Uncertain Times: The Reconstruction of China-US Relationship

The US-led international order is beginning to fall apart, making the reconstruction of a new China-US relationship urgent and imperative. Professor Chen Weixing, chair of the Department of Public Policy Leadership at the University of Mississippi, shares his insights on the changing relationship between the two big powers.

Professor Chen looks at the China-US relationship from a structural perspective. There are five main pillars that have helped sustain the US dominance in the world: military power, economic and technological power, soft power, the US-led international institutions, and defence networks. China’s rise has shaken, to a certain degree, these pillars. China’s growing economy has bolstered its rapid rising defence budget and ambitious technological development plans. She is playing more important roles in the international institutions created by the United States, and even working to create its own. With the common goal of balancing the United States, China has collaborated with Russia to form some kind of alliance. Professor Chen opines that China is on the way to becoming the biggest player in the world. In view of this, the United States’ concern is inevitable.

The United States’ response to China’s rise is paving the way for containment. At the strategic level, the Trump administration has defined China as a “revisionist power”. Such a strategy has achieved bipartisan consensus in the United States. Policies adopted, not only in the field of military and economics but also culture, are steps towards containment.

There are three major differences between the Cold War and the current China-US competition. Firstly, the Cold War was supported by three pillars, namely the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan and NATO. Secondly, the Cold War took place among blocs of powers. Thirdly, the Cold War was driven by ideological and security reasons while the current dispute is mainly due to economic and technological reasons.

Professor Chen points out that international politics today revolves around economics and power, instead of ideologies. He observes that it is difficult for the United States to decouple from China and convince her allies to choose sides, when the latter are trading more with China than with the United States. Basic strategy of US allies is to compete or collaborate with China. For the rest of the world, they are more likely to choose China, which is more compatible with them in many ways.

Professor Chen concludes that it is difficult in today’s international context to effectively contain China and for America to be great again alone. The United States’ competitiveness cannot solely depend on containing China. It must also depend on a strong economy, innovations and problem-solving at home. However, given the political divisiveness in the United States, it is questionable whether Washington could put acts together to address real challenges at home. Professor Chen believes that the odds seem to be in China’s favour. He explains that the biggest challenge for China is China herself, whereas the biggest challenges for the United States are both China and herself.

This summary reflects the personal opinion(s) of the seminar speaker(s) and should in no way be attributed to the East Asian Institute.