

**SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS:
DYNAMIC STABILITY FACING NEW FACTORS**

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EAI Background Brief No. 396

Date of Publication: 6 August 2008

Executive Summary

1. China-United States relations have remained dynamically stable as both sides have learned to observe each other's bottom lines. The rise of China, so far, has yet to turn Sino-American relations into a typical zero-sum game between great powers, as symbolized by President Bush's consistent promise to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games.
2. Extensive economic relationship is the anchor and engine for that relationship, creating growing vested interests on both sides. Institutionalized channels like the ministry-level "strategic dialogues" between Beijing and Washington are now important for the two governments to coordinate policies and manage disputes and differences.
3. China's massive holding of American financial assets including over half a trillion US dollars of US Treasury debt has become a source of influence as well as a new issue of concern in Washington.
4. The political changes in Taiwan have calmed the Taiwan Strait as China and the US seem to have achieved an effective co-management of the Taiwan issue. While reducing the likelihood of a Sino-American military conflict over Taiwan, the Ma Ying-jeou government, representing a tough political challenge to the CCP, promises to transform the Taiwan game for both Beijing and Washington.
5. Recent improvement in Sino-Japanese relations has two effects: it lowers the likelihood of Washington taking side in a Beijing-Tokyo sparring over the East China Sea; it also refocuses the nationalist energy in China on the United States.
6. The rapid rise of Chinese power and the increasing assertiveness of the Chinese elite, expected to be boosted by the Beijing Olympic Games, are inevitably raising concerns in many corners of the United States. Ideological

differences and the destined contention for power and leadership are becoming more important factors affecting the Sino-American relationship.

7. Washington appears to be willing to offer more room for Beijing, in exchange for more Chinese responsibility in shouldering the burden of maintaining the existing international order. Beijing, while still largely a follower, has started to demand for more representation in the making of rules.
8. The incoming U.S. administration is likely to bring new uncertainties, although the general framework is likely to remain before the US successfully settled the Iraqi issue. A Republican administration under John McCain could continue Bush's policy with some adjustments; a Democratic administration under Barack Obama, however, is expected to raise more concerns in Beijing in several areas, ranging from trade, human rights to regional realignment.
9. Senator Barack Obama, if elected, is more poised to make important changes to Washington's China policy, including a somewhat reduced influence of big businesses in the making of China policy thus making Beijing's strategy of targeted favor procurement less effective.
10. While Beijing may have a not-so-secret preference for a Republican administration in Washington next year, the historical pattern of having a fairly consistent China policy after elections since Richard Nixon is likely to largely repeat itself in the United States.

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Dynamic Stability with Great Uncertainty

- 1.1 The relationship between the People's Republic of China and the United States remains "dynamically stable." Barring any major disturbance during the Beijing Olympic Games this fall, Sino-American ties are expected to remain stable by the time a new administration takes over in Washington early next year. Both Beijing and Washington now view the bilateral relationship as matured, manageable, and crucially important to their respective strategic interests. Official statements and gestures aside, increasingly large vested interests are growing in both countries in many areas ranging from international finance, regional security and peace, to cooperation in the United Nations and a host of other international issues. The PRC-USA relationship now appears to be closer than ever. President Bush's consistent promise to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games illustrates that well.
- 1.2 Both sides now seem to understand and respect each other's bottom lines. The United States is careful about observing Beijing's key interests of internal political stability. The PRC is working hard to convince Washington that it has no intention of competing with the United States for influence and is eager to procure favors in the US with chiefly financial means and diplomatic cooperation.
- 1.3 Increasingly many on both sides of the Pacific, however, now realize that the US and China are the only realistic contenders in this global competition for

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leadership, wealth and power. Hence a China-US showdown remains a clear even inevitable probability, however distant it may seem for now.¹ Yet, so far, there are strong desires and efforts on both sides to maintain and improve relations so as to delay and even avoid the perhaps destined and certainly costly confrontation.² The U.S. hopes to do so by gradually giving Beijing more room to play and restrain China with more responsibilities and obligations supporting the existing international order. Washington likes to see a rising Chinese power that supports status quo and cooperation, and behaves in a rather humble and reserved manner.³

- 1.4 The frequent exchanges of visits by senior officials and institutionalized high level “strategic dialogues” covering various issues (from economic frictions to human rights records) especially the SEDs (Strategic Economic Dialogues) have become important avenues for the two governments to address their domestic audiences, coordinate policies, trade horses and manage disputes and differences.⁴
- 1.5 China’s “historic, strategic opportunity for peaceful rise” created by the 9/11 Attacks in 2001 is expected to continue. Yet suspicions are developing on both sides of the Pacific regarding each other’s true intention and next moves.⁵
- 1.6 The massive China trade, however heavily unbalanced, has generated vast vested interest in the business community of the US as well as created the financial dependence of the Americans that powerfully nourish a friendly US

¹ Philip Stephens, "A Global Response is Needed to the Shifting World Order," *Financial Times*, Nov. 30, 2007. For a more ideological analysis about such reasoning, see Robert Kagan, "End of Dreams, Return of History," *Policy Review*, August-September, 2007.

² Joseph Nye and Wang Jisi, "The rise of Chinese Soft Power and its Implications for the United States," paper, 2008.

³ Robert Sutter, *China's Rise: Implications for U.S. Leadership in Asia*, East-West Center policy series, 2006.

⁴ Xinhua News Agency, "The 4th Sino-American Strategic Economic Dialogue Opens," June 18, 2008.

⁵ Yuan Peng, "Trust America's Sincerity for just once," *Global Times*, Beijing, November 21, 2007.

policy towards Beijing, despite the differences in values and ideologies and rising American fears and concerns over a rising China.

- 1.7 Economic factor is not only the anchor and engine for the Sino-American relationship but also the key to China's impressive economic growth. Thirty to forty percent of China's vast export still goes to the U.S. every year,⁶ earning the majority of China's trade surplus.
- 1.8 In addition to providing cheap manufactured goods and hence reducing pollution and energy consumption in the United States, China has produced huge amounts of profit for American ventures that brought capital, technology, designs and market to China. China has also consciously poured hundreds of billions of dollars back to the U.S. to sustain American consumers' and Washington's deficit spending, at the great expense of capital loss. The massive Chinese holding of US financial assets has indeed become major sources of Chinese power in Washington.⁷ In 2006, China became the 2nd largest foreign holder of U.S. securities (after Japan), totaling US\$699 billion.⁸ By April of 2008, China's holding of the US Treasury debt alone reached a historic US\$502 billion, only slightly behind the largest holder Japan (US\$592.2 billion) and is twice as large as the third largest holder UK (US\$251 billion).⁹ From the Wall Street to the main streets, China now indeed represents opportunity, profit and often sheer economic necessity.¹⁰

⁶ It was 32 % in 2007 (www.uschina.org/statistics/tradetable.html).

⁷ China's politically motivated major orders of American goods and services, like the \$13.6 billion order package made one day before the latest (4th) round of the Sino-American Strategic Economic Dialogue in June this year, constitute "a continuation of a familiar pattern" (*First Financial and Economic Daily*, Beijing, June 6, 2008) that have served as rather effective tools to pacify critics in the United States. In 2008, a senior Chinese analyst privately described this favor-procuring policy this way: "we now offer the Americans financial goodies from time to time in order to pacify them.... So much so that the Europeans are imitating the Americans trying (forcing us to pay them off too so) to share our vast holdings (of foreign currency reserves) as well."

⁸ Wayne M. Morrison & Marc Labonte, US Congressional Research Service, "China's Holdings of U.S. Securities: Implications for the U.S. Economy," a CRS report for Congress, Washington, DC, 2008.

⁹ U.S. Department of Treasury data, posted on www.ustreas.gov, June 2008.

¹⁰ Sara Bongiorni, *A Year Without "Made in China": One Family's True Life Adventure in the Global Economy*, New York: Wiley, 2007.

- 1.9 Hu Jintao, so far, appears to have largely followed the same cautious, low-key and cooperative (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦) policy towards the United States, established by the late Deng Xiaoping nearly 20 years ago.¹¹ China's accommodating and favor-procuring acts and gestures may have been motivated by Beijing's peculiar desire for its own regime preservation.¹² But the lack of overt power struggle and direct challenge has gone a long way to pacify and stabilize China-U.S. relations. Since 2005, Washington has shown its delight by openly calling Beijing to be more of a fellow "responsible stakeholder."¹³

New Factors and Issues

- 2.1 Real issues and serious problems unmistakably still exist and develop between the PRC and the US. Some of them have been there for a very long time, like the political future of Taiwan and the chronic disputes over trade and intellectual property rights. The massive holding of US financial assets that have powerfully procured many favors for Beijing in Washington and the Wall Street, has become a new issue for many important constituencies in the United States.
- 2.2 More fundamentally, the PRC and the US are still very far apart in political ideology and values. The wish that trade and engagement will inevitably and peacefully transform China politically, even at the expense of some American jobs, though still very much alive in the U.S., is being increasingly questioned by those calling for a reexamination of the US policy towards Beijing.¹⁴ Some

¹¹ Wang Jisi, *On the Construction of China's International Strategy*, policy paper, Beijing, 2007.

¹² Yong Deng & Fei-Ling Wang eds., *China Rising: Power and Motivation in Chinese Foreign Policy*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 25-31.

¹³ Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State: *Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?* Remarks before the National Committee on U.S: China Relations, September 21, 2005. Thomas Christensen, Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, *China's Role in the World: Is China a Responsible Stakeholder?* Remarks Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, DC August 3, 2006.

¹⁴ James Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression*, New York: Viking, February 2007.

inside the Beltway are now seriously wondering if Washington has made a historical blunder when it empowered an ideological foe destined to clash with the United States. The successful testing of China's space weapon in early 2007 and the global mobilization of ethnic Chinese to support Beijing in the Spring of 2008 (in the aftermath of the riots in Tibet and during the tortured relay of the Beijing Olympic torch in Western countries),¹⁵ have given new momentum to that discourse.

- 2.3 There will likely be more motives for a reassessment of China once the U.S. starts to pull out of Iraq and a less anti-terrorism obsessed administration occupies the White House next year. In fact, Washington has been quietly working for years on a hedging strategy to strengthen its military presence in East Asia through new basing policies and force redeployment, enhancing its alliances and exploring new alignment possibilities in the region.¹⁶ The PRC has also been increasingly open about its rapid military development, showing off new hardware like jet fighters. A serious arms race may grow much larger and more open once the United States pulls out of Iraq in the not-too-distant future.
- 2.4 At the same time, new power and wealth have led many PRC elites to feel ever more annoyed and hurt by the relentless and often self-righteous American lectures and criticisms. The widespread deep resentment against the US, more than ever, powerfully reinforces emerging nationalist emotions in China which form a sometimes wishful sometimes calculated determination to catch up with and even replace the United States.¹⁷ The carefully censored media and tightly controlled education have amplified to nourish a whole generation of angry youths who increasingly deem the United States as an

¹⁵ Matthew Forney, "China's Loyal Youth," *New York Times*, April 13, 2008.

¹⁶ Ellen L. Frost, James J. Przystup, and Phillip C. Saunders, "China's Rising Influence in Asia: Implications for U.S. Policy," Washington DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, April, 2008.

¹⁷ For recent examples, see Yu Wanli, "Who created the American myth?" *Global Times*, Beijing, May 19, 2008, and Wang Tian, "The Decline of America and the Rise of Powers," <http://world.people.com.cn>, May 30, 2008.

inevitable, albeit yet to be officially pronounced, enemy of a rising China, not just an opponent of the PRC government under the CCP.¹⁸

- 2.5 In China, patience is visibly tapering off and both arrogance and ignorance are brewing. A revival of the Chinese *tianxia* (under-the-heaven) worldview and the efforts of “restoring the past glory” of Imperial China and promoting Confucian values for a “harmonious new world order” signal a new era when the PRC is increasingly taking the offensive posture in the ideological contest with the United States.¹⁹ In reality, Chinese military spending has grown much faster than economic growth in the past decade, leading to the emergence of a PLA (People’s Liberation Army) that is rapidly acquiring blue-water capabilities and theater superiorities.
- 2.6 Ironically, perhaps, a political democratization and media liberalization of the PRC, consistently (but somewhat increasingly nominally now) demanded by the United States, is likely to further nationalist sentiment even imperialist tendencies in China, at least in the short run.

Moves and Worries

- 3.1 Beijing has been wise not to repeat the history of many past rising powers when it insisted on a peaceful rise and vowing never to seek hegemony. Even though it is hard for the United States to take Beijing’s words vowing for a peaceful rise at face value forever, the peculiar logic of political survival of the CCP regime seems to keep damping China’s natural flames of nationalism. Beijing has essentially pledged itself to be a content follower and has been literally paying off the US in ways such as accepting the conditions of China’s WTO membership, revaluing Chinese currency as well as embarking on periodical buying sprees in the US. Few in Washington believe that the proud Chinese under an undemocratic leadership armed with Sino-centric feelings,

¹⁸ Cong Riyun, “Nationalism and the Process of Democratization in Contemporary China.” Beijing: Zhengfa University, unpublished paper, January 2007.

¹⁹ Pen Wei, “Dare to Compete with the West in political ideology,” *Global Times*, Beijing, January 28, 2008. The author, however, later said that his paper was edited and tilted “sensationally” by the editor.

once become truly rich and powerful, will stay forever as anyone's deputy. But Beijing so far has effectively maintained a humble and peaceful image.

- 3.2 China's latest geopolitical and resource-searching moves in places like Africa and Iran, and Beijing's concerted efforts to develop asymmetrical but lethal military capabilities have raised anxiety levels in many corners of Washington. Some start to worry that too many countries have now been charmed by Beijing's policy of "enriching the neighbors," often at the US expense. The recent calls from Beijing demanding for "participating in the making of " as well as upholding international rules and norms seem to signal a revisionist Chinese foreign policy.
- 3.3 If the CCP-PRC political system continues as it is while China rises to be a world-class power (a big if indeed), there will be an even bigger need for Beijing to alleviate the suspicion and fear it necessarily arouses in the United States. Without major, real political reforms in the direction of democracy and rule of law to establish reliable internal constraints of its growing power, China is likely to have a hard time to really rise peacefully, as the logic of great power politics tends to take over and pitch the PRC against the reigning powers led by the United States.
- 3.4 The much-anticipated 18th National Congress of the CCP (held in fall 2007) did not bring forth any significant political reform. The approaching Olympic Games and the associated international attention and scrutiny have forced Beijing into a lockdown mode of control and repression, despite the short-lived relaxation of media control right after the terrible Sichuan Earthquake of May 2008. Beijing thus is likely to remain the same into 2009, with the same mentality of being politically under siege.
- 3.5 A conceivable Sino-American grand compromise in Western Pacific may give the two countries more time and room to work out their differences. Washington could trade some of its influence in the region for peace and tune down some of its rhetoric to make the ruling PRC elite feel safe and less discontent. Taiwan could be sacrificed and the PLA could be given more room

and freedom to operate in the blue seas. Beijing could make more internal reforms to be better incorporated into the US-led world system. A mightier but basically satisfied and transformed China and a reduced but also content United States could thus coexist and compete virtuously and peacefully, under the existing world order.²⁰ Such an idealist scenario, both desirable and possible, requires new incentives and norms, brilliant leadership and sheer luck on both sides that may not be in place in time.

- 3.6 Ever since the late 1990s and especially during the Bush Administration since 2002, Beijing and Washington have learnt to co-manage the Taiwan issue with the consensus of “no unilateral change” in the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait. Taipei’s political changes in March 2008 have significantly calmed the situation and greatly reduced the rise of a Sino-American military conflict over Taiwan. The new Taiwanese President, Ma Ying-jeou, with his proclaimed new three-no policy of “no independence, no unification, no use of force,” appears to be a positive factor in stabilizing Sino-American relations.
- 3.7 However, given Ma’s political “threat” to the CCP as a viable fellow “Chinese” political leader, the relationship between Beijing and Taipei is likely to enter a new stage where the problem is less of national unification versus separation but one of political struggle between two sets of different systems, values and ideas. This may offer the United States a new leverage to transform the PRC; it also opens up a new battlefield which is full of uncertainties.
- 3.8 Recent improvement in Sino-Japanese relations as exemplified by the fruitful exchanges of summit visits and the agreement over the division of the East China Sea affects Sino-American relations in two ways: it lowers the likelihood of Washington taking side in a messy Beijing-Tokyo sparring over maritime rights, while refocusing the nationalist energy in China on the United States. Once the anti-Japanese fever in China is more tightly controlled by

²⁰ G. John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West Can the Liberal System Survive?” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008.

Beijing, the energy of rising Chinese nationalism would be targeted more fully at Washington.

The Coming Changes in the US

- 4.1 Even if Beijing is likely to carry on politically and diplomatically in the same way as it has been for the past two decades, there are coming changes in the United States as this is an election year that will give Washington a new administration. There are already voices from the two candidates, Senators John McCain and Barack Obama, suggesting adjustments, changes and even major overhauls of the existing US China policy.
- 4.2 Senator McCain, a seasoned moderate Republic politician with heroic military record, has said in blunt terms that he would demand more cooperation from China in the areas of dealing with global issues such as climate changes, arms control, and nuclear disarmament.²¹ While strongly criticizing Beijing's handling of the Tibetan riots in March 2008,²² he seems to be more interested in having China as a fellow, responsible new partner, "to live up to its duties as a superpower" than seeing the PRC weakened and Beijing collapsing.²³ In his article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2007, McCain said that while China's rise is a top challenge for the next president, the two countries are not destined to be adversaries, as long as Beijing behaves as a responsible and reformed partner. In April 2008, McCain issued this major statement on China:

"Our relationship with China is important, and we value our ability to cooperate with the Chinese government on a wide variety of strategic, economic, and diplomatic fronts. But the Chinese government needs to understand that in our modern world, how a nation treats its citizens is a legitimate subject of international concern. China has signed numerous international agreements that make China's treatment of its citizens a subject of legitimate international concern, not just a matter of national sovereignty. To be a responsible stakeholder in the modern

²¹ Carrie Dann, "McCain on China EQ, global warming," NBC, May 12, 2008.

²² "Statement by John McCain on Tibet," www.JohnMcCain.com, March 18, 2008.

²³ Bruce Nussbaum, "Davos--Senator McCain on China," www.businessweek.com, January 27, 2007.

world, a government must also be responsible at home, in protecting, not trampling, the rights of its people.

"I deplore the violent crackdown by Chinese authorities and the continuing oppression in Tibet of those merely wishing to practice their faith and preserve their culture and heritage. I have listened carefully to the Dalai Lama and am convinced he is a man of peace who reflects the hopes and aspirations of Tibetans. I urge the government of the People's Republic of China to address the root causes of unrest in Tibet by opening a genuine dialogue with His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, aimed at granting greater autonomy. I urge the Chinese authorities to ensure peaceful protest is not met with violence, to release monks and others detained for peacefully expressing their views and to allow full outside access to Tibet."

"I understand and respect Prime Minister Brown's decision not to attend the Olympic opening ceremonies. I believe President Bush should evaluate his participation in the ceremonies surrounding the Olympics and, based on Chinese actions, decide whether it is appropriate to attend. If Chinese policies and practices do not change, I would not attend the opening ceremonies. It does no service to the Chinese government, and certainly no service to the people of China, for the United States and other democracies to pretend that the suppression of rights in China does not concern us. It does, will and must concern us."²⁴

- 4.3 With a much thinner record and limited experience in foreign policy, Senator Barack Obama, a charismatic liberal Democrat, has said relatively little about China before and during the campaign. What he has said is largely in line with traditional Democratic views and demands on issues of trade imbalance, human rights record and political values. But he has shown a strong willingness to give China much more attention than either George W. Bush or John McCain, for its own right.
- 4.4 In an interview on April 27, 2007, Obama called the rising China a competitor and "neither our enemy nor our friend." He expressed clearly that, as the President, he will make effort to forge "enough relationship" with China to make it an important, stabilizing partner similar to the EU and Japan. At a public speech on foreign policy last year, Obama proposed a highly intriguing

²⁴ "Statement By John McCain On China And The Olympic Games," Press Release, April 10, 2008.

but yet to be specified idea of forming new regional framework in Asia to face the opportunity and the challenge represented by the rise of China:

“And as we strengthen NATO, we should also seek to build new alliances and relationships in other regions important to our interests in the 21st century. In Asia, the emergence of an economically vibrant, more politically active China offers new opportunities for prosperity and cooperation, but also poses new challenges for the United States and our partners in the region. It is time for the United States to take a more active role here - to build on our strong bilateral relations and informal arrangements like the Six Party talks. As President, I intend to forge a more effective regional framework in Asia that will promote stability, prosperity and help us confront common transnational threats such as tracking down terrorists and responding to global health problems like avian flu.”²⁵

- 4.5 Seemingly to be in tacit agreement with his opponents not to make China a major campaign issue this year, Obama nonetheless was the first candidate to issue a statement condemning Beijing’s crackdowns in Tibet in March 2008. In April 2008, he also harshly criticized Beijing’s refusal to open China’s market to American goods and services, hinting a stronger effort bordering trade protectionism to force China to make more concessions in trade talks if he is elected.²⁶ On July 13, 2008, he reiterated similar points during an interview with the CNN.
- 4.6 It appears that Obama, if elected, is more poised to make important changes in Washington’s China policy as his major foreign policy advisors are in serious disagreement with the Republican team that is expected to be largely inherited by a McCain Administration. A somewhat reduced influence of big businesses is also expected in the making of China policy under an Obama Administration, thus making Beijing’s strategy of targeted favor procurement less effective. Therefore, it is easy to understand Beijing’s not-so-hidden preference for another Republican administration as the Chinese leaders have now managed to achieve a good rapport with the Republican leaders, while having a less cordial relationship with the Democratic leaders including the

²⁵ Remarks of Senator Barack Obama to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 23, 2007.

²⁶ Deborah Solomon, Jason Leow and Jason Dean, “Clock Ticks on U.S.-China Goals, Major Trade Issues Likely to Be Put Off To Next President,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2008.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi who has been harshly and repeatedly condemned by Beijing. Chinese analysts have openly termed Obama as “having a tough attitude towards China,” and semi-openly expressed misgivings and ill wishes about Obama (some of which are expressed with heavy racist flavors).²⁷

- 4.7 Nevertheless, it has been a general pattern since Richard Nixon that every new US president who comes to power with criticisms against his predecessor’s China policy, will quickly change to follow the same policy shortly after taking over the White House. In an election year, China is often the cheap and easy scapegoat for anything that goes wrong in the United States. Despite the incinerating campaign rhetoric, Washington always seems to be able to return to its basic China policy after the new administration settles in. This year may be no exception. Indeed, due to the fact that there is no incumbent candidate running, the politically motivated criticisms of the current US China policy is much muted this year. The shocks and changes likely to take place after the change of guard at the White House may prove to be rather inconsequential to the overall dynamic stability of Sino-American relations.

Status Quo Amidst Great Uncertainties

- 5.1 Sino-American relationship is dynamically stable in 2008 and is expected to remain so into 2009. Great efforts, vested interest, institutionalized channels, and positive developments in the Taiwan Strait have helped to stabilize this extremely important relationship. The Chinese policy towards the United States appears to be stable and the incoming new administration in the United States is likely to make adjustments and changes but is unlikely to abandon Washington’s current China policy.

²⁷ “Obama watches Sino-American Strategic Economic Dialogue, his attitude towards China remains tough.” Phoenix TV, Hong Kong, June 18, 2008. Edward Cody, “In China, Fascination With Obama’s Skin Color,” *The Washington Post*, June 17, 2008.

- 5.2 In the medium to long term, however, there are inherently many uncertainties, chiefly among which are China's rising power and Beijing's lack of political changes.
- 5.3 It is entirely possible for a more powerful China to enjoy a more equal and mostly amicable relationship with the United States for a long time to come. But the deep divides and great differences between the two countries, if remain unchanged, still poise to usher in more Sino-American discord, threatening a repeat of the history of international relations of the last century.