades, China has gotten many things right. It foresaw the possibility of crises and attempted to prepare itself to deal with them. It also got some things wrong. But these have little, if any, relevance to battling a pandemic.

By contrast, America has preferred to spend its tax dollars on efforts to engineer foreign regime change rather than to build or sustain domestic human and physical infrastructure. The result is serious U.S. incapacity to respond to crises like the coronavirus pandemic. It turns out that lack of foresight, planning, and the development of surge capacity can have serious, even fatal, consequences. So can lack of confidence in government. Low expectations of government soon become self-fulfilling prophecies.

America has been in retreat from solidarity with allies and participation in multilateral institutions. This is convincing the world that Washington can no longer be relied upon to uphold the international order that it once created. Meanwhile, China's nationalist tantrums remind the world of its previous outbursts of mass insanity – for example, in the Boxer Rebellion and the Cultural Revolution – and destroy confidence in it.

Attacks on the CCP by American officials just cause Chinese patriots to rally behind the flag. Chinese attacks on the United States provoke a similar reaction among Americans. Exchanges

of diatribe not only fail to persuade those they are directed at, they stimulate resentment, derision, and counterattacks.

This century has fundamentally altered the international reputation of the United States. It is now doing the same to China's reputation. Both countries will emerge from their uncouth confrontation with diminished appeal as global leaders. The counterproductive contest between America First and China First is damaging the institutions of global governance and crippling the world's ability to respond to future challenges. Healing these self-inflicted wounds will not be easy.

This raises the question of whether Sino-American relations can ever be repaired and what a failure to restore good relations between these two great nations would mean for the world. We have seen an escalation from a trade war to a technology war and from that to political warfare and a rising danger of military strife. US-China relations are arguably in the most dangerous state since the Korean War. A pall of political correctness analogous to McCarthyism is settling over American democracy. China is losing its cool.

The world is being divided into distinct economic and technological ecospheres. This will slow progress in both China and the United States. Estrangement needs to be replaced by renewed openness and cooperation. Accomplishing this will require sustained efforts by both countries.

To borrow a Chinese formulation [提法], both China and the United States need "a peaceful international environment." China needs this to restore itself to prosperity and self-respect as well as to take the leading place among humankind that its size and talents justify. The United States needs a peaceful international environment to enable it to recover from the damage that the Cold War and subsequent military interventions abroad have done to it. Americans need to focus our wealth and attention on domestic reconstruction. We cannot do that without a mutually advantageous relationship with China.

The achievement of "normal" relations between our two countries half a century ago reflected our leaders' recognition of common interests and challenges. Americans and Chinese set aside ideological differences to be able to tackle the challenges before us. We each feared Soviet expansionism and sought to sustain a favorable global balance of power. Later, we saw the benefits of economic partnership with each other, as demonstrated in reform and opening [改革开放] and the growth of mutually beneficial interdependence.

Challenges to our common interests may no longer be military in nature, but they still exist. China and the United States need to work together or in parallel to deal with climate change, restore global prosperity, and advance human knowledge and well-being. At the moment, despite some expressions of pious hope that this will happen, there is no sign that it actually will.

I am now an old man – with more to remember than to anticipate. Most of you at this conference are young. You will see the results of what our two countries do about renewing Sino-American friendship and cooperation. Most likely, I will not. Still, whether we are young or old, our only hope to meet the challenges we each face lies in subduing our emotions and

focusing on our respective national interests. Those interests require us to cooperate despite our differences. This cannot occur unless we rediscover the merits of mutually respectful dialogue, seeking truth from facts, and avoiding pointless confrontation.

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