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Bush China Foundation Brief: Generational perspectives in U.S.-China relations, part II

By Euhwa Tran | September 2023

The United States, in recent months, has sent numerous high-level visitors to China, starting with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and several congressional delegation visits are being planned, including one led by Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer. Yet, these overtures have not led to any notable “thawing” in the U.S.-China relationship and, ironically, have further inflamed tensions to some degree in light of the lack of reciprocity in return visits by Chinese officials to the United States.

Despite these diplomatic quibbles, the two nations remain highly interconnected, and their relationship continues to have an outsized impact on each country domestically and globally. Despite this reality, the critical issues impacting the relationship are too often portrayed as simply black or white, without consideration of the nuances surrounding each matter and the wide range of perspectives in both countries. Given the incredible complexities of the bilateral relationship, it is essential to create opportunities for new conversations on long-standing disagreements and more recently emerging issues to better manage the challenges facing both countries today and in future years.

To meet this need, the George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations (Bush China Foundation) launched the U.S.-China XGen (cross-generation) Initiative in the fall of 2022 to broaden the discourse and to highlight differences and similarities in generational perspectives on issues impacting the relationship. The project engages Americans and Chinese of varying ages and brings members of “Generation Z”—those between ages 18 and 25—into dialogue on an equal footing with more senior experts representing the Millennial, Generation X and Boomer generations. The yearlong initiative culminated in August with an in-person track 2 dialogue in Washington, DC focused on Taiwan, climate change and the overall bilateral relationship. Key conclusions from the two days of discussions are highlighted in this report.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic inflicted monumental, long-term impact on the United States and China and their bilateral relationship. Although the individual experience varied based on stage of life, geography and the health of loved ones, among other factors, both societies unequivocally recognize that neither can return to pre-pandemic times. Physically and mentally, access to health care for serious, non-COVID illnesses; long COVID; and the overall toll on mental health, particularly that of younger generations, continues to have lasting repercussions. Ideologically, the significant deepening of polarization and the rampant spread of misinformation has left enduring detrimental impacts, with sharp disagreements over the accuracy of information rupturing long-standing friendships and professional relationships. Distrust in and disillusionment with governments and official institutions has increased substantially in both countries and pervades all generations. In the United States, COVID accentuated racial disparities in health care, and anti-Asian hate crimes and rhetoric changed how Asian Americans view their sense of belonging and security. In China, sudden and large-scale lockdowns generated a sense of insecurity about basic livelihood needs—such as access to

food and medicine—not previously experienced by several generations of Chinese that had grown up in times of relative economic stability and growth.

The immediate and ongoing impact of the pandemic on the U.S.-China relationship remains consequential. Some U.S. participants felt that the pandemic created tensions and deteriorations in bilateral relations that otherwise would not have occurred, given the signing of the Phase One trade deal and the expressions of support from President Trump for President Xi just before the COVID outbreak in the United States. The Chinese side opined that longstanding structural issues in the overall relationship likely would have led to tensions at some point, regardless of the pandemic. However, across the board, both sides agreed that the pandemic and the accompanying anti-Asian sentiments resulted in a significant reduction of Chinese students seeking to study in the United States and an increasing reluctance among Chinese nationals to settle in the U.S. permanently, enacting significant damage to the U.S.-China relationship in both the short- and long-term.

Climate change

Although climate change is commonly viewed as an area ripe for U.S.-China cooperation, barriers to collaboration abound. Lack of trust between the two countries—exemplified by concerns over intellectual property protection, significant restrictions on bilateral collaboration in the science field and tariffs levied by both countries against the other, among others—presents significant hindrances.

Furthermore, the high monetary costs of addressing climate change necessitates public funding, which is an obstacle in the United States. Whereas the Chinese government can drive the nation's climate efforts, the U.S. faces political challenges and a lack of public support on climate issues. At the federal political level, concerns surround the next U.S. presidential election in 2024, where a Republican victory likely would undo many existing climate policies. At the local level, public opposition to forms of clean energy like off-shore wind turbines also prevents progress on this front.

Notwithstanding the numerous obstacles to cooperation, as climate change is an international issue requiring a global response, both countries should work to overcome such barriers. Specific recommendations include the following:

- Both countries should **foster greater professional mobility for clean technology researchers**, such as creating a special visa category for these individuals. In particular, the United States should establish measures to incentivize talented individuals specializing in clean technology to work in the U.S., regardless of their country of origin.
- The two countries should **collaborate on measuring emissions from methane leaks**.
- The two countries should improve technology-sharing by **expanding the U.S.-China Clean Energy Research Center (CERC) model** to include new technologies such as advanced coal technologies, hydrogen and clean medium- and heavy-duty trucks,

among others.¹ Specifically, expansion can be achieved via multilateral agreements that integrate CERC's Technology Management Plan (TMP) model—a set of predetermined IP rules that protects IP in international, collaborative research and clarifies the joint ownership of IP resulting from joint research activities—into the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Technology Mechanism, facilitating further multilateral low-carbon technology transfer and cooperation.

Taiwan

The issue of Taiwan in the U.S.-China relationship is rife with complexities and contention, often stemming from misperceptions and mistrust by both the United States and China towards the other. China feels certain that the United States is pushing for conflict in the Taiwan Strait, while the U.S. is convinced of an impending Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Both militaries are, therefore, preparing for a worst-case scenario in the Taiwan Strait, which makes the overall situation extremely dangerous. Although China increasingly believes the United States is taking a whole-of-government approach in using the Taiwan issue to contain China, the U.S. participants maintained this to be untrue.

U.S. participants agreed with the Chinese view that many in the United States do not necessarily understand just how important Taiwan is in the eyes of both Chinese officials and the general public. For the Chinese public, the Taiwan question is not merely one of policy or politics, as all generations attach strong emotional value to reunification with the island. Even younger Chinese do not view the PRC's loss of Taiwan as a historic issue that happened before their lifetime and that has very little import today. Rather, they feel it is part of their collective memory of a weak and subjugated China. Now that China is stronger, they believe it is time to work to regain Taiwan. Across generations, the public closely followed the landing of Nancy Pelosi's plane in Taiwan and expressed disappointment that Beijing did not take stronger actions at that time. In contrast to the Chinese public, the U.S. public, particularly the younger generation, is much more focused on issues directly impacting their day-to-day—such as the banning of TikTok—than on Taiwan.

At the government level, although the United States maintains that it simply wants Beijing to respect Taiwan's rights and that it will accept Taipei's desires, Beijing suspects that Washington would never allow the island to return to the People's Republic of China. China blames the U.S. for portraying the PRC as a threat and an enemy, effectively quashing any possibility of Taiwan viewing mainland China favorably. However, the U.S. side flagged the changes Beijing made to Hong Kong's Basic Law, adding to Taiwan's unfavorable impression of the PRC.

U.S. and Chinese participants agreed that the short- and medium-term goal must be peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, advocating for **increasing communication between U.S. and Chinese foreign policymakers**, with more frequent, private meetings to allow each side to make clear their red lines separate from domestic politics. Furthermore, the two countries

¹ Joanna Lewis detailed the CERC model in *Cooperating for the Climate*. CERC was established in 2009 with the aim of accelerating the development and deployment of clean energy technologies that can help address climate change and enhance energy security. The center involves policymakers, researchers and industry representatives from both countries. It has proven successful due to its engagement with both the public and private sectors and its intellectual property rights protection efforts.

should establish **crisis prevention and management mechanisms** to mitigate potential conflict in the Strait.

Additionally, the Chinese participants added that peace and stability in the Strait can only be maintained if Beijing credibly believes that prospects for a peaceful resolution in the Strait are possible at some time in the future. To that end, Chinese participants across all generations advised **increasing exchanges between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese**, particularly given the decline in such interactions during the pandemic. The younger Chinese participants also observed that their generations on the two sides of the Strait share more common interests than older individuals, and Beijing should thereby **focus more on enhancing the attraction and desirability of lifestyle on the mainland**, rather than fixating on concerns over current Taiwanese identity. The Chinese participants remained optimistic that peaceful reunification may be possible in future decades, even though it is impossible right now.

U.S.-China relations

Given the importance of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship to both nations and globally, the two countries should take steps toward creating a more stable and functional relationship. Among the most viable actions would be for the two countries to **resume military-to-military dialogue**, which would be highly impactful. Another relatively low-hanging fruit would be to **restart the Fulbright program for U.S. and Chinese academic exchange**. Although administered solely by the U.S. government, resumption of the program would require Chinese agreement as well, and both countries would need to take steps to ensure that Fulbright participants are accorded a basic level of respect from all involved government agencies.

Additional recommendations focus on bilateral economic ties and transnational issues. Bilaterally, the two countries should **clarify and codify certain business practices' parameters** by outlining what is and is not allowed, including those related explicitly to the U.S. and foreign consulting firms operating in China and Chinese enterprises in the United States. Transnationally, the two countries should **conduct more frequent diplomatic meetings and track 2 dialogues on Ukraine**, including establishing a formal joint committee to discuss the Ukraine issue. The significant global impact of this crisis would levy pressure on the United States and China to work together constructively, making it an ideal opportunity for collaboration.

Generational perspectives

Pragmatism coupled with disillusionment is common among younger and older generations in both countries, although many participants also expressed a conscious desire to be optimistic. Members of Generation X—approximately in their 40s and 50s—broadly identified their priorities as maintaining peace and avoiding war. Generally speaking, they seek to pass on a manageable state of affairs to younger generations that is at least on par with the current reality.

Generation Z—those between ages 18 and 25—believe themselves to be more pragmatic than those older than them. Some felt that they and their peers should bring a positive drive and energy toward finding solutions and enacting change to any challenging issue. Yet, others expressed that they are fear-driven, with the expectation that the entire world would be destroyed in some way or another within their lifetimes. In light of this anticipation, the Chinese

side expressed a strong sense of individualism, willing to contribute to their field and nation not only according to their capabilities but also only as they desire. At the same time, they refuse to be tied to the traditional societal expectations of time, such as marrying by a certain age or having children by a certain age.

The growth that China has experienced over the past several decades has influenced generational perspectives. Generation X and older remember an impoverished China and its subsequent economic growth, which instilled in them optimism for their future. Although there is consensus that the outlook for younger generations is no longer as upbeat, national pride is stronger among the youth. Whereas Generation X grew up starkly aware of the economic gap between the United States and China—a humbling reality for them—younger Chinese did not grow up with such a gap. Rather, they benefited significantly from the economic growth of their country, which they viewed as on par with the United States, resulting naturally in a strong sense of pride in their nation.

In the United States, the younger generation senses that they are not automatically proud of their nation like the older generation. They feel the older generation has made many mistakes that have left the world a tougher place for them, and established institutions and systems are stacked against them. Accordingly, public service is not appealing.

Common viewpoints across varying age groups, as well as differences in generational perspectives towards one's future and that of each country, shape how each person approaches global issues such as climate change, bilateral concerns like cross-Strait relations and domestic challenges. To tackle the challenges facing the United States and China individually, bilaterally and internationally, it is essential to understand the experiences behind each generation's viewpoints and harness the collective strengths and capabilities of those from all age groups. The Bush China Foundation hopes that its U.S.-China XGen Initiative will be an ongoing contribution to this effort.

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