

Why Convergence Breeds Conflict

**Growing More Similar Will Push China and the United States Apart
Mark Leonard, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2013, pp.125-135**

Many fear that in the not-too-distant future, the world will be torn apart as the gulf that separates China and the United States grows ever wider. How, they ask, can a communist dictatorship and a capitalist democracy bridge the gap between them? But it is time to stop thinking that the two countries come from different planets and that the tensions between them are the product of their differences. In fact, until relatively recently, China and the United States got along quite well --- precisely because their interests and attributes differed. Today, it is their increasing similarities, not their differences, that are driving the two countries apart.

The U.S. – Chinese relationship stands in stark contrast to the one between the United States and the Soviet Union, the last country to rival American power. During the Cold War, when geopolitics was above all a clash of ideologies, increasing contact and growing convergence between the two disconnected societies fostered detente.

But the contemporary era of international interdependence has reversed that dynamic. Today, competition has more to do with status than ideology. As a result, differences between great powers frequently lead to complementarity and cooperation, whereas convergence is often at the root of conflict. As they rebalance their economics and recalibrate their foreign policies, Beijing and Washington are increasingly fighting over shared interests. And as Sigmund Freud could have predicted, the more similar China and the United States become, the less they like each other. Freud called this “the narcissism of small differences”: the tendency of essentially similar people to fixate on minor distinctions between themselves in order to justify hostile feelings. Of course, the two countries are hardly identical. But the chasm that divided them a generation ago has narrowed, and as they converge they are becoming more conflict-prone.

When U.S. President Barack Obama came to power in 2009, he hoped

to integrate China into global institutions and encourage it to identify its interests with the preservation of the post war, Western-led international system. But almost five years later, according to a U.S. official with whom I spoke earlier this year who is familiar with the president's thinking, Obama's attitude toward the Chinese is best described as "disappointment." According to the official, Obama feels that the Chinese rebuffed his attempt to forge an informal "G-2" arrangement during his first trip to China, in November 2009, and disagreements between Beijing and Washington on climate change, maritime issues, and cyber-security have convinced Obama that China is more of a problem than a partner.

The Chinese, for their part, do not feel inclined to uphold a Western-led international order that they had no role in shaping. That is why, in the run-up to his meeting with Obama in June at the Sunnylands estate in California, Chinese President Xi Jinping urged the establishment of "a new type of great-power relationship" --- a coded way for the Chinese to tell the Americans to respect China as an equal, to accommodate China's territorial claims, and to respect that China will define its own interests rather than support Western-led international agendas.

As the two biggest global powers indulge their neuroses, the rest of the world is getting anxious. On a range of important economic and geopolitical issues, Beijing and Washington are increasingly trying to bypass each other rather than investing in common institutions. The effect on the world will be profound. Although global trade will be expand and global institutions will survive, international politics will be dominated not by powerful states or international organizations but rather by clusters of states that will flock together because they share similar histories and levels of wealth and believe their interests are complementary. These pragmatic, somewhat ad hoc groupings will seek to strengthen themselves from the inside out, and their interactions with one another will eclipse the formation of the unified, multilateral liberal order that the United States and its allies have sought to build since the end of the Cold War.

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SIMILATERALISM

In between these emerging U.S.- and Chinese –led orders stand global institutions such as the UN Security Council, the G-20, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. But they are often gridlocked because of disagreements among their members. So instead of socializing emerging powers into Western norms, the most that can be hoped from them is that they serve as venues for the great powers to discuss especially pressing crises: for example, the global financial meltdown of 2008 or North Korea’s nuclear intransigence. Such institutional weakness and irrelevance could grow worse over time, as rather than working together to reform existing common forums, Western powers try to build “a world without China” and China and its partners try to create what some analysts call “a world without the West.” Take the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership’s likely effect on the WTO, the once-proud WTO “will become like another Geneva-based organization, the International Labor Organization, a place with a beautiful view on the lake where ministers make nice speeches once a year but never take important decisions.”

Instead of seeing universal multilateral institutions as indispensable, countries will lean more heavily on new networks forged between countries with similar levels of prosperity. Think of it as “similateralism.” One result will be a strange new form of bipolarity that will superficially resemble the Cold War more than the world of the past two decades. The differences will include a diminished United States, a smarter (and more successful) peer competitor for Washington, and stronger nonaligned countries. But the dynamics of global politics will also be fundamentally different from those which prevailed in the five decades after World War II.

First, unlike the Cold War, this contest will predominantly be geo-economic rather than geopolitical in nature, as a result of the rising costs of maintaining military power. Second, the U.S.-Chinese rivalry will be characterized by high levels of interdependence between the major players, owing to the intense economic interpenetration of the two countries. But policymakers in both countries will see this interdependence as a risk to be mitigated and managed, not a recipe for warm relations. The United States needs China to continue buying

U.S. Treasury bills, and U.S. states compete fiercely to attract Chinese investment. Yet Washington also worries about an overreliance on Chinese capital and fears Chinese cyber-espionage. China, on the other hand, needs to find a home for its currency reserves and needs American know-how to build a knowledge society. But Beijing fumes that the U.S. Federal Reserve's policy of quantitative easing is destroying Chinese wealth and suspects that Washington is working to foment regime change in China.

Third, while many nonaligned countries ultimately found themselves forced to choose sides during the Cold War, in the coming decades, they will be able to exploit the existence of more flexible blocks that do not demand exclusivity. The result will be a promiscuous world order in which countries will be able to make arrangements with both China and the United States.

Finally, Beijing and Washington will fight over status rather than ideology. China has so far been too weak and too defensive to articulate an alternative to the U.S.-led liberal world order, but that is set to change. China and the United States will use the same words in explaining their motivations: "order," "legitimacy," "growth," and "responsibility." But they will be, as the saying goes, divided by a common language.

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