



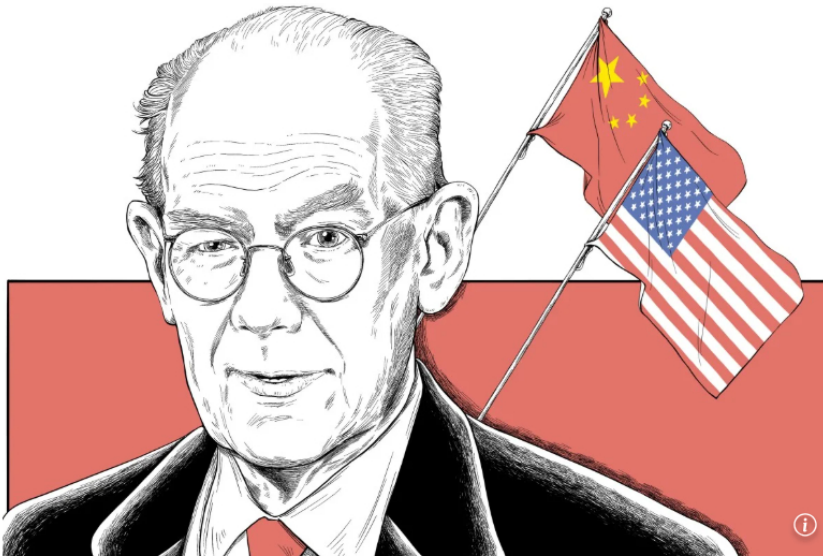
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Open Questions | John J. Mearsheimer on unavoidable anarchy and what Trump gets right on China, Russia

International relations expert discusses looming flashpoints in the US-China rivalry and the 'colossal mistake' if Ukraine joined Nato

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[87 of 87]

John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1982. He has written extensively on security issues and international politics and is best known for his theory of offensive realism in international relations, which holds that to dominate the international system, great powers must constantly engage in security competition with each other, sometimes leading to war.

In this interview, Mearsheimer discusses the biggest threats to a liberal democracy, Donald Trump's good instincts and the top need driving China's rise to global power.

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In terms of US–China relations, they’re going to be fundamentally competitive for the rest of this century. But I don’t think in the foreseeable future they are going to be intensely competitive. There are two reasons for that.

The first is that the United States is pinned down in the [Middle East](#) and in the war in [Ukraine](#). It is deeply committed in both those conflicts. And that makes it very difficult for the US to pay much attention to East Asia. So the US does not want any trouble with China in East Asia.

The US understands it has a competitive relationship with China, but it does not want to have a crisis and it certainly does not want to have a conflict. Again, because the US is foolishly, in my mind, concentrating on the Middle East and on Ukraine instead of East Asia.

At the same time, China has significant economic and political problems at home and has no real interest in a crisis with the US at this point in time, much less a conflict.

So the Chinese leadership, much like the American leadership, has an interest in managing the competition in ways that maintain a relatively peaceful environment in East Asia.

Therefore, I would expect if President Xi and President Trump get together, they will have a very cordial meeting and both sides will go to great lengths to assure the other side that they do not want trouble in East Asia, and they will say that they can live peacefully together.

Is TikTok going to be a hurdle or is it basically solved?

The competition between the US and China mainly involves security and [TikTok](#) is a minor issue. In the US, what is driving American concern about TikTok is not China. The US says that, but that is not true. What’s driving concern about TikTok in the US is the Israel lobby.



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The fact is that on TikTok, Israel is invariably shown in a bad light because there are all sorts of posts on TikTok that portray the Israeli genocide in [Gaza](#).

And what the Israel lobby wants to do is it wants to shut TikTok down or create a situation where TikTok limits the amount of criticism of Israel. And that is why there’s been all this controversy surrounding TikTok. It does not have much to do with US–China relations. It has to do with Israel.

Is the multipolar world order still being shaped, and is Beijing strong enough to challenge the unipolar world order?

The United States, China and Russia have all been great powers since about 2017. That is another way of saying that we have been in a multipolar world since 2017.

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And in that multipolar world, I think the US is the most powerful of the three great powers. Nevertheless, I think China is a peer competitor of the United States. China is economically very powerful and it is translating its economic might into military power.

And therefore it has become a formidable challenger of the US, which again, I think still remains the No 1 power in the system. Russia, I think, is the weakest of the three great powers, but we clearly live in a multipolar world.

There is no question that in that multipolar world – where China is a peer competitor of the United States – it is interested in having great influence in existing international institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization and so on.

And at the same time, China is interested, as you would expect from a rising great power, in creating its own institutions. The [Belt and Road Initiative](#) is one example of this. The [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank] is another example of this. And of course, the Brics bloc would be a third example.

So, what we should expect moving forward is that the US and China will have their own institutions that they dominate and they will compete for power. They will compete for power inside institutions to which they both belong.



■ Is the proposed TikTok sale to US and global investors a done deal?

You've previously said the US will not accept a peer competitor, yet China advocates a "win-win" approach and urges the US to abandon its "[zero-sum mentality](#)". Given your earlier point that great powers inherently compete to achieve regional hegemony, is this win-win goal realistic?

No, win-win is not realistic. The fact is China and the United States are strategic competitors. They are competing for power. They both want to influence the balance of power in ways that favour themselves. The Chinese want to gain power at the expense of the Americans and the Americans want to gain power at the expense of the Chinese.

This makes perfect sense for both countries, but that competition is by definition zero-sum. And it makes good sense for the Chinese to talk about win-win because that kind of soft rhetoric helps make other countries think that China is a benign actor in the international system. It's soft power and it makes sense, but it does not reflect reality.

The Chinese operate in a highly competitive world as does the United States, and the competition is zero-sum in nature and nothing can change that.

Under the "Realism" theory of international relations, is it correct to say that states – motivated by conflict and self-interest – are compelled to

continuously maximise their power to guarantee their security and survival in the jungle?

Survival has to be the principal goal of every state because if you do not survive, you end up with a century of national humiliation or you disappear from the planet. So, survival is always the No 1 goal for states, whether we're talking about China or the United States or Nicaragua or South Africa; it does not matter.

Survival is the principal goal, just like for every individual on the planet, like you, like me. And in the international system, the best way to survive is to be powerful. And if you're weak, other states will take advantage of you, as the Chinese know very well from their century of national humiliation.

So the Chinese are deeply committed to their survival and they fully understand that the best way to achieve their survival is to be powerful. And indeed to be more powerful than the United States.

If I were Chinese and somebody asked me, "Do you want to be more powerful than the United States or would you accept a situation where the United States is more powerful?" my answer would axiomatically be that I'd want China to be far more powerful.

As a Chinese citizen, I would want China to be more powerful than every country on the planet because the best way to survive in a system where there's no higher authority that can protect you if you get into trouble is to be very powerful. China understands that, the United States understands that, and that is why the two are competing to be more powerful than the other.



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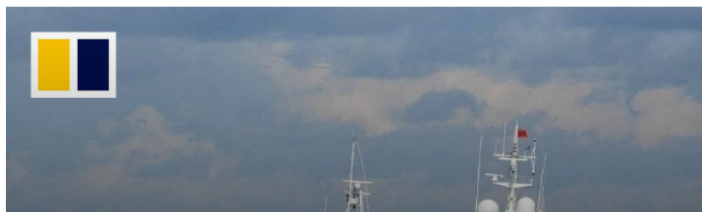
— John J. Mearsheimer

So, even though the US is occupied by Ukraine and the Middle East, this tension will continue because they are both competing for supremacy in the international system?

Yes. To put a finer point on it, the Chinese are interested in becoming a regional hegemon in East Asia.

The Chinese want to dominate East Asia, the way the United States dominates the western hemisphere. Furthermore, the Chinese want to develop a power projection capability. They want to build a [blue-water navy](#) so they can project power around the world, much the way the US does with its navy. It makes perfect sense from a Chinese point of view.

But the Americans have a deep-seated interest in making sure that China does not dominate East Asia and that the US dominates the high seas – not China. And this is the root of the competition between these two countries. And it will go on for the foreseeable future.





New collision of Chinese-Philippine ships in South China Sea

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How has China's military modernisation specifically changed the risk of a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea?

I think there is a serious risk of a military clash over Taiwan and in the South China Sea. There's no question about that.

Taiwan is a very dangerous flashpoint between the US and mainland China because the United States is deeply committed to making sure that Taiwan remains "independent" for strategic reasons. And at the same time, from Beijing's perspective, Taiwan is sacred territory and it is deeply committed to making Taiwan part of China.

These conflicting attitudes towards Taiwan create a situation where you could easily have a conflict between the two great powers. We do not have to worry too much in the immediate future about a conflict over Taiwan, in large part because Beijing does not have the military capability at this point in time to conquer Taiwan.

Conquering Taiwan would involve a major amphibious operation and amphibious assaults are among the most difficult military operations. To attack Taiwan across the Taiwan Strait would be enormously difficult, especially since the US would almost certainly aid Taiwan in the fight.

At this point, Beijing is unlikely to try to attack or conquer Taiwan because it does not have the military wherewithal.

And at the same time, because the United States does not want a crisis with China at this time, it will go to great lengths to make sure that the Taiwanese government does nothing to provoke Beijing.

So I think that it is likely – not certain – that there will not be a conflict between the US and China over Taiwan in the near future. But moving forward, that could all change as Beijing develops greater military capability, and as the United States builds up its forces in East Asia, which I think is likely to happen over time. So the issue of Taiwan is filled with increasing risk over time. Yes, there's no question about that.

The possibility of conflict over the South China Sea is great as well due to China's military modernisation, which you just mentioned.

Miscalculation is always a significant problem. The fact is that the United States and China have fundamentally different views on who controls the South China Sea. China basically believes that it's a body of water that belongs to China.

China thinks it effectively owns the South China Sea. The US views the South China Sea as international waters. Furthermore, in a conflict there, between countries like the Philippines and China, the US would almost certainly side with the Philippines.

And one can easily imagine a crisis breaking out between the Philippines and China, and when the shooting starts and the US comes in on the side of the Philippines.

So there are a number of ways that you could have a crisis in the South China Sea that ends up escalating and turning into an armed conflict between the US and China.



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Is the political polarisation in the United States a temporary phenomenon that will significantly decline after Trump's second term, or is it a lasting, entrenched trend?

I do not believe that Trump is principally responsible for the political division in the United States, although he exacerbated it. I think he took advantage of that political division to get elected in 2016 and then to get re-elected in 2024. There is no question that there is a profound political division in the US, and it threatens the very essence of American democracy.

We in the United States are facing a major crisis. We have a particular political system generally referred to as liberal democracy, which most Americans cherish. I certainly do, and I want to make sure that liberal democracy flourishes in my country for the foreseeable future. But when you look at the forces at play inside the US that underpin this political division, there is great cause for worry.

The fact is that large numbers of people in the lower classes and even in the middle class are extremely angry at the governing elites, especially the liberal intellectuals. Plus, they feel that they have little say in government policy. Indeed, they think the elites run the country for their own benefit.

And related to that, it is quite clear that if you look at the state of the [American economy](#), it is very difficult for the average American to pay the cost of housing, the cost of food and more generally, the cost of just living from day to day.

People who are not at the top feel that they are at a point where they cannot put enough food on the table, they cannot put a roof over their head, and this is because the governing elites, the people who run the government, are using the system to enrich themselves at their expense.

Another way of saying this is you have significant economic inequality in the United States, as you do in most countries at this time. Anytime you have great economic inequality and the people at the bottom are struggling, those people are going to be very angry, and especially angry at the people at the top who they think are manipulating the system to their advantage.

So this, in good part, is what is driving the polarisation in the US, which leads to a sharp divide between red states and blue states.





Trump downplays Taiwan dispute in China talks

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How is that going to hurt democracy?

To make a democracy work you need tolerance. Tolerance is of enormous importance because people often disagree about core issues like abortion. There is not much tolerance of opposing viewpoints these days.

People on the red side view people on the blue side as the enemy and people on the blue side view people on the red side as the enemy.

When you live in a liberal democracy and you have division of this sort where you have rival groups that don't just disagree but loathe each other, and in many cases want to do violence to the other side, and certainly show very little tolerance towards the other side, that liberal democracy is not going to last very long.

The thing you want to remember is that in any political system, whether you are talking about China or the United States or any other country, different people are going to have fundamentally different views about first principles and about questions regarding the good life.

They are going to want to run their lives in very different ways. You always have fundamental differences among groups of people and among individuals in any society. To make that society work, you need a powerful government that can keep people from killing each other.

But at the same time, it is also very important that there be lots of tolerance – that one person who has a view that is very different from another person is tolerant of that person's views.

Once people become intolerant to the point where they want to kill people who have fundamentally different views, there is no way you can have a liberal democracy, and you run the risk, of course, of civil war. This problem is not peculiar to the United States; it is true of many countries around the world.

China had a huge civil war that finally ended in 1949, which tells you that there were at least two big groups of Chinese people who had very different views on what China should look like.

This is not unusual. The United States had a civil war between 1861 and 1865, and the US, like every other country, has a rich history of contentious relations between different groups and different individuals in its midst.

The question is: how do you foster a liberal democracy or how do you create and maintain a liberal democracy in a world where people often profoundly disagree? Tolerance is one of the keys to success, and what I'm saying to you is that if you look at America today, tolerance is in short supply, which is very dangerous.

As shown in the Charlie Kirk murder?

That is an example, yes. The [Charlie Kirk murder](#) is an excellent example because it shows you the potential for violence. It shows you that profound disagreement can lead to violence, and that is anathema in a liberal democracy.

If disagreements frequently turn into killings, liberal democracy is kaput.

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You mentioned that Trump has had some good instincts in international relations, but you also said that he failed in execution. What were the good instincts and what went wrong?

The best example of Trump's good instincts is that he ended engagement with China in his first term. I think engagement, which was designed to make China richer, was a remarkably foolish policy from an American perspective.

The US helped make China a formidable, great power. The US helped end unipolarity by fuelling China's economic growth through a policy called engagement. This was remarkably foolish and Trump ended engagement and moved to containment. That is the best example of Trump having good instincts although I'm sure all of my Chinese interlocutors do not want to hear that.

A good example of where he has the right instincts but has been unable to execute is on Ukraine. Even before he moved into the White House, he was deeply committed to ending the Ukrainian war and greatly improving relations with Russia. But he has failed to stop the war in Ukraine. He is now in the process of trying to stop the genocide in Gaza after foolishly supporting it for many months. He has achieved a temporary ceasefire, but it is doubtful it will hold and regardless, it is not the same as getting a genuine peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.



The question is: how do you foster a liberal democracy or how do you create and maintain a liberal democracy in a world where people often profoundly disagree?

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Why is improving relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin a “good instinct”?

For two reasons. First of all, Russia is not a threat to dominate Europe the way China is a threat to dominate East Asia. So the US does not have to worry about containing Russian expansion in Europe. Russia is too weak to control Europe. It is not the Soviet Union in its heyday.

So, we have no good reason to pick a fight with Russia. Second, by picking a fight with Russia in Ukraine, we have driven the Russians into the arms of the Chinese. And from a strategic perspective, that is remarkably foolish.

The US should have good relations with Russia and should do everything it can to make sure that Russia and China do not have close relations. We operate in a world of balance of power politics. There are three great powers: the United States, China and Russia.

It makes absolutely no sense for the US to be arrayed against a closely allied China and Russia. But because of the war in Ukraine, we have helped to create a tight alliance between China and Russia, which is certainly in China's interest but not in America's interest.

I have long argued that China should hope the war in Ukraine goes on for a long time and that the US remains deeply involved in that war. That makes it difficult for the United States to pivot to East Asia to contain China, and it also works to drive the Russians into the arms of the Chinese. This is clearly in China's interest. So the war in Ukraine is manna from heaven for China.

Therefore, the US should have a deep-seated interest in ending that Ukraine

war, a point I think Trump recognises.

Why did Trump fail?

He failed to appreciate how complicated the Ukraine problem is and what is necessary to solve it.

Trump thinks he is a genius. He thinks that he can solve problems quickly and easily and does not have to depend on experts. With regard to Ukraine, it is an incredibly difficult problem to solve and he needed to listen to people who knew the issue. He needed to understand all of the dimensions of the conflict and he needed to work overtime to end that war.

But he didn't do that and thus he failed to end the war diplomatically, which means the war is going to be settled on the battlefield. And I believe that the Russians are going to win an ugly victory and that the war is likely to end reasonably soon.

Is that because the US is withdrawing its support?

That matters a bit. It is mainly because in a war of attrition like you have between Ukraine and Russia, what determines who wins is the number of soldiers on each side and the amount of firepower on each side. This is a war of attrition where both sides are trying to bleed the other side white.

In a conflict like that, the balance of manpower between the two sides and the balance of firepower between the two sides matter enormously. And the Russians have a decisive advantage in terms of both manpower and firepower.

And that advantage has now reached the point where Russia is on the verge of defeating Ukraine and conquering a huge chunk of Ukrainian territory and annexing it to Russia.

What is the time frame?

Well, it's hard to say specifically.

There are important individuals in Ukraine who are saying the war has to end by the end of this year. That is certainly possible, but if it does not happen and the war goes into early 2026, it will not go much beyond then.

The Russians are inflicting huge casualties on the Ukrainians, which is why I think the war will come to an end reasonably soon. And the result will be that the Russians will occupy a large chunk of Ukrainian land that they will annex.

Ukraine will end up as a dysfunctional rump state, and the Russians will have a vested interest in making sure that that dysfunctional rump state remains dysfunctional, so that Ukraine cannot join [Nato](#) or the European Union.

So, this is a catastrophe for Ukraine.

You pointed out the risks of conflicts 10 years ago.

It was remarkably foolish of the United States and the Europeans to push to bring Ukraine into Nato.

And that is why I've argued that the United States especially, but also the Europeans, bear the principal responsibility for this disaster. If the West had not moved to bring Ukraine into Nato, I believe that Ukraine would exist today inside its pre-2014 borders.

That is to say that I believe Crimea and the four oblasts that Russia has

annexed would still be part of Ukraine. There would have been no war in all likelihood between Ukraine and Russia. It was a colossal mistake on the part of the US and its European allies to push to bring Ukraine into Nato.

What can Europe do in the face of the changing world order? What will happen to Europe after the end of the war in Ukraine?

The problem that the Europeans have is twofold. First of all, they now have poisonous relations with Russia, and they cannot depend on cheap gas and oil from Russia to fuel their economies. So, from both a political and economic point of view, Europe is in deep trouble because of what has happened in its relations with Russia.

At the same time, of course, the US is slowly withdrawing from Europe, which is not good from a European perspective because the US serves as a pacifier in Europe. The presence of large-scale US military forces in Europe has a pacifying effect there.

We provide a security umbrella for Europeans. And that is why the Europeans are deeply committed to keeping US troops in Europe. In fact, European elites live in fear that the American pacifier will go home. So, if you are a European leader today, you have to worry about two major league problems.

One is your terrible relations with Russia, and what that means politically and economically. And two, the fact that the US is going home or might go home.

So the question then is what does that mean for Europe's relations with China? I think this tells you that the Europeans have a deep-seated interest in fostering good economic relations with China. And the Chinese, of course, have a deep-seated interest in fostering good relations with Europe.

So one can imagine a situation moving forward where economic intercourse between Europe and China increases significantly to the benefit of both sides.

Furthermore, it's important to understand that the Europeans are getting increasingly desperate, which is likely to push them to trade with China regardless of what's happening in Ukraine.

You mentioned that we are in international anarchy now. Is the UN still relevant and still performing its functions, and can China fill the void of international leadership as the US withdraws from many international organisations and initiatives?

The United Nations remains relevant for sure. But the key point to understand is that the United Nations has never been a very powerful or effective institution. That is because the UN Security Council, which is the most important decision-making body inside the United Nations, is often paralysed because the major powers on the Security Council have a veto.

So, as long as China, the United States, Russia, France and Britain all have vetoes, there are great limits to what the United Nations can do.

Furthermore, the UN does not have an army, which means that it cannot force a great power to behave according to its rules if that great power does not want to.

International institutions have no meaningful coercive leverage over great powers. And that fact, coupled with the fact that the great powers all have veto power in the Security Council, is going to markedly limit what the United Nations can do. That has been true since 1945, when the United

United Nations can do. That has been true since 1945, when the United Nations was created.

So, the United Nations has limited influence on international politics. Still, I think the UN is a useful institution and I think all the great powers prefer to have the UN rather than not have it.

But no great power is under any illusions about what the UN can do. This is not to say that institutions do not matter at all. China certainly understands that institutions do matter. Just think about how much China has benefited since 2001 from membership in the World Trade Organization.

And as we all know, China benefits greatly from Brics, from the Belt and Road Initiative, from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and so on and so forth. So, China understands that institutions matter even if they do not have coercive leverage over great powers like China and the United States.

Unsurprisingly, China is going to great lengths to increase its influence inside existing institutions, while also creating international institutions of its own. This is exactly what the US did, once it became a great power. China is following in America's footsteps.

If we have rules-based international institutions, are we still living in international anarchy?

We live in anarchy because there is no higher authority that can enforce the rules. This is the point that I've been trying to emphasise.

If an international body tells China that it cannot do something that China thinks is in its national interest, Chinese leaders will ignore what that international institution says. The US would do the same.

If the US thinks that the ruling of an international institution is not in its national interest, it will ignore that ruling and that international institution will be unable to enforce its ruling because it has insufficient power. It is not a world government. The system is anarchic.

It's why international law is of limited utility. Inside China, you have a state. You have a higher authority that enforces the law. Inside the United States, you have a higher authority, the state, that enforces the law. You have a police force. You have a legal system that has real bite because that legal system is part of the state.

But in the international system, there is no world state. There is no higher authority. There is no international police force. Of course, that is why states have to provide for their own security, and thus why they want a favourable balance of power.

The international system, in short, is a self-help system, and in a self-help system, the best way to survive is to be powerful, as all states quickly figure out.

You are known for advocating China containment policies, which Beijing opposes. At the same time, you are a popular scholar in China and you've even been interviewed by state media when you visited China. Why is that the case?

To answer this question, you really need to ask Chinese people why they're so friendly towards me. But I'll give you my thoughts on why I get along so well with my Chinese interlocutors and why I love to visit China.

First of all, most Chinese people understand my core argument about China's rise even if you disagree with it.

China's rise even if you disagree with it.

It is an argument that you want to listen carefully to and think about. I have long argued that China cannot rise peacefully. Of course, the Chinese people have a deep-seated interest in believing the opposite. They should want to think that China can rise peacefully.

Therefore, if you are Chinese, you want to hear my argument and try to figure out why you think I'm wrong.

I have found in many of my discussions with Chinese people over the years that they are determined to figure out what the flaws are in my argument so they can make the case I am wrong and China can rise peacefully.

In essence, I think most Chinese understand that engaging with me from an intellectual point of view makes good strategic sense.

The second general point I would make is that I think that I have much in common with most Chinese elites – not all but most. I think most Chinese are realists and they are sympathetic to my general approach to thinking about the world.

I think the average Chinese person is more of a realist than the average American. And I think there is a certain *simpatico* between me and most of my Chinese interlocutors for that reason.

I also find that the Chinese love theory. I often say that I think the Chinese are among the most theoretical people that I've engaged with over the years.

I go to many countries, talk to many people. But I think there's no country on the planet where the people are more attuned to talking about international relations theory than the Chinese. And of course, I love international relations theory and therefore I feel very much at home intellectually in China. I think that is a very important reason for my popularity in China.

Intellectually, I'm more at home in China than I am in the United States when talking about international relations. That may sound odd, but the Chinese are my kind of people when it comes to thinking about international politics.

They're realists and they think in theoretical ways. So, I feel comfortable in China. I think my Chinese interlocutors understand that I feel comfortable, which makes them feel comfortable. So I almost always have excellent intellectual exchanges with my Chinese interlocutors.

Why are Chinese realists?

Chinese are realists because of their history. They understand from studying China's history, they understand that the international system is a dangerous place and terrible things can happen to a country if it is weak.

The Chinese fully understand that it is not easy to survive in the international system and the best way to survive is to be powerful. The century of national humiliation forcefully drives that point home very clearly.

Americans tend to be much more idealistic in their thinking about international politics. That is not to say that US policymakers always behave according to those idealist dictates. But they tend to think and talk about international politics in those terms and tend to be hostile towards realism in ways that the Chinese are not.

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Josephine Ma

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Josephine Ma is China news editor and has covered China news for the Post for more than 20 years. As a correspondent in Beijing, she reported on everything from the 2003 Sars outbreak t...

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