

Democracy Conflict between China and the US: A Historical View

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Abstract: *Human rights disagreements have lied between the United States and China due to the discrepancy in political systems. Democracy, being one of the most important factors in human rights, has aroused continuous conflict between the two countries. This paper reviews the history of the democracy conflict between China and the United States. Throughout history, the essence of the China-US democracy conflict is consistent: the strategic need for national security.*

Keywords: *China-US relations; Democracy; Democratic politics; Human rights diplomacy*

1. Introduction

Ever since the late 20th century, one of the most important and most difficult resolving aspects of contention in China-US relations is the issue of human rights. Among all elements of human rights, democracy is more ideologically charged than any other factor. For even though other elements of human rights can be separated from a particular kind of political or economic system [1], democratization is unavoidably related to Westernization, and consequently unavoidably connected with state security. In the American view, China's political practice is incompatible with the standards of democracy; while in China's view, China under socialist conditions ought not to be judged by the US under capitalist conditions.

The "democracy conflict" discussed in this paper is the conflict over democracy between China and the US on the institutional level, based on discrepant political systems, government systems, and different beliefs of democracy. This paper reviews the history of the democracy conflict since late WW2, briefly outlines the changes in the democracy conflict from the establishment of diplomatic relations in the 1970s to the pre-epidemic era, and discusses the essence of the democracy conflict between the two countries.

2. The history of the China-US democracy conflict

2.1. Early Contact (1941-1946)

The US government, during its initial contacts with both Kuomintang Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during WW2, was already very concerned with the democratic values manifested by the two parties, as this directly represented the probability of establishing a democratic system when the party came into power after the war. At this time, US diplomats who had contact with CCP's Yan'an regime were amazed by the simple democratic qualities it presented, which American journalist Israel Epstein portrayed as the "startling contrasts between the bold and democratic Communists and the corrupt, decadent, repressive KMT" in his report for the New York Times [2].

This stark contrast was the root of the US comparative inclination toward the CCP during WW2, of their pressuring peace talks between the KMT government and the Communists in the early post-war days, and of the call for the KMT to incorporate the CCP as a legitimate party into a coalition government. The Yan'an regime was far more consistent with what the US identified as democratic political standards than the KMT government, hence supporting or at least maintaining friendly relations with such a regime was conducive to achieving comprehensive democratic politics in a country with one-fifth of the world's population as part of the US global strategy. This attempt continued throughout WW2 and into the early post-war period. The basic assumption underlying this tendency was that the CCP was more like a national liberation front pursuing liberal democracy and freedom rather than a genuine Soviet-like communist regime. In the course of the war, the CCP was clearly aware of, and intentionally exploited and prompted this perception, and consequently was able to obtain weapons provided by the US for

guerrilla resistance and to utilize US pressure to refrain the KMT government.

It was not until early 1946, before the outbreak of the Chinese Civil War, that the CCP officially began to shift from friendly to hostile toward the US as the latter went on to provide military aid and loans to the KMT government, and formally broke off diplomatic ties with the US after the outbreak of the Civil War, which in the US view meant the bankruptcy of the coalition government, i.e., the abandonment of the CCP's efforts to avoid a civil war, and the end of democratic politics in the CCP regime.

2.2. Undercurrents (1972-1988)

There were neither interactions nor disputes on democracy issues between China (mainland) and the US in the early Cold War period, for the two countries lacked direct diplomatic contact, until the 1970s, when China-US relations began to normalize and formalize, for the shared threat of the Soviet Union greatly overwhelmed the ideological incongruity between China and the US. At the same time, the reform and opening-up policy China began to implement in the late 1970s, especially the vindication of injustice cases in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), indicated to the US China's tendency to move closer to western political values; and the economic policy of attracting investment was also a manifestation of China's advancement of capitalism and market economy, which is considered necessarily consistent with capitalism liberal democracy. The US believed that China's deviation from Soviet communism and acceptance of Western liberal democracy had become possible. For China, also, in the process of reconstructing its Leninist people's democracy and rule of law after the Cultural Revolution, shared values with Western liberal democracy overwhelmed contradicting values, and reform and opening up called for the introduction of many western political ideas and practices. In general, at the beginning of this period, the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US was itself based on common interests that transcended ideology, and the issue of democracy, with its ideological roots, was naturally not the prior attention for both countries.

Yet beyond the calm eye between China and the US was the storm of human rights conflicts around the world. The 1970s was a period when the US democratic export began to advance from proposal to concrete policy. If the previous emphasis on democratic values in diplomatic strategy was mostly a political tradition, in this period it formally initiated to be closely integrated with diplomatic policy principles and gradually became an essential diplomatic weapon. The most prominent practice was the Helsinki Final Act signed in 1975 by 35 countries, including the US and the Soviet Union, whose entry into force elicited widespread upheavals within the Soviet Union, with open demands for multi-party systems, the formation of liberal groups, and other typical features of Western liberal democracy. During the Carter administration (1977-1981), the slogan of "human rights diplomacy" was first formally introduced and became a central part of US diplomatic policy for a long time. During the Reagan administration (1981-1989), the US began to integrate human rights with the strategic interests of US diplomatic policy.

The US for the first time applied "human rights diplomacy" to China-US relations when in 1979 Carter signed the Taiwan Relations Act, which stated that it was the goal of the US to preserve and promote human rights in Taiwan. The Act did not have a direct impact at the time, but in the subsequent conflicts between the US and China over Taiwan, Taiwan was always classified by the US as part of the democratic world, excluding mainland China. This was an important part of the subsequent China-US conflict over democracy.

In 1980, the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs of the US issued its first human rights report on China in response to the "Democracy Wall" movement. It was the most prominent part of China-US human rights friction regarding democracy during this period, i.e., support for public attacks on the country's institutions, advocacy of a multi-party system, etc. This period is known in the West as the "Beijing Spring", corresponding to the "Prague Spring" of democratization and reform in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

During this period, the friction over democracy between China and the US began to formalize gradually and emerge into a stage of preparation for confrontation.

2.3. Fierce Confrontation (1989-1994)

The Tiananmen crisis that occurred in China on June 4th, 1989 brought the human rights issue to the very center of the China-US relationship [3]. The outcome of the incident, in the view of the US, was a complete violation of democratic politics. At the same time, the political movements that took place in

Eastern Europe fully realized the democratization process envisioned by the US for communist countries, i.e., dialogue between communist parties and democratic parties or groups reached with US support and facilitation, a multi-party system achieved, and the former eventually deprived of rein through elections. Subsequently, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact greatly eliminated the US government's plan of conserving a sound relationship with China. For this reason, the US-led western countries imposed a series of economic sanctions on China, including using the Most Favored Nation (MFN) status as the main tool.

This period was the most intense confrontation in history between the US and China. Affected by both the world landscape and the Chinese situation, the US demands for China's "human rights diplomacy" went beyond the ideological level to more concrete forms. One of the three pillars of US foreign policy proposed by the Clinton administration was to base China on the principles of liberal democracy and democratic institutions. Through economic and political pressure, the US expected to promote democratization reform in China and to bring about a fundamental transformation of China's political system similar to that of the Eastern European countries.

However, China insisted on the idea of non-interference in its internal affairs and did not carry out institutional reforms, and opposed all US "human rights diplomacy" firmly and fiercely, while continuing to expand its reform and opening-up policy externally and to build its people's democratic legal system internally, as it had since the 1980s. With this standoff, doubts have emerged within the United States about this policy of containment of China. Some American analysts argued that allowing China-US relations to be built on ideological conflicts after the collapse of the Cold War pattern would hamper US global strategy, especially regional political and economic interests in East Asia and the Pacific Rim. The business community also believed that an economic conflict with a huge market that was continuously promoting market economy reforms and committed to taking part in the world economic system would be extremely costly and could permanently damage US' global market position.^[4] Eventually, Clinton announced in 1994 that human rights issues would be delinked from MFN status. So far, the bitterly conflicting confrontation between the US and China over democracy came to a temporary cease.

2.4. Calm Cease (1996-2018)

During this period, common interests in areas ranging from nuclear nonproliferation to transnational crime continued to overwhelm ideological conflicts. It was a time when the US government equally recognized concerns regarding human rights and acknowledged the importance of the China-US relationship. The Bush administration, as American human rights advocates put it in the 1990s, "focused more on core rights of universal consent, emphasizing the principle of humanitarian treatment of individuals and less on national political systems"[5]. The Obama administration raised relatively more explicit concerns over human rights, but no straightforward tension over democracy equivalent to the previous period exhibited. In conjunction with China's fairly moderate diplomatic posture during the 2000s and early 2010s, the two countries remained free of confrontational conflict over democracy.

As in the 1970s and 1980s, this period was a time of comparative calmness but was a time when the overall US democratic export strategy advanced and matured. On one hand, the intervention behavior was formed. Since the end of the Cold War, the diplomatic policy adopted by the US in the export of democracy became more intense and direct. As early as 1992, the US had pushed the United Nations to allow multinational forces to enter Somalia to provide humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. From 1995 to 1999, NATO also intruded in the Yugoslavian Wars in the name of humanitarian assistance. After 911, counterterrorism became the priority of US diplomatic policy, and the Bush administration brought the strategy of democracy promotion to the height of US core security interests. On the other hand, the strategy of indirect intervention was formed. The main form is the formation of the "nonviolent war" strategy, commonly known as "color revolutions", indicating ideological means that emphasize psychological warfare, such as nonviolent protests and persuasion, non-cooperation movements, and direct intervention and disruption of situations [6]. In addition to diplomatic backing, the specific means comprised of reaching out to opposition groups within the target country and providing financial assistance for their political democratization actions. For instance, supporting the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan and the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong in 2014 were part of this strategy.

From this period onward, the US democracy promotion strategy was no longer a policy slogan, but a practical international political act that started posing a direct impact on national sovereignty, from penetrating diplomatically between countries to more aspects of the target society. The US strategy of exporting democracy to Taiwan and Hong Kong is not only about the two regions, but also intends to bring about an overall impact on mainland China through the process of desired drastic political

transformations in Taiwan and Hong Kong, just as the domino effect initial regime transformation in Poland had on the Eastern European countries and eventually the Soviet Union. This explicitly hostile strategy sets the stage for a future overt conflict between the US and China over democracy.

2.5. Conflict Resurfaces (2019)

Once again, the United States and China are in open conflict over democracy issues in the 2019 Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement. As the legal conflict between Hong Kong and the mainland is involved, touching upon the very foundation of the political system, and as the movement largely overlaps with the Hong Kong independence movement, challenging China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the crisis poses a greater threat to China's national security strategy than either the Sunflower Movement or the Umbrella Revolution, as a result, the conflict between the US, who overtly supports the movement, and China is much more intense.

In this process, a landmark transformation occurred in the China-US democracy conflict: China began to take its initiative over the issues of democracy. This change occurred for two reasons. First, since the Trump administration, especially since the 2018 trade war greatly shrank common economic interests and led to resurfacing intense ideological conflict, China had adopted a more assertive attitude in foreign policy toward the US than before and had intended to maintain more autonomy. Second, the violent chaos the Hong Kong political movement displayed in the process of democratic request, to some extent, exhibited some drawbacks of the widely accepted citizen participation definition given by renowned political scientists Samuel P. Huntington and Joan M. Nelson that legitimated violent protests even rebellions.[7] On this basis, China began to initiate a dispute with the US over the essence of democracy, expressly in response to what Pelosi referred to as "a beautiful landscape".

3. The Essence and Future of the Conflict

3.1. The Discrepant Understanding of Democracy

In the Chinese context of democracy, both formal definition and informal consensus, there is a strong "people-based" overtone rooted in the traditional Chinese Confucianism, that is, it focuses more on the government behavior instead of citizen rights, on whether it provides high-quality services to the people, on whether the policies introduced are well received, and on whether the economic and social good of the people are guaranteed. A white paper published by the Chinese State Council Information Office in 2021 described the idea and practice of democracy in China, in which a large number of contents on social insurance systems and economic efficiency can be found. Similarly, according to the Third Wave of Asian Barometer Survey on public opinion in mainland China on meanings of democracy (2011), mainland China citizens generally consider the government's capability to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, to ensure basic livelihoods, and to provide quality public services to be the most important features of democracy, manifestly before freedom of election, freedom of political expression and multi-party system.

The word democracy in Chinese, "Min Zhu", is the combination of the word people and master, meaning the rule of people. Yet the definition of "rule" in democracy in China is fundamentally different from that in the West. Chinese criterion for evaluating whether a government is democratic is whether it serves as a good servant of the people. In the Western comprehension of democracy, "master" emphasizes autonomy, i.e., the citizens' right to take the initiative in political participation, including the equal and effective rights to vote, to affect policy, to speak freely, in a word, to "argue". This right has given rise to a multi-party system, which requires the existence of opposition parties that can compete for power and the inclusion of spokespersons representing different interests.

The absence of the "right to argue" has been the primary basis for the US accusation of undemocratic politics in China since the 1990s. But in China, the absence of the "right of argument" is fated and natural, in that, the basic assumption of the CCP regime, same as any Communist party, is that under socialist conditions, Marxism and the CCP represent the unanimous interests of all citizens, that the CCP's rule is truthful, [8] and that Chinese society undoubtedly does not require the "right of argument" on the institutional level, deliberately not on legitimacy issues. Rather, as mentioned above, government behaviors are more related to democracy in China's case.

3.2. The Essence of the Democracy Conflict between Chinese and the US

The conflict between China and the US over democracy has been a fluctuating dynamic, with the common political or economic interests as the variable and the conflict as the dependent variable. And now, the two countries are visibly entering a new period of conflict. In the epidemic era, when zero-covid and coexistence policies are inexorably exclusive, the discrepancy between the claim of democracy in China and that in the West becomes more prominent, and the topic of democracy is on the agenda of dialogue or confrontation between China and the United States as never before.

Nonetheless, the essence of the China-US democracy conflict is consistent: the strategic need for national security.

For the US, the democratic strategy toward China is an accession of the democratic strategy toward the Soviet Union. The latter, stemming from the power parity purpose and preventing nuclear war, inevitably leads to the former also assuming that China is equally aggressive and threatening. What is rooted in the China-US democracy conflict is the mentality that, as Gaddis phrased, authoritarianism within a state produced aggressive behavior toward other states [9]. As early as the end of WW2, the reason the US continued to support the KMT instead of the Chinese Communist Party, which it previously believed to be more democratic, was that the world landscape had already transformed dramatically towards a bipolar pattern. To recognize the possibility of communism and democracy appearing together in one regime was to deny the absolute legitimacy of anti-communism and anti-Soviet. As Richard Bernstein put it, "Once the Cold War broke out, it was not a country's domestic arrangements that determined its relationship to the United States; it was whether it aligned itself with the Soviet Union and put itself in the service of Soviet goals"[10]. In other words, between a pro-US authoritarian regime and an anti-US democratic regime, the United States was bound to choose the former.

Throughout the Cold War, US foreign policy was based on this. It strained democratic values to embrace right-wing dictatorships throughout much of the "third world" as a way of preventing the emergence of left-wing dictatorships, and yet "every administration since Truman's had done this"[11]. This strategy did not terminate with the end of the Cold War, but continued to be internalized into the overall US national security strategy and became straighter, broader, and more concrete.

For China, ensuring the initiative in the democratic conflict is likewise important for its national security. There is no disagreement that the Chinese political system, with a clear contrast to the more familiar liberal democratic ones, follows a model of people's democracy offered by Marxism, which is used, in particular, to designate the goal of social equality brought about through the common ownership of wealth, and tends to be dismissive of liberal democracy [12]. Yet the term has become rather contentious and plausibly doomed since the practice of the Soviet Union proved unsuccessful. During the late 20th century and the early 21st century, questions are increasingly raised about the link between voting and democracy legitimacy [13]. Therefore, the applicability of western standard democracy, as well as the indispensability of the US role model, are also suspected by many researchers, especially Chinese researchers, who are keen to prove the legitimacy of Leninist people's democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The humiliation in recent history and a corresponding sensitivity to sovereignty determine China's sense of insecurity compared to the US in diplomatic policies. With its embodiment of the dominant Marxism of the country, the maintenance of the conception of people's democracy is necessarily a matter of securing ideological rein, territorial, sovereign integrity, and the overall security of the state.

In a pattern of ideological rivalry, the China-US democracy conflict is destined to be not about democracy per se, but about the need to safeguard national security strategic interests under ideological conflict. That is the essence of the democratic conflict that is inevitable to arise from time to time between China and the US, as long as ideological confrontation remains active. After the end of the Cold War, the ideological conflict did not perish, but was only temporarily suppressed, and would predictably reappear in the form of national security strategies, either explicitly or implicitly, when common economic interests diminish.

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