No matter who wins the American presidency and who fills the new Chinese Politburo, on November 6 and 8 respectively, the world can expect a more strained relationship between the United States and China in the years ahead. While individual leaders do matter and domestic debates about foreign policy persist, Sino-American relations now operate on the basis of a number of systemic factors beyond the control of Xi Jinping & Co. on the Chinese side and either Mitt Romney or Barack Obama on the American side.

Over the past three years the relationship has become more strained, fraught, and distrustful in a number of realms. The competitive elements in the relationship are growing and now becoming primary, while the cooperative ones are secondary and declining. Taken together, this condition can be described as “coopetition.” But the inter-governmental meetings meant to forge cooperation are becoming more pro forma and increasingly acrimonious. Beneath the surface of official exchanges, mutual distrust is pervasive in both governments and one now finds few bureaucratic actors on either side with a strong mission to cooperate (educational and tourist exchanges are exceptions). The two sides wrangle over trade and investment conditions, technology espionage and cyber hacking, global governance challenges like climate change and Syria, nuclear challenges like Iran and North Korea, their respective military postures in the Asia-Pacific, and other issues. As China’s global footprint has emerged onto every continent, it is increasingly bumping up against longstanding American interests—thus adding a global dimension the relationship has never had.

This increasingly uneasy situation has been brought about by a number of factors intrinsic to both nations, but also as the result of systemic changes in world affairs. At the systemic level, it is not unnatural that frictions should arise between a rising power and an established power. Rising discord also goes beyond the governments to the domestic society. A recent Pew poll, released on September 18, reveals that 66 percent of the general American public and 80 percent of experts view China as a competitor, while 26 percent of both groups say China cannot be trusted. Chinese attitudes are more posi-
In the domestic debate, both countries have been sliding toward more nativist or realist positions. In the United States, the Obama administration has pursued a more realist approach through its “strategic rebalancing” (also known as the “pivot”) to the Asia-Pacific. In China, realist voices and policies have become more characteristic of Chinese foreign and security policy since the nation’s “year of assertiveness” during 2009-2010.

While this increasingly competitive relationship is likely to be the “new normal,” and both sides need to get used to it and not indulge in naïve pursuit of harmony, Sino-American ties are also characterized by deep interdependence. They are each other’s second largest trading partner, the U.S. is the third largest source of foreign direct investment in China while China is the largest foreign creditor of the United States, China is the world’s largest exporting nation and the United States the largest importer. Every day about 9000 people travel between the two countries, nearly 150,000 Chinese students study in American universities with about 20,000 Americans studying in China. There are 38 sister province/state and 169 sister city relationships binding localities together and offering opportunities for exchanges. There are 300 million Chinese learning English and approximately 200,000 Americans learning Chinese. This interdependence has bolstered those in China arguing for a “major powers” orientation that emphasizes relations with the United States.

History has never witnessed, and neither nation has any experience in, a competitive major power relationship that is simultaneously so deeply interdependent. To some extent, this helps to buffer the strategic competition and keep the relationship from becoming fully adversarial (although President Obama described China as an “adversary” in the recent presidential debate on foreign policy), but in other areas interdependence breeds intensified competition and frictions. This leads to the odd mixture of a cooperative-competitive dynamic—which can be described as competitive coexistence.

Given the global importance of US-China relations, this is a marriage in which divorce is not an option. The stakes are high. Whether President Obama or Republican challenger Mitt Romney win the presidential election, their China policies are likely to bear many commonalities. As both declared in the October 22nd presidential debate on foreign policy, they both seek to cooperate with China where possible but simultaneously evince tougher trade and diplomatic policies towards Beijing. Thus the competitive trend is likely to continue into the future—absent a newly emergent global threat that challenges both nations to forge greater cooperation. U.S.-China relations have really not faced such a common threat since the 1970s-1980s (despite common opposition to al-Qaeda and terrorism). Absent such a galvanizing mutual threat, managing competition becomes the overriding task of the new American and Chinese governments. In his recent book On China, Henry Kissinger hopes for what he calls “co-evolution” between the two powers, but even he admits that this will require “wisdom and patience.” It will also require mutual pragmatism and mutual accommodation. It is not at all clear that the respective political cultures and political systems, national identities, social values, and worldviews are conducive to a newly cooperative US-China relationship. It will be all the new leaders in Beijing and Washington can do to maintain a modicum of stability between the two sides.

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