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Opinion

How to teach China-US relations as tensions between the two superpowers soar?



- Students – and the rest of the world – would appreciate a workable plan to escape the calamity of entrenched policy silos, where nation-states never rise above juggling their own interests

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

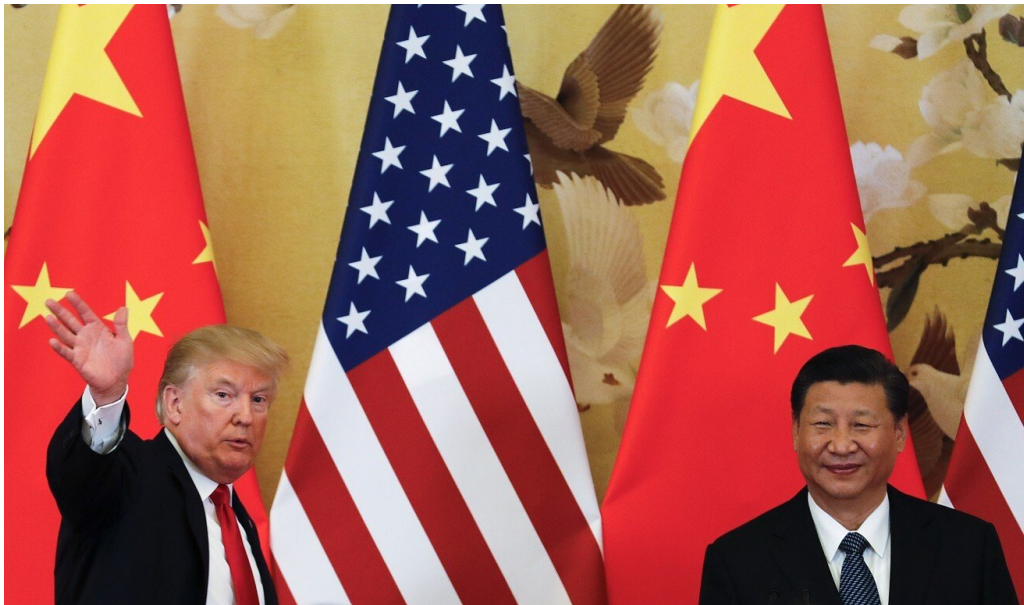
Young students get plenty of lectures. Consider nuclear apocalypse. Princeton University emeritus professor Richard Falk, often tabbed “the world’s leading international lawyer”, notes in his extraordinarily farseeing book *Power Shift* that it’s constantly drummed into us that the time is just not ripe, due to today’s international tensions, for nuclear disarmament to happen. “Utopian preconditions” to progress, Falk rightly sneers.

I believe that sentiment mirrors exactly the feelings of many intellectually frustrated young people today, who might wonder, as Falk puts it, whether the human species even wishes to survive at all.

Consider the issue of China versus the US. How to teach about China? Currently enrolled in my annual university course are students who range from Americans who don't know the Central Committee from Comedy Central to highly informed young people from China who just might be grandchildren of Central Committee members.

In the best American academic tradition, we generally don't ask – we research, we teach, we discuss – and in the Chinese way (more humility and wariness, than secrecy) students generally don't tell.

And so, a few years ago, when we launched a course on superpower perceptions on the part of China and the US, faculty colleagues were supportive, of course – although one chuckled and termed the pedagogical plunge a “mission impossible”. He was only half-joking and, as it turned out, only half wrong.



US President Donald Trump waves next to Chinese President Xi Jinping after attending a joint press conference at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on November 9, 2017. Photo: AP

Still, overall, today's students care about understanding the dynamics of their immediate future. Nuclearised China-US tensions may not be like the epic natural sweep of climate change – not to mention the Covid-19 pandemic – but all these oppressive tensions nevertheless weigh on the world's geopolitical and mental balance.

Balance in foreign policy is central. Former US vice-president Joe Biden, who last week accepted the Democratic Party's [nomination](#) to oppose US President Donald Trump's re-election, mentioned China only once in his comprehensive and competent domestic policy speech, appealing to our better angels by steering clear of rhetorical gutter snipes about the country.

Now, how will the Trump convention this week play the China problem? There may just be enough on-the-fence voters who can be led to believe, faster than you can tweet Zhongnanhai, the kind of anti-China tropes that in the midst of a heated campaign could sound close to conventional political wisdom.

It will be easier for Team Trump to sell the idea of China as a [wolf warrior](#) than a pleasant panda, especially as in recent times that's exactly how Beijing has been marketing itself.

How do international students tend to process such a confusing scene? With more cosmopolitanism than many US-educated natives. Neither hug nor crush the China panda, neither worship nor mutilate the American flag. No nation is wise enough to be right on every point, no one craven enough to be absolutely always in the wrong.

Consider the issue of interference in the [internal affairs](#) of other nations – a presumed normative international no-no. But nations do it all the time: Moscow does it, sometimes indelicately, with poison. Washington will not refrain from doing it clumsily, opting for “[shock and awe](#)” regime change rather than the slow but steady soft sell of soft power.

Beijing, you have to admit, is too big to be nominal or neutral on some issues, even if it so desires. Rather, China can “interfere” simply by creating new tensions or by over-responding to a deliberate American taunt, handing Trump a hot-button issue to tweet about.

Or it can respond by staying calm, well under the world's radar, minding its own business, calculating that a president Biden would prove more predictable and level-headed than jumpy Trump.

If there is one big book that can cover all the nuances of the bilateral relationship in the tsunami of a single semester, I haven't heard of it. One problem is that many touted “experts” have limited expertise – they know one or two topics on China very well, but little else about this huge and dynamic country.

Some books are like propaganda, which has value, but is not balanced scholarship. Others convey an attitude of monochromatic American swagger.

Despite these odds, my preference is to zone in on one special book, stay with it, absorb its wisdom and integrate what else might be necessary to complete the picture. For this purpose, *On China*, by Henry Kissinger, is still the single best analysis around.

Not easy reading – but a special work of needed expanse, crafted by an accomplished academic for whom the mists of history always hover over the present, and who intimately participated in many of the pivotal events recounted. Extra credit goes to an author who actually interacted with key figures who helped make the history with which we have to live.



Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger meets Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, on November 22, 2019. Photo: Xinhua

Students will tend to rise to the challenge if they sense that the challenge is authentic rather than synthetic. Sometimes I get inspired by their doggedness – by their acceptance of both sides of a story, of three-dimensional situations and even of contrasting, counter-factual scenarios.

But they would also deeply appreciate some sensible skyway to heaven: some workable plan to escape the calamity of policy silos into which we are dug. And yet, even the Kissinger perspective, for all its depth, never rises above the horizon of nation-states juggling their own interests.

Students certainly know we're stuck in one massive historic rut, not to mention in a monster pandemic. More than a university course or two will be needed, students know that too. But we must plot a great escape, with probably not a lot of time left to engineer it. To make matters worse, there's enough optical ambiguity from the government's policies of President Xi Jinping to make Pompeo's anti-China push seem a plausible product. Then there are the matters of intellectual property theft, internet hacking, spies in US consulates and so on.

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