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ESSAY

# U.S.-China Relations amid COVID-19 Outbreak and Impact on East Asia

## Abstract

COVID-19 did not facilitate cooperation between the US and China but caused the bilateral relations to worsen further instead. US domestic politics, China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy, and the pre-existing US-China rivalry are important contributing factors to the deterioration. Such deterioration amid the pandemic outbreak has presented a certain degree of security challenges in East Asia around Taiwan, the East and South China Seas, and the Korean Peninsula. Regional players in East Asia, namely Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, must look for a balance point between the two great powers to optimize security and economic benefits. To create and maintain regional prosperity and stability, cooperation between the US and China is necessary, which can be achieved through efforts of the two great powers and also of the regional players.

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## Introduction

Shortly following the signing of Phase One trade deal between the US and China in January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, first reported in China back in December 2019, spread quickly to the rest of the world. While the two great powers used to discard their differences and stand united against a common threat during the Cold War and the 2008 Financial Crisis, the already failing bilateral relationship took another hit amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

In the meantime, as East Asia has become a main arena for competition,

tensions over some of the long-standing problems in the region have exacerbated, posing a greater risk toward regional stability and prosperity. As these problems are often intertwined with key interests, no regional player can be insulated from the US-China competition. Consequently, with little light of any improvement in the US-China relationship in the near future, it is imperative for regional players to consider their roles and take actions accordingly.

In this paper, we will first examine the impact of COVID-19 on US-China relations. Then we will analyze the challenges it has brought to regional



security in East Asia, followed by an assessment of roles and choices for regional players. Finally, we will advocate for restoring and promoting US-China cooperation for long-lasting stability and prosperity in the region.

## US-China Relations amid COVID-19 Outbreak

The change in US-China relations during COVID-19 outbreak is closely correlated with three important factors: namely the US domestic politics, China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy, and the pre-existing US-China rivalry. The aggregated effect of the factors above, especially the interaction of the first two, causes even further deterioration of US-China bilateral relations.

### US Domestic Politics

The Trump Administration did not manage to take adequate measures against COVID-19. In March, when confirmed cases in the US had started to gradually increase, and the situation in Europe and Asia had proven COVID-19 to be deadly and highly contagious, President Trump still dismissed concerns over the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The failed response by the Trump Administration has led to catastrophic consequences as the pandemic swept across the US. By June 28, 2020, there have been 2,452,048 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 124,811 deaths, making the US the epicenter of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> The US

economy shrank 4.8% in the first quarter, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) further predicted a US annual gross domestic product (GDP) decline of 8.0% this year.<sup>4</sup>

The disastrous US pandemic response has caused President Trump's disapproval rate to surge to a historic high of 58%.<sup>5</sup> Based on recent polls, Democrat candidate Joe Biden is leading President Trump by a significant margin in both general election and electoral college, and there is no guarantee for the Republicans to maintain the majority in the Senate.<sup>6</sup> In a year of presidency, Senate, and House elections, American domestic politics kicks in the Trump Administration and the Republicans desperately took actions to mark China as the scapegoat for the pandemic situation.

On February 29, 2020, President Trump still complimented China's pandemic responses and claimed the two countries were in close contact.<sup>7</sup> However, as the domestic situation worsened, President Trump started to refer COVID-19 with offensive terms such as "China Virus" and blamed China for delayed information sharing.<sup>8</sup> In a campaign memo sent out by the National Republican Senatorial Committee, Republicans were advised not to defend Trump but to attack China when asked about questions regarding President Trump's responsibility in the domestic pandemic outbreak.<sup>9</sup> By creating an atmosphere of victim complex, Trump Administration and the Republicans are

2. See for instance Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year..." Twitter, March 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1237027356314869761?lang=en>.

3. *World Health Organization*, "United States of America: WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us> (accessed June 28, 2020).

4. *International Monetary Foundation*, "World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020: A Crisis Like No Other, An Uncertain Recovery," June 2020, <https://www.imf.org/~media/Files/Publications/WEO/2020/Update/June/English/WEOENG202006.ashx?la=en> (accessed June 26, 2020).

5. *Marist Poll*, "Complete June 26, 2020 NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll of the United States (Tables of Adults and Registered Voters)," June 26, 2020, [http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NPR\\_PBS-NewsHour\\_Marist-Poll\\_USA-NOS-and-Tables\\_2006251102.pdf#page=3](http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NPR_PBS-NewsHour_Marist-Poll_USA-NOS-and-Tables_2006251102.pdf#page=3) (accessed June 26, 2020).

6. *RealClear*, "General Election: Trump vs. Biden," [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2020/president/us/general\\_election\\_trump\\_vs\\_biden-6247.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2020/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_biden-6247.html) (accessed June 26, 2020);

7. *China Central Television*, "特朗普：美国正考虑采取部分中国抗疫措施 [Trump: the U.S. is Considering Taking Some of Chinese Pandemic Response Measures]," March 2, 2020, <http://news.cctv.com/2020/03/02/>



8. See for instance Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus..." Twitter, March 17, 2020, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1239685852093169664>.
9. O'Donnell & Associates, "Corona Big Book: Main Messages," April 17, 2020, <https://static.politico.com/80/54/2f3219384e01833b0a0dd95181c/corona-virus-big-book-4.17.20.pdf> (Accessed June 26, 2020).
10. Zhiqun Zhu, "Interpreting China's 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy," *The Diplomat*, May 15, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/> (accessed June 29, 2020).
11. Lijian Zhao (@zlj517), "2/2 CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army..." Twitter, March 12, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238111898828066823>.
12. David Shambaugh, "The U.S. and China Are Both COVID Losers," *China-US Focus*, May 17, 2020, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-us-and-china-are-both-covid-losers> (accessed June 26, 2020).

determined to transfer the responsibility of their incompetence in solving domestic issues at China's expense, which seriously hurt China's feelings and damaged US-China relations. And, these actions would be met head-on by China's "wolf warrior diplomacy."

### China's "Wolf Warrior" Diplomacy

Faced with false accusations from the US, China responded with "wolf warrior" diplomacy, sending its officials to defend national interests even in confrontational ways.<sup>10</sup> In practice, under this rather nationalistic approach of diplomacy, Chinese diplomats would counter insults to China with understandable yet emotional or even equally offensive responses.

Rather than dismissing the blames in a composed manner, some of the Chinese officials participated in a de facto blame game, as seen by the West, and exchanged heated rhetoric against their American

counterparts. For instance, China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian expressed, in a tweet, his suspicion that the coronavirus was brought to China by the US military.<sup>11</sup> While the Chinese consider the tweet as a reasonable response to false accusations from the US, Americans find Zhao's tweet both "wrong and insulting."<sup>12</sup>

From China's point of view, it is totally reasonable and justifiable to retaliate the grievous insults and unwarranted charges by US politicians, after China made a huge sacrifice in its battle against the pandemic. However, whether this approach is the most optimal choice for China remains controversial. Although China's intention was to defend its national honor, the "wolf warrior" diplomacy led to an escalation of the blame game and a further decline of US-China relations.<sup>13</sup>

### Pre-existing US-China Rivalry

Adding more fuel to the flames, just as



Professor David Shambaugh pointed out in an article, the US-China rivalry became more apparent when a crisis finally appeared.<sup>14</sup> Side effects of the COVID-19 outbreak were interpreted through the lens of US-China rivalry, which further escalated conflicts between the two countries.

In the economic aspect, with no appreciation for medical supplies received from China but the frequent mentioning of “Made in China 2025” and other Chinese industrial policies, a Congressional Research Service study warns about the US reliance on Chinese health supplies and advises that the US should promote domestic production to alleviate such dependency, putting on yet another looming shadow on the US-China economic relations.<sup>15</sup> In the geopolitical aspect, an outbreak on American naval ships, including USS Theodore Roosevelt, produced a temporary power vacuum of US aircraft carrier presence in East Asia. Viewing Chinese activities in the region as taking advantage of this vacuum, the US increased its military presence. As later analyzed in this paper, tensions in the troubled South China Sea have exacerbated in the past months, further deteriorating the US-China relations.

The COVID-19 outbreak brought unexpected shocks to US-China relations. The Trump Administration’s blame game tactics were met with fierce “wolf warrior” responses from China. While both countries are trapped in a vicious cycle of media war on pandemic related issues, the

economic and geopolitical conflicts are also boosted by COVID-19’s side effects. The pandemic proved detrimental to the bilateral relationship.

For regional players in East Asia where the arena for the great power competition lies, what does a worsened US-China relationship imply for regional security?

## Security Challenges to East Asia under Deteriorating US-China Relations

East Asia is the main battlefield for the US-China rivalry. The key conflicts between China and the US, also the key security challenges to the East Asia region, are around the issues of Taiwan, the East and South China Seas, and North Korea. From a US-China dyad perspective, on the one hand, some of the US policies on these issues and defense commitments pose an implacable threat to China’s security and sovereignty. On the other hand, China’s recent behaviors have been seen as “not just of the erosion of US power, but also the rise of an illiberal Chinese sphere of influence in Asia and beyond.”<sup>16</sup>

### The Taiwan Issue

The Taiwan issue poses the greatest security challenge to the region simply because its sensitivity leaves no maneuver room for mainland China. Somehow, the cross-strait situation is now in functioning but vulnerable equilibrium. The nature of such equilibrium is that one party may

13. Gideon Rachman, “A Dangerous Blame Game Will do no Good,” *Financial Times*, May 05, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/ffc6ac00-8de0-11ea-9e12-0d4655dbd44f> (accessed June 26, 2020).
14. David Shambaugh, “Competition and the Coronavirus,” *China-US Focus*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/competition-and-the-coronavirus> (accessed June 26, 2020).
15. Congressional Research Service, “COVID-19: China Medical Supply Chains and Broader Trade Issues,” April 6, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46304> (accessed June 26, 2020).
16. Ely Ratner, “Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee: Hearing on Addressing China and Russia’s Emergence as Great Power Competitors and The Implementation of The National Defense Strategy,” January 29, 2019, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Ratner-Testimony-SASC-1.29.19\\_open.pdf?mtime=20190128170409](https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Ratner-Testimony-SASC-1.29.19_open.pdf?mtime=20190128170409) (accessed June 26, 2020).

make some noise from time to time but never makes actual moves.

Though President Tsai Ing-wen's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Administration is pro-independent, she well understands that the consequences would be unacceptable if she really goes for a de jure independence. Even though mainland China has reiterated the issue of reunification frequently under President Xi Jinping's presidency and that PPeople's Liberation Army (PLA) activities around Taiwan have increased, they do not indicate an imminent armed invasion.<sup>17</sup> The US has no interests other than maintaining a stable status quo over Taiwan. In other words, all three parties have ultimately different visions, but none of them intends to take actual moves right now, and thus the peaceful status quo is maintained – at least for the time being.

Unfortunately, the deteriorations of US-China relations and cross-strait relations, and the COVID-19 outbreak coincide with each other at the same time, creating a “perfect storm” for the fragile equilibrium to break. The growing distrust resulted from the worsened relationships makes mainland China suspicious of actions taken by Taiwan or the US, and vice versa. On February 3, 2020, when mainland China was still occupied with COVID-19, Taiwan's Vice-President Elect Lai Ching-te made an “unofficial” visit to America, which was perceived as a dangerous provocation by mainland China. In response, the PLA organized naval and air force combat readiness patrols as a warning to pro-independence activities in Taiwan. A few days later, American B-52 bombers and P-3C anti-submarine warfare aircraft conducted flights over Taiwan's

17. Bonnie Glaser and Matthew P. Funaiole, “China's Provocations Around Taiwan Aren't a Crisis,” *Foreign Policy*, May 15, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/15/chinas-provocations-around-taiwan-arent-a-crisis/> (accessed June 26, 2020).

18. *Global Times*, “连续三天！台媒曝美军机今又出现在台湾附近空域 [In 3 Consecutive Day! Taiwan Media Reported U.S. Military Aircraft Appearance in Taiwan Neighboring Airspace],” February 14, 2020, [https://taiwan.huanqiu.com/article/3x1kW5mqERc?bsh\\_bid=5480553712](https://taiwan.huanqiu.com/article/3x1kW5mqERc?bsh_bid=5480553712) (Accessed June 24, 2020).



19. Junfeng Li and Sikun Li, “备降军事演练？美军机飞越台湾西海岸发出什么信号？[Alternative Landing Military Drill? What Signal Does U.S. Military Aircraft's Flight Across Taiwan West Coast Send?]” June 10, 2020, <https://3w.huanqiu.com/a/de583b/3yafWgRVHuw?agt=8.wap%20target> (Accessed June 24, 2020).
20. Kazuki Nakamura, “Is the Japanese Public on Board With the ‘New Era’ of China-Japan Relations?” *The Diplomat*, June 10, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/is-the-japanese-public-on-board-with-the-new-era-of-china-japan-relations/> (Accessed June 24, 2020).
21. Brad Lendon and Junko Ogura, “Vote in Japan to change status of disputed islands threatens to raise tensions with China,” *CNN*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/21/asia/china-japan-island-dispute-intl-hnk-scli/index.html> (Accessed June 24, 2020).

neighboring airspace.<sup>18</sup> Since March, the US Navy has sent out three destroyers to sail through the Taiwan Strait to dispel any China’s thoughts of taking advantage of the power vacuum resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak on US Naval ships. More recently, US Navy transport aircraft flew over Taiwan Island on June 9, 2020.<sup>19</sup>

These growing military activities around Taiwan – even though all three sides would probably claim that its activities were reactions to other parties’ behavior or that it did not intend to change the status quo – have created high risks for misunderstanding and misjudgment. Mainland China may misjudge US military activities as encouraging Taiwan’s independence movement. The US may misjudge Chinese military activities as signs of an imminent invasion of Taiwan. The US has invested too much in Taiwan to see it fall, whereas the Chinese government will lose legitimacy if it allows Taiwan to go independent. If any of such misjudgment really takes place, the consequences will be an inevitable armed clash between the two powers, which can create havoc in the region.

### The East China Sea

In the East China Sea, the major root of security threat is the dispute over Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands between China and Japan. Unlike the case of US-China relations, the pandemic facilitated cooperation between China and Japan as governments and people in both countries donated a significant amount of health

supplies to each other.<sup>20</sup> Recently, the Diaoyu Islands dispute resurfaced after a Japanese city council voted to change the administrative status of the islands. In response, China lodged a strong protest and sent out a fleet of coast guard ships to the surrounding waters.<sup>21</sup>

Even after considering the role of the US, given the deteriorating US-China relations, the risk of armed conflict should be relatively low. Thanks to the Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism established in 2018, China and Japan so far have done a great job preventing tensions over the dispute growing out of control, even though both sides protest the other party’s government ship activities from time to time. Furthermore, even though the US sees China as a major strategic rival, given that the disputed islands are covered under the US-Japan defense treaty, there will be little incentives for the US to actively instigate confrontations between China and Japan. Nonetheless, it has to be noted that in an extremely unlikely case where tensions over the islands get out of hand and result in a military clash between China and Japan, the US military will get involved against China.

### The South China Sea

While confrontations between claimant parties continue to occur in the troubled South China Sea during the pandemic outbreak, the deteriorating US-China relations have further worsened the security situation in the South China Sea



with the increase of military activities targeted toward each other.

When much of the world was occupied with COVID-19, China had basically controlled the pandemic by late March 2020. The pandemic outbreak on US Naval ships deployed in the West Pacific caused a temporary window of power vacuum during which there was no operable US aircraft carrier in the region. Subsequently, in addition to sailing warships through the Taiwan Strait, the US conducted four Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) between March and May to fortify its strategic military presence in the region.<sup>22</sup> The US military activities were obviously targeting China because the

US saw recent incidents, such as the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat, as China taking advantage of the pandemic to advance its claims.<sup>23</sup> Perceiving US FONOPs as provocative violations to both international law and territorial integrity, Chinese naval and air forces in response forced out US warships from the Xisha (Paracel) and Nansha (Spratly) Islands.<sup>24</sup> When the US deployed three aircraft carriers near China in June, a *Global Times* article warned that the gathering would “be met with Chinese countermeasures” with mentioning of anti-ship ballistic missiles in the PLA arsenal.<sup>25</sup>

As instances illustrated above, the surge of American military presence due to deteriorating US-China relations is met with equally hard-lining military responses

from China, which consequently increases the number of military confrontations and thus the potential risk of military clashes. More importantly, from the Chinese viewpoint, US actions in the South China Sea to challenge Chinese territorial claims could be read as associated with the Taiwan issue. This may then even stimulate even stronger reactions from the Chinese military and cause a vicious cycle escalating even more military activities. Hence, the deterioration of US-China relations amid COVID-19 is a challenge to security in the South China Sea.

### North Korea

Tensions over the Korean Peninsula have increased during the pandemic as a result of North Korean missile tests, gunfire exchange in the demilitarized zone, anti-North leaflets, the cut of communication channels, and most recently the blowup of the liaisons office by North Korea.<sup>26</sup>

Currently, there is little evidence that the deterioration of US-China relations has contributed to the worsened security situation in Korea. Nonetheless, as China and North Korea fixed up their bilateral relationship through summits between President Xi and Kim Jong-un in 2018, the US can no longer expect China’s cooperation to apply pressure and sanctions on North Korea.<sup>27</sup> As long as China’s own interests are not offended, it may become reluctant – the declining US-China relations will certainly strengthen this reluctance even more – to exert its influence to alter some of North Korea’s

22. *National Institute for South China Sea Studies*, “The U.S. Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific 2020,” <http://www.nanhai.org.cn/uploads/file/20200623/jlbg.pdf> (Accessed June 24, 2020), pp. 118.

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24. Adela Suliman, “China says it ‘expelled’ U.S. Navy vessel from South China Sea,” *CNBC News*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-says-it-expelled-u-s-navy-vessel-south-china-1196261> (Accessed June 24, 2020).

25. Xuanzun Liu, “Rare gathering of US aircraft carriers ‘to be met with Chinese countermeasures,’” *Global Times*, June 14, 2020, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1191544.shtml> (Accessed June 24, 2020).

provocative behavior, which could have a potentially negative impact on security and stability in the Korean Peninsula.

## US and China Walking towards Confrontation: Roles and Choices of East Asia

In a new reality that conflicts between the US and China have spilled over from trade disputes to virtually every aspect of international affairs, most players in East Asia, namely Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, must make a choice for their roles as a result of US-China rivalry.

Two important factors that the players need to consider are security and economy. In terms of security, it appears that all three players are facing a similar dilemma. On the one hand, while they all happen to be an ally or partner of the US, relying on the US or hinting for US support on security issues further increases US military presence, which will worsen the situation counterproductively as previously discussed, especially in the case of Taiwan. On the other hand, giving up US military support as an appeasement to China (mainland China) is also unrealistic as they are not strong enough to deter China's possible military coercion in the future. Consequently, they must find a way to maintain the security tie with the US, which grants them protection without irritating China.

Secondly, from an economic perspective, they again face a similar dilemma. All three players are economically interdependent

with China as it is their largest trade partner.<sup>28</sup> Normally, a good economic relationship with China is desirable because it brings prosperity and then support for the politicians in office. However, an economic tie too deep may come with the price of economic dependence, which can be used as leverage by China on disputed issues and cause a backlash in domestic politics. This was the case in Taiwan back in 2016, when President Ma Ying-jeou's economic policy created too much economic dependence on mainland China and generated dissatisfaction among the electorate.<sup>29</sup> The players will have to find a perfect balance when engaging in economic activities with China. Therefore, no matter whether it's from a security or economic point of view, simply choosing a side with China or the US is no longer an optimal decision.

Instead, on the most basic level, in addition to avoid provoking confrontations, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan all need to calculate carefully where their best spot to stand is between the increasingly distant China and America. They must navigate to find a balance between the great powers to ensure their security while harvesting the fruit of economic prosperity. For Japan, in the words of Ryan Hass, it should become "more equidistant between Washington and Beijing."<sup>30</sup> For South Korea and Taiwan, which have more worrisome security concerns against North Korea or mainland China respectively, standing slightly closer

26. Council on Foreign Relations, "Global Conflict Tracker: North Korea Crisis", June 25, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/north-korea-crisis> (Accessed June 28, 2020).

27. Evans J.R. Revere, "Lips and teeth: Repairing China-North Korea relations," *The Brookings Institution*, November, 2019, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FP\\_20191118\\_china\\_nk\\_revere.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FP_20191118_china_nk_revere.pdf) (Accessed June 28, 2020), pp. 9.

28. World Trade Organization, "WTO Data," <https://timeseries.wto.org/> (Accessed June 26, 2020).

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30. Richard Bush et al., interviewed by Bruce Jones, ed. Laura McGhee, Mireya Solis and Ted Reinert, "The stress test: Japan in an era of great power competition," *The Brookings Institution*, October 2019, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FP\\_20191021\\_japan\\_competition.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FP_20191021_japan_competition.pdf) (Accessed June 26, 2020), pp. 16.



## US-China Cooperation: The Indispensable Element of Regional Prosperity and Stability

So far, the paper has analyzed the deterioration of US-China relations amid the COVID-19 outbreak and examined the impact it brings to regional security in East Asia, conveniently picturing the reality in which the lack of US-China cooperation leads to diminished mutual understanding and aggravated danger of armed clashes. Although scholars from both sides called for unity between the two countries at this darkest hour of modern public health history with one voice,<sup>31</sup> China and the US are trapped deeper in escalated tensions. Even so, the fate of East Asia has yet been sealed. Cooperation is what is needed to restore a promising future for the region, and fortunately, and it is still feasible between the US and China.

Cooperation between great powers has always been an indispensable element of creating and maintaining prosperity and stability, as proven in the history of Anglo-American relations and US-Soviet relations. Confrontations create distrust and conflicts, while cooperation promotes mutual understanding and mutual development. It is crucial to keep in mind, however, that competition is different from confrontation; competition allows room for cooperation while confrontation does not. Given the fact

to the US will not be a bad choice.

The players can further choose to play a more active role to conduce stability and prosperity in the region. Since the evolving confrontation between the US and China are causing tensions to rise and cooperation to fade in East Asia, the players can explore ways to invite both countries to participate in collaborative activities, which may lead to reduced security tensions and improved environment for mutual development. For instance, Japan could propose a multilateral joint drill of search and rescue or disaster relief operations in non-disputed waters and send invitations to both China and America. Successful joint drills of this kind will contribute to a slow and long process, which hopefully may repair distrust and alleviate tensions among all participating parties. Ultimately, although it would be impossible to completely reverse the grand trend of US-China rivalry, this active approach is worth trying for players in East Asia as it has the potential to improve regional security and stability from the root.

31. "Saving Lives in America, China, and Around the World," *Asia Society*, April 3, 2020, [https://china.ucsd.edu/\\_files/statement/covid-19-pandemic-statement.pdf](https://china.ucsd.edu/_files/statement/covid-19-pandemic-statement.pdf) (assessed June 26, 2020). An Open Letter to the People of the United States From 100 Chinese Scholars," *The Diplomat*, April 2, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/an-open-letter-to-the-people-of-the-united-states-from-100-chinese-scholars/> (assessed June 26, 2020).

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33. Xiaobo Liu, "How China can Resolve the FONOP Deadlock in the South China Sea," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Centers for Strategic and International Studies*, March 1, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/how-china-can-resolve-fonop-deadlock/> (assessed June 29, 2020).

that the US and China have entered the phase of strategic competition, the two countries must navigate carefully to protect the mechanism for necessary cooperation.<sup>32</sup> Through improving US-China cooperation, the two great powers and other players in East Asia can work together to bring stability and prosperity to the region.

Finally, we would like to offer several pieces of advice for de-escalating tensions and promoting cooperation between the US and China for the sake of a prosperous and stable East Asia.

**In an era of growing populism and nationalism, both governments need to consider the domestic politics of the other side before taking action and making reaction.**

The deterioration of US-China relations during the pandemic outbreak is partly a result of domestic political factors driving foreign policy. Both countries should exercise tolerance and restraint by taking some time to analyze the nature of the other party's rhetoric before making responses since, every now and then, the actions taken are completely out of domestic political concerns and do not necessarily have real implications on foreign policy. Though it is necessary to acknowledge the need to take retaliatory reactions, such as the case of false accusations faced by China, these reactions should be pursued with caution to avoid further escalating exchanges of unpleasant rhetoric.

**Cooperation usually requires compromise first and bring benefits later.**

China and the US did a wonderful job on the Phase One trade deal, which required quite an amount of compromise, especially on the Chinese side. Making compromise mutually is the first step of resuming cooperation between the two countries as it creates the space that eventually brings common gains. This holds true especially for more sensitive issues such as the South China Sea. For example, as Captain Liu Xiaobo suggested, the US and China could make mutual compromises on their vastly different interpretations of maritime laws so that both would benefit from the freedom of navigation concept in the long term.<sup>33</sup>

**Conducting cooperation under a multilateral framework may provide a more effective result.**

Multilateralism alleviates the issue of power imbalance under a bilateral framework and can reduce nervous or awkward atmosphere among the participants as well. Particularly, while US-China military communications have been practically suspended and military confrontations take place occasionally, as discussed earlier, Japan can take the role of proposing a multilateral joint drill, which may hopefully lead to a restart of US-China military relations, which are an essential part of improving US-China relations overall and facilitate regional stability.

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