

# ***Trends in the Development of US–China Relations After the 2020 Presidential Election in the Context of the Information and Political Discourse of American Elites***

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*In a short period, from 2016 to 2020, China has transformed from the main trade and economic partner of the United States, during the years of Barack Obama's presidency, to one of the leading opponents of the US administration. This article analyses the reasons for the growing tension in US–China relations and the trade war as the apogee of this confrontation considers the discourse of American political elites in the media regarding China's participation and role in the demarcation between states and assesses the prospects of relations between the two countries under the Democratic administration of Joe Biden, with a focus on the information agenda in the United States. The quantitative results of the topic modelling analysis show that the ongoing ideological shift of discourse from the Democrats and lack of any discussion of trade negotiations resulted in 2022 demonstrate that the shift from the economic sphere to ideology has been completed. The tensions between China and the United States have transferred to the political-diplomatic stage with a new danger for the United States and NATO interests coming to the surface—Russia and its policy in Eastern Europe.*

**Keywords:** Information policy, discourse analysis, US–China relations, trade war, topic modelling

## **INTRODUCTION**

US–China relations and their prospects are a vital subject of interest among international relations specialists and political commentators. The policy of the Trump administration in the United States was twofold: On the one hand, there was

pressure on the Chinese leadership and the desire to eliminate the trade imbalance. On the other hand, the desire to prevent the outbreak of a full-scale Cold War with China given the huge influence of this country in the world and the existence of a 'Sino-American' economy, which is hard to deny even for inveterate sceptics in the American establishment.

The relationships with China were among the most critical issues during the 2020 presidential campaign in the United States. Republican President Donald Trump and his campaign officials consistently reminded Democratic critics about the aims of his trade war with China—the limitation of increasing trade imbalances between the two countries. Since 2018, Trump has imposed unprecedented trade and economic restrictions against China. According to the experts of the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies of National Research University Higher School of Economics: 'As a result, the sanctions pressure that China is subjected to is at least comparable, and, most likely, exceeds the real effect that Russia is subjected to' (Kashin, Pjatachkova and Aksenov 2020). In a short period of time, from 2016 to 2020, China has transformed from the leading trade and economic partner of the United States, during the years of Barack Obama's presidency, to one of the main opponents of the US administration.

This article analyses the reasons for the growing tension in US–China relations and the trade war as the apogee of this confrontation, considers the discourse of American political elites in the media regarding China's participation and role in the demarcation between states and assesses the prospects of relations between the two countries under the new Democratic administration of Joe Biden, with a focus on the information agenda in the United States.

Over the past few decades, after the normalisation of relations between the United States and China in 1972, Washington has often changed the vector of its policy regarding Beijing, from trade cooperation to financial war. At the same time, American companies were playing their own game, actively investing in the rapidly growing Chinese economy since the late 1970s. In the early 2010s, the United States offered China a share (albeit unequal) in remaking the world for two, which was unofficially called the G2 concept. The Trump administration, in turn, has predicted a serious aggravation of relations between the two countries.

Now, relations between the United States and China are going through a particularly low point in their history. Several American experts reasonably believe that, during the Trump administration, the level of relations began to rapidly slip back to the pre-Nixon, times when the normalisation of US–Chinese relations took place, and the United States officially recognised the Communist government in Beijing (Steinbock 2018). If everything is clear with the official position of Washington, then what is the discourse of the American political media regarding the role of China in the decoupling between states? Is there a desire among the elites and the American establishment to stabilise relations with China since Joe Biden became the President of the United States?

**INFORMATION POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE CONTEXT OF EXTERNAL THREATS AND THE NEED TO DEVELOP A RESPONSE STRATEGY**

The information policy of the United States is inextricably linked to its current political course, since it is focused on mobilising the population, increasing the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the electorate and more effective solutions to crisis phenomena in society. In addition, it is precisely through the state's information policy that the government can implement a strategy for responding to internal political and economic crises, as well as external ones (Liu, Lai and Xu 2018). Thus, when one talks about the information policy of the state in response to external challenges, the media and political establishment often play the role of a 'soft power', referring to its own citizens and external actors to increase the legitimacy of the authorities and retain the authority of the state as a participant in international relations in the international arena. The specified function of the media is considered in key works by such specialists in international relations and political analysts as Lippmann (1922), Herman and Chomsky (2010) and Nye (2004), etc.

This work associates the concept of 'information warfare' with the information policy of the United States, which is an important aspect of the growing US–Chinese divide and whose manifestations are expressed in disinformation regarding both rivals and allies to retain the loyalty of the latter, as well as ideologisation and confrontation between political players. However, the information consumer should note that since the beginning of the 2010s, Russian and Western analysts have been using the concept of 'information warfare' in a distorted way: Earlier theoretical works consider information warfare as an integral aspect of armed conflict (in particular, Libicki 1998) which is devoid of reason in the context of non-military economic and political US–China disengagement. The modification of the concept of an information war in the 1970s made it possible to highlight a specific type of information policy of aggressive states to reduce the credibility of an opponent and preserve the loyalty of their allies on the world stage.

Hence, in a state of information warfare between the United States and China, each party is required to produce a specific reaction to the opposite side's actions, including sanctions, political detentions and restrictions on the use of technological products of companies of the opposing parties. Washington initiated all these measures against Beijing, which initiated a weaker and more cautious response from China. The actions of both the American and Chinese sides are expressed in the need to choose the most profitable and least costly crisis-response strategy, which brings one directly to the crisis management policy of the two countries. Crisis management studies are directly related to the theory of attribution, the classical interpretation of which directly involves the problem of perception and interpretation of social behaviour, based on an individual's own psychological experience. However, instead of individuals, the theory of crisis management considers whole organisations and states as individual actors, as they take certain measures of a psychological nature,

including their own policy (negation, intimidation, the suppression of information, intentional disclosure of all available information, etc.), to solve internal and external problems that threaten the legitimacy of the current government and the image of the state (Coombs 1995).

The case of the growing US–China economic divide is, thus, an example of the risks to China's status in world politics. The active ideologisation of confrontation, initially endowed with an exclusively economic meaning, is unlikely to damage China as a new potential world leader. However, it does, without a doubt, represent a danger to the investment and geopolitical attractiveness of China as a new power centre because it not only creates risks for supporters of China and their strategic partners in the United States but also performs its primary purpose by inflicting damage to the major infrastructure project 'Belt and Road', which later became the new model of regional governance in China. Both sides are actively trying to disseminate their own interpretation of current events through the media, scientific publications and the official statements of government representatives (Bacchus 2020). The discourse of China's representatives regarding the country's participation and role in the recent growing confrontation is an example of the crisis management policy of the Chinese leadership.

#### **THE DISCOURSE OF AMERICAN POLITICAL ELITES IN THE MEDIA AND OFFICIAL STATEMENTS REGARDING CHINA'S PARTICIPATION AND ROLE IN THE DISENGAGEMENT**

The information policy of the United States, like any other major international player, is associated with the desire not only to strengthen its influence within the state by mobilising the population but also to implement its own strategy of soft non-military force, establishing dominance in a particular region (Nye 2004). In the United States, unlike in China, there are many independent think tanks whose purpose is to advise or influence the decisions of the Washington administration regarding this or that international player, and China is no exception here. Analysts' interest in the People's Republic of China began to grow after the end of the 'Cold War' and especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century, when, due to the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, the US share in gross world product began to decline. Beijing was gradually becoming a major trade competitor to Washington, which inevitably led to the need to analyse the prospects for US–China relations.

Starting with the arrival of Donald Trump as President in 2017, an active anti-Chinese campaign of the new US administration began, which set as its official goal the elimination of the US–China trade deficit and minimising Chinese influence on American domestic politics. During the 2016 presidential election campaign, Trump accused China of slowing the American economy and 'stealing' American jobs. In the 2017 National Strategy, China was identified as one of the main threats to American security, a revisionist state (Basu 2020). A milestone event occurred in March 2018,

when special Sales Representative Lighthizer completed his investigation regarding China, which triggered the start of the tariff war. In the investigation, it was said that the Chinese government had violated Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974: Beijing was accused of hacking into the database of American IT companies and stealing commercial and technological information (Borger 2021). In the same year, one of the most famous advocates of anti-Chinese policy in the United States, the author of the *Death by China* documentary, the head of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy, Peter Navarro, published a report with a long list of accusations against Beijing, denoting China as an economic aggressor (Carafano et al. 2019). In 2020, the Trump administration-imposed sanctions on the largest Chinese corporation Huawei, accusing it of cyber espionage and collecting the personal data of Americans for the Chinese government (Chen 2019). The sanctions policy against China during the last year of the Trump administration is described in detail by researchers from the Higher School of Economics in an analytical paper (Kashin, Pjatchkova and Aksenov 2020). The result of Trump's policy aimed at China was the highest level of deterioration in relations between the two largest economic powers since 1974. Can this be considered exclusively an 'inflection' of Trumpists, who started the process of decoupling, or is there some consensus among the US media and analysts that the US policy towards China should be tightened?

In the publications by the leading American media and analytical centres for several years of the trade war, there is a clear bias towards demonising China (Kwan 2020). In 2020, the Republican think tank Heritage released several articles, which emphasised the necessity of blocking the Chinese social network TikTok, popular among American youth, because of the illiberal nature of the Chinese economy and the cooperation of all Chinese companies with the leadership of the Communist Party of China (Carafano et al. 2019). Thus, analysts, following the federal government, emphasised the need to 'Americanise' the management of the office of Byte Dance, which owns the TikTok application in the United States, for its further operation in the country.

The differences between the leading American parties in relation to China are rather stylistic in nature. Both parties recognise the threat of China's growing economic power to the United States' leading position globally. The Cato Institute, a Washington pro-Democratic 'think-tank', criticised the Trump administration's position on China primarily from a constitutional point of view, noting that 'the leading role in determining foreign trade policy, according to the US Constitution, should belong to Congress.' From the point of view of the centre's analyst, the Democrats should join forces with their allies, without resorting to additional restrictions on China, as a response to the foreign trade challenge from the Middle Kingdom (Bacchus 2020). Also, several experts from the Democratic Party stressed that the United States should not abandon the policy of protectionism in those areas where the production of American goods is not so dependent on the PRC. In recent years, a growing number of large companies set up their production in Mexico (which largely contributed to the signing of a new free trade agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico

to replace the outdated NAFTA in 2017), as well as in Vietnam, in connection with the cheap labour force in this country.

The leading US media, most of which speak from anti-Trump positions, criticise Trump's weak position in relation to human rights violations, regarding Uighurs in China (Coombs 1995). The press secretary of the Biden campaign headquarters, Andrew Bates, in August 2020 in the publication 'Axios' attacked the Republican, saying that Beijing's policy towards Uighur Muslims was genocide, and that even to preserve the trade deal, the United States should not go along with the Chinese government, delaying the introduction of sanctions against those involved in these crimes. The administration's policy towards Tibet and the Uighurs is a clear example of how the issue of human rights in China was less important to the Republican Trump administration than the economic standoff. To reach a comprehensive bilateral trade deal, the president was willing to postpone or turn a blind eye to this issue (Swan 2020). Republican administrations have been traditionally notable for fewer ideological biases and a shift in foreign policy towards 'Realpolitik'. It is the focus on human rights as a basis for restrictions, along with the tactics of strengthening relations with allies to pursue a coordinated line towards Beijing that determines the main divide between the representatives of the establishment of the Democratic and Republican Parties regarding the 'Chinese' issue.

Thus, as can be seen from the discourse of the American media, the US political establishment does not question the need to contain China, conducting tough anti-Chinese propaganda both inside the country and among its allies. The trend of demonising China left little room for manoeuvre for the new US administration, led by Democrat Joe Biden. However, how did the change of political elites after the elections affect the escalation of the conflict? Was it possible for the current American president to offer a correction of Trump's policy, and what are the prospects for continuing the US–China decoupling in the future?

#### **SEMANTIC ANALYSIS AND THEMATIC MODELLING OF DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN MEDIA ON THE TOPIC OF THE US–CHINA TRADE WAR: THE DYNAMICS OF CRISIS ESCALATION OR STAGNATION?**

In this work, the authors have analysed the information materials of the main mass media of the United States, representing the views of Democratic and Republican political elites—*The New York Times*, representing the views of the former and Breitbart representing that of the latter, respectively. Further, it will be assumed that, due to the wide audience coverage, one can generalise the results of the analysis of the media data to the national level of American mass media, conducting informational policy considering US–China relations in politics and economics in the context of the trade war and economic disengagement.

The analysis of media discourse of Democratic and Republican media is conducted in two dimensions—both ideological (Democratic/Republican viewpoints) and

temporal (that is, 2020/2022). Specifically, the comparison of public discourse by media that represents the views of two parties will make it possible to conclude about changes in political narratives in the United States before and after Biden's coming to power. Likewise, the results of the comparative analysis of media discourse over two years will reveal the dynamics of US discourse concerning US–China relations and will, thus, help to conclude whether the Biden administration's coming to power resulted in further escalation of current relations. This was previously predicted by international relations analysts, based on the latest Innovation and Competitiveness Act passed by the US Senate in June 2021, where China was formulated as the greatest geopolitical and geoeconomics threat to US foreign policy (Mearsheimer 2021).

### THE IDEOLOGICAL ASPECT OF US MEDIA DISCOURSE

The authors have analysed the articles of *The New York Times* and *Breitbart* for the key combinations of the words 'trade war' and 'US–China relations' in two time periods—from 1 October to 31 December 2020 (the last months of the Trump administration), and from 1 January to 29 March 2021 (administration of President Biden). About 600 articles were parsed and classified by major problem topics for each of the media queries, and a word cloud visualisation was made. By analysing the semi-annual period of American politics, one can conclude that the media discourse has changed not only considering changes in the dynamics of US–China relations but also in connection with the Democrats' coming to power and the change in the administration of the United States, with President Joe Biden replacing Republican Donald Trump in January 2021. The limitations of this study include the high probability of information noise in the media caused by the presidential election race, during which it is natural to cover internal issues relevant to the American electorate. However, one can expect the external validity of the results obtained, since it is assumed that the views of Democratic and Republican media represent the media chosen for analysis.

All relevant *Breitbart* and *The New York Times* news articles used in the analysis were pre-processed and classified with a set of natural language processing (NLP) methods, which represents the major type of quantitative American media discourse analysis and includes, among other systems, speech recognition methods, understanding and generating language and its semantic and linguistic properties, discursive text analysis, etc. In particular, this study used the methods of natural entity recognition with the implementation of latent Dirichlet allocation for creating the tag cloud with words indicating the key themes of the texts, as well as topic modelling, aimed at highlighting key themes and issues identified by computerised algorithms that were raised in the corpus. The latter two methods were used in this paper to highlight key media topics related to US–China relations and predict possible priority policy directions of the Biden administration during his term of office.

Figure 1  
Word Cloud of Most Frequent Terms in October–December 2020, the NYT.

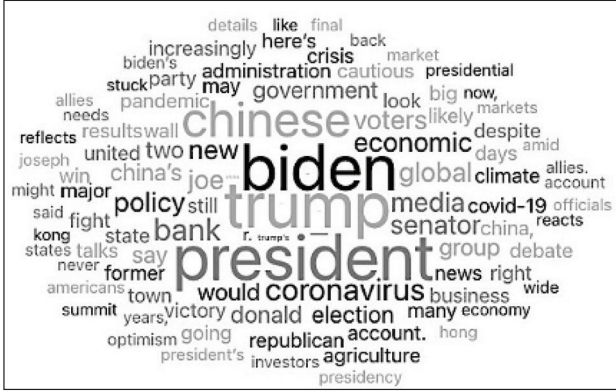


Figure 2  
Word Cloud of Most Frequent Terms in January–March 2021, the NYT.



First, the authors pre-processed and tokenised articles of the pro-Democratic *The New York Times* newspaper from the electronic version of the media, which were parsed based on the keywords ‘trade war’ and ‘US–China relations’. Figure 1 shows a visualisation (‘word cloud’) of the most frequently used words during the presidential term of Donald Trump in October–December 2020:

Similarly, Figure 2 shows a visualisation of keywords in *The New York Times* articles during the first months of the Biden administration (specifically, January–March 2021):

The first thing that demands attention in the results obtained is the shift in media attention from the Chinese issue directly to other areas, including healthcare:





cloud in the first months of Biden's work, shows the effect of the domestic policy information agenda during the upcoming elections. This assumption is affirmed by the much lower density of the China-US tag cloud in Figure 3 during the last three months of Trump's work (Figure 3).

In addition to the word cloud visualisation, the authors classified thematic problems of the articles parsed in both media outlets, which were also divided into the period of Trump's work and the first months of the Biden administration. Based on the key topics raised in *The New York Times* between October and December 2020, one can identify the following problem areas:

1. Biden, policy, Trump, president, town, Joe, here, still, going, may—***Stability of Trump's policy in the event of his election victory (media focus on the words—here, still, policy)***
2. Party, Republican, right, media, increasingly, two, debate, reflects, wall, senator—***Presidential debates and their media coverage (including the politics of the Senate and the Republican Party)***
3. Trump, two, Donald, world, coronavirus, Chinese, crisis, global, town, China—***China's role in the coronavirus pandemic and global standoff***
4. Voters, win, climate, going, agriculture, years, now, Americans, fight—***Climate change and US domestic policy, including in the field of agriculture.***

Accordingly, the selection of key topics in *The New York Times* during the first months of the Biden administration was made as follows:

1. COVID, many, vaccine, doses, EU, bloc, export, coronavirus, Trump, export—***Trump's foreign trade policy and the need to solve the problem of developing and using coronavirus vaccines;***
2. Economy, Chinese, country, reached, China, trade, never, announced, may, need—***Taking further measures to limit trade policy of China;***
3. Biden, revive, US, world, Trump, never, go, China, new—***Redefining the role of the United States in the world during the Biden administration and further confrontation with a growing China;***
4. Party, China, president, leaders, reached, Trump, administration, white, economic, Republicans—***The Trump administration's focus on the white electorate of affluent Republicans.***

Similarly, thematic simulations were also conducted on Breitbart over two time periods. The main topics by which algorithms grouped media texts during the Trump period were as follows:

1. School, big, ahead, bill, coronavirus, president, elect, America, election, Hunter, bill—***US elections process and their results.***

2. Joe, vaccine, policy, examined, China, voter, presidency, possible, general, de Blasio—***the US elections and Chinese discourse within the framework of the election programme.***
3. China, Trump, Russia, COVID-19, battleground, former, Democratic, president, elect, Joe—***the China–Russia issues and the anti-pandemic measures with the arrival of Biden into power.***

It is interesting that the Republican media avoided discussing the protests in the United States and the Black Lives Matter movement on the eve of and during the US presidential election, since detailed coverage of the protests could negatively affect the mood of the electorate, as well as lead to the risk of collective action. It is natural, therefore, that after the election of Biden as president, the pro-Republican media began to talk with renewed vigour about protests, while the thematic modelling results did not reveal similar problems in the pro-Democratic media.

Topics highlighted in Breitbart by the NLP algorithm during the first months of the Biden administration:

1. Xi, race, Republican, direct, face, polling, increase, effect, praise, global—***discussions of the results of Trump’s policies, including on countering China.*** Remarkably, the foreign policy discourse of the United States about China and the nationalistic rhetoric were placed by a machine learning algorithm into one group (the close distance between the name of Xi Jinping and the concept of ‘race’ in the considered case, including the word cloud tagging, reveals a close semantic position of the words in the texts and, therefore, the ultra-nationalist rhetoric of pro-Trump media, such as an indication of China as a ‘yellow peril’ similar to the United States rhetoric in the 1980s–1990s).
2. Examined, authorisation, China, global, COVID, American, close, district, president—***US–China interaction with the new administration.***
3. Race, police, cross, national, defence, election, challenge, numerical, Republican, Iran—***the Iranian issue is raised, as well as protests in the United States and the Black Lives Matter movement.***
4. Praise, national, threat, police, go, prosecution, new, criminal, polling, country—***national and regional security in the context of US elections.***

Here, one should again mention that all the topics that are highlighted in the current work are exclusively in conjunction with the Chinese question—that is, based on selected topics, it is possible to conclude that US–Chinese relations, including economic and trade division, are used in the context of domestic American problems of the United States, as well as the election agenda of both presidential candidates. In addition, the presence of the Chinese issue in both pro-Democratic and pro-Republican media makes it possible to conclude that there is an unspoken consensus

in the media regarding the need to deepen the further US–Chinese demarcation and the seriousness of the Chinese issue, both for the role of the United States in the world and for the internal information agenda within the country. Thus, the potential for manoeuvring in the new White House administration is extremely limited. President Biden needs to avoid appearing like a ‘Chinese puppet’ on the one hand, and on the other, look for ways to stabilise the confrontation with China.

### EVOLUTION OF US MEDIA DISCOURSE: 2022 VS 2020

The first part of the media discourse analysis presented in this paper refers to the comparison of public media discourse on the eve of the presidential elections at the end of 2020 and the new Biden administration coming to power in 2021, which presented contrasting results of media language differences even on the *Chinese peril* issue. It is important to compare the previous period’s results to the current state of US public discourse concerning US–China relations. As no major political or economic declarations have been made by either side since the spring of 2021, and bearing in mind the shift of the US media from the China problem to the ongoing Russian–Ukrainian issue, the research question is: Have the US Republican and Democratic media changed or limited the discourse of the US–China trade conflict?

In pursuit of an answer to this research question, the authors addressed the articles of two major US newspapers—*The New York Times*, which represents the views of the Democratic Party, and Breitbart, which, with its right-wing emphasis on the US domestic and foreign policy, represents the view of US Republicans. In total, the authors parsed 1,130 *The New York Times* articles containing any of the two collocations of ‘trade war’ and ‘China–US’ in the text or the titles, and 519 Breitbart articles with the same request in the period of November 1—January 21 of 2022. The visualisation of the most used word tags is presented in Figures 4 and 5, respectively.

What is most clearly seen from the parsed data and the visual analysis of the tag clouds presented above is that *The New York Times* has much more to say about US–China issues than the pro-Republican media—the amount of *The New York Times* articles on the issue is twice the amount of Breitbart texts, which explains the tag cloud of the first media being much denser than that of the latter. Next, what is also important to mention is that both clouds include a significant number of the words ‘Hong Kong’, ‘COVID’, ‘Omicron’, and ‘Olympic games’, which reflect the information coverage of recent news in the region. It is of interest though, that the antagonistic discourse, especially that of Breitbart, has clearly shifted from the economy to the information standoff of Chinese state media, especially the *Global Times*—the main Chinese Communist Party state media that covers foreign affairs. It is also important to mention that right-wing media emphasise human rights issues in China, which explains the emotional description of Xi Jinping as a ‘dictator’.



Likewise, as with the topic modelling analysis conducted in the previous part of the research, the authors classified texts from both newspapers into five categories based on the major problematic fields described in the samples. The topics derived from *The New York Times* in the period of November 2021–January 2022 are the following:

1. Said, COVID, people, city, China, year, coronavirus, new, omicron, variant—***The omicron variant of COVID-19 and the role of China in the global pandemic;***
2. Want, new, China, said, get, Ukraine, would, Russia, Biden, president—Russia–Ukraine tensions and probability of China’s support for the former;
3. New, climate, part, look, like, said, year, pandemic, one, world—***Two-week UN climate conference in Glasgow results and the global pandemic prospects;***
4. Would, house, Donald, billion, Washington, Times, president, Trump, new, like—***The discussion of Trump’s previous policies and domestic Republican-Democratic debates;***
5. Tennis, last, officials, [New] York, Chinese, world, one, Times, year, new—***The forthcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing.***

The major topics classified in Breitbart in the same time period are as follows:

1. Yughur, people, Games, boycott, party, Communist, human, rights, Beijing, Olympics—***The US diplomatic boycott of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and the violation of human rights in China;***
2. Officials, Global, Times, party, people, city, Communist, [Li] Peng, Beijing, Coronavirus—***The ‘Communist Peril’ of China and the global pandemic;***
3. November, government, military, also, Taiwanese, Communist, Beijing, Lithuania, state, Taiwan—***The China–Taiwan issue and China’s domestic military activities in November 2021;***
4. Government, administration, state, people, world, American, also, would, president, Biden—***President Biden’s policy and America’s place in the world;***
5. People, climate, Omicron, state, percent, Coronavirus, global, Biden, Times, world—***Two-week UN climate conference in Glasgow results and the global pandemic prospects.***

As the results of topic modelling demonstrate, the topics covered by the media in the last part of the analysis are much more concrete and describe certain events covered by the media, concerning military operations, the Glasgow conference on climate change, Winter Olympics in Beijing in 2022, etc. Although topics covered by both media are comparatively the same, as they describe the results of the ongoing events, the discourse of the pro-Republican Breitbart is much more aggressive than that of *The New York Times*, which should not surprise any reader. What is surprising, though, is that the coverage of human rights issues and the traditional Taiwan problem are

the focus of the right-wing media, while they were traditionally paid attention to by the Democrats. Such an ideological shift of discourse from the Democrats and lack of any discussion of trade negotiations results (although the last of them took place in spring 2021), demonstrate that the shift from the economic sphere to ideology has been completed, and the tensions between China and the US have transferred to the political-diplomatic stage with a new danger for the United States and NATO interests coming to the surface—Russia and its policy in Eastern Europe.

### **THE ROLE OF CHANGING POLITICAL ELITES AFTER THE UNITED STATES ELECTION: WILL BIDEN'S PRESIDENCY AFFECT THE FURTHER ESCALATION OF THE CONFLICT?**

One of the most important issues is the prospect of continuing the US–China decoupling under the administration of Biden. To what extent will the current president's policy regarding the strategic competitor differ from Trump's? The Chinese authorities were cautiously optimistic about this, which is noted among Chinese analysts and media. Thus, the Chinese side continued to emphasise the need to build a dialogue with the new Biden administration, considering the main achievement not so much the favourable outcome of the negotiations, but the very existence of a dialogue between the parties. At the same time, Chinese think tanks increasingly perceive the US–China disengagement as a given and a new reality that needs to be adapted and worked out in the changed conditions. Chen Wan from the Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relations has repeatedly written that the US–China confrontation is not only natural because of the pressing domestic issues of the American side but also favourable, as it will relieve Sino-US cooperation from the zero-sum game and will help to move away from the usual historical ligament along the line of 'Washington–Beijing' (Chen 2019). In this sense, any Biden policy will be considered by Chinese elites, who are ready for any decoupling scenarios, either as expected, or, in case of possible improvement of the dialogue, as positive for relations between the two countries.

In the election team of the new American president, there were three different camps on this issue. Some argued for a return to the policy of Obama, who tried to make China a strategic economic ally by drawing it into the Trans-Pacific Partnership project, rejected by Washington with the advent of Trump as president. Others supported continuing Trump's hard line by limiting free trade opportunities with China. Still, others were in favour of a moderate 'mixed' approach—a combination of protectionist measures with cooperation in areas that are beneficial to the United States (Fallon, 2021). However, in the context of the existing bipartisan consensus on the continuation of the PRC's containment policy, the possibility of variability of the new US administration on this issue may be very limited.

So, the president-elect in his first post-election telephone conversation with the head of China said that he would be able to fight back against the CCP Chairman Xi Jinping if necessary (Findings of Investigation, 2018). The first meeting between diplomats of the new administration of the United States and China in Anchorage ended in a major failure and a scandal related to the ultimatum of the speeches of the American delegation. The continuation of a very tough line towards China, however, does not meet support from the European allies of the United States, as a result of which analysts in Washington believe that the new administration will not be able to count on their support in the future (Fallon 2021). These concerns are also confirmed by the latest opinion polls conducted by the European Public Opinion Research Center in the 11 largest EU countries, which confirm that most Europeans believe in the crisis of the American political system and in the future receipt of hegemony status by China. Even in the most pro-American country in Europe, the United Kingdom, about 40% of respondents said that the American political system was destroyed. In general, across the EU and the UK, 48% to 79%, depending on the state (the smallest number in the United Kingdom, and the largest in Spain) believe that China will be the leading world power in 10 years (Krastev and Leonard 2021). Among the countries that are allies of the United States, the greatest enthusiasm for tough opposition to China is observed in the countries of the Asia-Pacific region – Australia and Japan. Nevertheless, as Dmitry Suslov, a Russian expert and deputy head of the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the Higher School of Economics, notes: ‘The Biden administration will fully pursue a policy of isolating China, exerting pressure on its allies and partners not to cooperate with China on technology issues. This could significantly slow down China’s technological development and strengthen the US’ technological leadership in the foreseeable future’ (Suslov 2021).

The alarming trend of continuing the US–China standoff threatens to become a new constant in international relations in the twenty-first century. Given the inevitably growing contradictions between the great powers and the catch-up nature of Chinese modernisation, which has been carried out since the 1980s by increasing cooperation with the United States and Western countries, there is a high probability that decoupling will continue under the new American administration. There will be a shift in policy from a trade war to a technological confrontation (for example, continuing to curb the expansion of the technology giant Huawei into foreign markets), and a more active introduction of sanctions against Chinese officials under the Magnitsky Act. At the same time, the Biden administration, in the authors’ opinion, will actively cooperate with China on the issue of limiting harmful emissions into the atmosphere and environmental safety, as the development of green energy and climate change issues is one of the priorities of the work of the Democratic team in the White House, which was clearly demonstrated during the recent international climate summit online.



From 2010 to 2017, the parties continued to diversify and improve bilateral dialogue mechanisms. Under Barack Obama, for example, the US–China Consultations on Asia-Pacific Affairs and the US–China Strategic Dialogue on Security were created, and under Donald Trump, the US–China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue.

There are different assessments of whether Washington will be able to form such a coalition. On the one hand, the United States understands that the current record inflation and the need for economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic are forcing many developing countries to seek cooperation with China, which managed to get out of the crisis with minimal losses and maintain high growth rates relative to other countries. Moreover, developing countries are mostly interested in maintaining relations with China and the United States and are unwilling to choose between the two largest world economies. On the other hand, some American experts believe that after the outbreak of the pandemic, unprecedented favourable geopolitical conditions have developed for the formation of a broad anti-Chinese coalition. In their opinion, during the development of the pandemic, negative characteristics of China's foreign policy behaviour were manifested, such as the use of the crisis phenomena of world development in the interests of obtaining commercial benefits and asserting its territorial claims, and the politicisation of its contribution to the fight against COVID-19 in combination with aggressive propaganda and disinformation companies. The formation of the anti-Chinese coalition became possible due to the emergence of several countries, including the leading world powers, which experienced pressure from Beijing during the fight against the pandemic or directly realised the danger of excessive economic, industrial or technological connectivity with China. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the fact that countries that previously adhered to the line of managed pragmatism in developing cooperation with China have become critical of it, and some of them have turned to implementing specific measures to counter it.

The strengthening of China's role in world politics and its stable economic growth are considered by the American political elite as a strategic challenge. Official Beijing hoped that with the arrival of a new Democratic administration in the White House, the trade war between the two countries would enter a stabilisation phase (Findings of Investigation 2018). However, the sanctions track remained the same. Despite the lifting of sanctions against the Chinese company TikTok, pressure continued on many Chinese technology giants. In early February 2022, the US Department of Commerce included 33 Chinese companies in the so-called 'list of unconfirmed companies'—this list includes firms whose business legality cannot be verified by the US authorities. Inclusion in this list imposes restrictions on the ability of companies to receive supplies from American exporters. Such a measure is also a blow to Chinese business because now, companies from the United States will have to cooperate with them less willingly since they will need to obtain a special licence. Among the Chinese firms included in

the list were high-tech suppliers, including manufacturers of laser components and pharmaceuticals, state research laboratories and two universities. Moreover, in 2021 the United States initiated the creation of a strategic security dialogue with Australia, India, Japan and the United States (QUAD), which can be identified as an element of military containment against China. Problems will occur with the Chinese 'neutral' support for Russia in the current Ukrainian war. It will probably deteriorate the relations between the two superpowers until the 'Cold War' level. The Sino-American competition will be the core global conflict in the twenty-first century.


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