

America and China: Managing Conflict or Confrontation?

(Translated)

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The relationship between Washington and Beijing is no longer merely a trade dispute or economic competition. It is a conflict over technology, supply chains, markets, influence, alliances, military capability, and the shape of the coming international order. Yet paradoxically, this conflict is unfolding between two powers that cannot fully decouple from one another. Herein lies the essence of conflict management: it is neither a new Cold War in the traditional sense, nor a state of complete economic peace.

The September 2026 meeting between US President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping offered a clear illustration of the current phase. The two sides kept communication channels open and worked to contain trade tensions, though this did not signify a resolution of their major disagreements. Instead, the event confirmed that negotiation itself can be a component of conflict management. Following the visit, steps on trade and a dialogue on artificial intelligence were announced, while issues like Taiwan and technology remained points of sharp contention.

Washington pressures Beijing on technology, trade, and security, while China strives to expand its capacity for strategic independence from American tools. Simultaneously, the two economies remain deeply intertwined. This equation appears contradictory, yet it reflects the nature of modern great-power rivalry: intense competition coexisting with bridges that prevent a full-scale rupture.

Over recent decades, China has built economic, industrial, and technological power that positions it as a genuine strategic competitor to America. However, possessing power does not necessarily equate to a desire to use it in direct warfare.

China's calculation may be more closely tied to time. If it can boost its production, advance its technologies, reduce external dependencies, expand its trade networks, and enhance its military capabilities, then its negotiating position strengthens with each passing year. Is China attempting to win the long-term conflict by playing for time, while America seeks to win by denying China that very time? If accurate, the core of the competition lies not only in present actions but in what each power fears the other will become in a decade. Time itself has become a primary arena of conflict.

Power is not always about striking an opponent immediately; sometimes, it is about ensuring the coming years unfold to your advantage. This explains a key aspect of China's behavior: it does not need a decisive victory in every round; sometimes, it is sufficient to thwart its opponent's objectives while steadily building its own capacities.

For America, the challenge is different: the longer time stretches, and the more China's technological, industrial, and military growth continues, the narrower the gap between them becomes in critical fields. This dynamic underpins much of America's policy—aimed at slowing trajectories of China's rise, especially in technologies deemed strategically vital.

Thus, time transforms from a neutral element into a strategic resource. China seeks to gain more of it, while America aims to restrict China's unfettered access to it. The contest becomes one of who can effectively "buy" time and who can deprive their rival of it.

If the relationship were solely a trade conflict, containment would be simpler. But behind the economic rivalry lies an escalating military and strategic race, with Taiwan representing the most sensitive flashpoint. Any crisis over Taiwan could rapidly escalate beyond the island, triggering a U.S.-China confrontation with global economic and military repercussions.

Yet, possessing military power does not automatically imply a willingness to use it. Deterrence operates on a different principle: convincing an adversary of your capability to

confront, without actually having to do so. This explains why both powers proceed on parallel tracks: building strength on one hand, while maintaining communication channels on the other.

Washington aims to preserve its technological and military edge, bolster its alliance network, and prevent China from achieving regional dominance in Asia. However, a direct war with China is not a straightforward decision. China is not easily isolated, and the American and Chinese economies are linked through intricate trade, industrial, and financial networks. Moreover, any military confrontation between two nuclear powers carries risks that extend far beyond their bilateral dispute.

Each side seeks to minimize its vulnerabilities while amplifying its points of leverage. America possesses significant advantages in advanced technology, finance, market access, and its alliance system. China commands a massive industrial base, extensive supply chains, a major footprint in global trade, and growing technological and defense capabilities.

China can effectively argue: there is no need to rush; we will build our industry, develop technology, expand markets, and strengthen our capabilities, and then return to the negotiating table. America, meanwhile, must grapple with a different question: to what extent can it allow China to reach a stage where the cost of containment becomes prohibitive?

This logic fuels policies of technological restrictions, supply chain diversification, alliance reinforcement, and sustained military presence in Asia. The battle is therefore not only about the present balance but about the shape of the global power structure a decade or two from now.

Managing conflict does not mean the absence of confrontation; it means attempting to control its timing, scope, and costs. Consequently, we may witness more tariffs, technology controls, military maneuvers, and alliance-building, alongside more summits, negotiations, trade deals, and dialogue channels. If China can leverage time to build technological independence and expand its economic and security ties, then time becomes its ally. If America can maintain its technological lead, keep its alliances cohesive, and prevent the emergence of a complete strategic alternative to its system, then it will have used time to its own advantage.

The most dangerous scenario, therefore, is not necessarily a deliberate decision for war by either power, but rather one of them reaching the conviction that time is slipping away. At that juncture, pressure intensifies, risks multiply, and room for maneuver shrinks.

Hence, the future of the U.S.-China relationship may be determined not merely by counts of aircraft carriers, GDP size, or semiconductor output, but by each party's ability to exercise strategic patience, build strength, maintain alliances, and negotiate from a position of power—all while avoiding a loss of control over the conflict's trajectory.

For the foreseeable future, America and China will continue to operate on a razor's edge: applying pressure without severing ties, competing without igniting war, and negotiating while preparing for the possibility that talks may fail. This is not necessarily a prelude to hot war; it may itself constitute a new form of cold war—a managed conflict between two powers that recognize direct confrontation would be catastrophic and complete retreat is even costlier.

America and China are not managing peace; they are managing conflict, each striving to shape the future to its advantage. But beyond this rivalry lies a larger question that transcends them both: what kind of global order does humanity want? Today, the world is in greater need of a system that respects the right to life, pursues peace, reduces wars and conflicts, and places human beings, their dignity, and their future at the center of concern—instead of allowing power, wealth, and influence to become ends in themselves.

The future must not remain hostage to great-power conflict. Humanity needs the principles and systems of Islam in ruling governance, society, and international relations, to live in true happiness—where the ultimate meaning of human bliss is to please the Creator, Allah (swt), by establishing a life founded on Islamic principles and justice.