

Jessica Chen Weiss on Stepping Back from the Brink

The academic talks about creating a vision for the U.S. that isn't defined by beating China; why the repudiation of engagement went too far; and the dangerous echo chamber in discussions about China.

By [Katrina Northrop](#) — October 9, 2022

[Jessica Chen Weiss](#) is a professor of political science at Cornell University. From August 2021 to July 2022, she served as senior advisor to the State Department's policy planning staff on a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship for Tenured International Relations Scholars. Weiss earned her Ph.D at the University of California, San Diego. Her previous work has focused on Chinese nationalism, and she is the author of [Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations](#). In this lightly edited Q&A, we spoke with [Weiss](#) about how she would define success in the U.S.-China relationship and what she sees as a dangerous echo chamber in discussions about China.



Jessica Chen Weiss.

Illustration by Lauren Crow

Q: You wrote an [article](#) published in *Foreign Affairs* last month which laid out risks in the current U.S. approach to China policy. Why did you think it was important to write the piece?

A: One of the things that I took away from my time inside the administration as a Council on Foreign Relations fellow is that often the things that folks inside were trying to do were constrained or made more challenging by the broader political conversation and public discussion of what seemed possible. And so one of my intentions in writing the piece was to try to create more space in the public conversation in Washington, and more broadly, to take further some of the steps that the administration is already trying to do, like put a floor under the U.S.-China relationship.

For those who haven't read your piece yet, can you summarize the main argument?

My main argument is that it's not clear where the growing tensions in the U.S.-China relations are headed or how this ends in a way that avoids catastrophe. I go through the variety of ways in which this could end badly, including in a crisis or conflict over Taiwan, the continuing erosion of the already weak international system, and the cost that the United States is likely to pay in terms of the vibrancy of our democracy and the quality of public debate. I then suggest some steps we could take to put us on a more positive trajectory that heads off or reduces the risk of confrontation, and that would create more space and resources for tackling shared challenges, including climate change and pandemics, and that allows more time and attention for an affirmative vision — one that

centers on a more inclusive world that delivers for Americans as well as peoples around the world, and that isn't defined primarily in terms of beating China.

BIO AT A GLANCE	
AGE	41
BIRTHPLACE	Seattle, Washington

You argue that the U.S. has yet to define success in the U.S.-China relationship. How would you define success?

Part of the challenge here is that success has been defined largely with reference to where we were in the past and not where we are going in the future, as the realities of global power shift. I would define success in terms of avoiding war, first and foremost, making progress on shared challenges, and strengthening and renewing our comparative strengths. Those strengths are our democratic institutions and what was once a traditional comparative advantage, the power of attraction — being a magnet for international talent, investment and innovation.

Why do you think the administration hasn't defined success? What are the constraints to doing that?

It is hard, in our currently deeply divided and polarized political discourse, to talk about a vision of success that involves a give and take, a recognition that we can't dictate success and

the terms of success but are in fact going to have to think about a world in which we make choices under constraints.

But that work is necessary. It's not on any particular administration to do this because in order for this to last, and in order for American leadership to be sustained, it needs to be rooted in a more broadly shared sense of how the United States should relate to the world. Of course, we will never all think the same thing. That's the beauty of being a democracy. But one of the real questions that American allies and partners have is, what comes next, where are we going? And to what extent can the United States be relied upon? You can't understate the challenge of setting a direction in the current context of a remarkably hyperbolic political discourse in the United States. And with the midterm elections around the corner, it's a challenging environment. That's one of the reasons why it has been hard. It's not often said explicitly but it is a background condition that makes it challenging.

There was some criticism, especially in the first year of Biden's presidency, that the administration had not really laid out a China policy strategy. At the same time, there were others saying a grand strategy is not going to solve all the issues in the U.S.-China relationship. What do you think of the criticism about the administration lacking a China strategy?

Let me back up. One of the challenges is this narrative that

U.S. strategy for decades failed and that we need something totally new. In the Trump administration, there was this repudiation of engagement and dialogue with China. Although there was broadly a recognition that a recalibration in U.S. policy towards China was needed, under the Trump administration it swung so far that we really lost the muscle memory and also created a political environment in which those kinds of ordinary regular diplomatic interactions became, somehow, politically suspect. People talked about, "Don't do dialogue for dialogue's sake." That political narrative has made it harder to articulate a new basis for bilateral interaction.

The public articulation of the administration's China strategy is laid out in Secretary Blinken's May 26th [speech](#). It involves "invest, align and compete." It is largely about doing what we need to do at home and then abroad with allies and partners to shape the environment around China.

In order for that to be effective, this effort to work around China also needs to involve a component of working with China, not just "with" as in cooperating, but trying to shape China's choices by engaging more explicitly with Beijing to make clear the consequences, both positive and negative, of specific choices that they might take. You can't do that effectively if you're only shaping the environment around China. There also has to be this element of direct diplomacy.

And the administration is building toward that. It's just not been the primary thrust of the strategy thus far. I'm hoping that we get there.

It's also not just about open channels of communication but also about what we are prepared and willing to discuss when those meetings take place. One of the arguments that I make in the [*Foreign Affairs*] essay is that deterrence isn't just about threats, it is threats *and* assurances. Depending on what Beijing does, it can expect different outcomes. One of the challenges I see is that there's a lot of unilateral action to strengthen our position. But one of the classic features of the security dilemma is that steps that one side takes to make itself more secure end up prompting an equal and opposite reaction on the other side, leaving us worse off. So this unilateral cycle of action and reaction is leading in a one-way direction toward escalation. And what we need to start thinking more about — along the lines of the progress that was made after the [meetings](#) in Tianjin in working groups — is doing more of those kinds of small reciprocal steps that can be taken across a variety of domains to begin to take steps back from the brink.

There are so many things that Taiwan offers, and of course it's a vibrant economy as well. Arguably, you could

do more for the island by, for example, moving forward with the trade and investment agreement that has been mooted.

Can you give me an example?

One example is the area of Taiwan and our One China policy. The administration has made clear that our One China policy is unchanged — we continue to uphold the status quo or seek to uphold the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. But at the same time there is a question as to whether there are any limits to where the U.S.-Taiwan interactions are going. In the broader political context, where you have former government officials or political candidates explicitly suggesting that the United States should extend diplomatic recognition to Taiwan as an independent state or country, Beijing is increasingly concerned that this is a one-way trajectory toward the United States pursuing a “One China, One Taiwan” policy [which would effectively treat Taiwan as an independent state]. And so this is not about assuring Beijing that we would never do XYZ if China were to use force or coercion. It’s more about, if China doesn’t escalate, we are not going to use that as an opportunity to push the envelope further with Taiwan.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan after you

wrote this piece. How does her visit reflect the things you are talking about, and what were your reactions to her visit?

President Tsai Ing-wen meeting with Nancy Pelosi and her delegation, August 2, 2022.

Credit: 總統府 via [Flickr](#)

This is a very good example of how steps that U.S. officials take to show support for Taiwan can prompt and precipitate an opposing reaction on the other side that actually worsens the situation from the perspective of the United States and Taiwan. China has used Pelosi's visit as an opportunity to demonstrate that it is not going to abide by what was once considered the center line and has flown military aircraft across that line. Beijing has also engaged in unprecedentedly

threatening exercises around the island. As a result, the status quo has been further eroded.

So far, at least, we've seen a relatively restrained response by the United States and by Taiwan. And that response was consistent with what many countries in the region wanted to see. And so the situation was at least temporarily diffused, or at least didn't escalate to the kind of crisis that many feared, and perhaps Beijing wanted. Nonetheless, there is a question about what comes next, [especially] with Taiwan's own presidential election looming on the horizon in 2024. We have legislation under consideration in Congress, the [Taiwan Policy Act](#), that will contain measures with symbolic upgrades to the U.S. treatment of Taiwan diplomatically, ostensibly while maintaining an unofficial relationship.

The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022

The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 promotes the security of Taiwan, ensures regional stability, and deters People's Republic of China (PRC) aggression against Taiwan. It also threatens severe sanctions against the PRC for hostile action against Taiwan.

The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 creates a new initiative to bolster Taiwan's defense capabilities, providing almost \$4.5 billion in security assistance over the next four years and designating Taiwan as a "Major Non-NATO Ally"; reforms bureaucratic practices and procedures to bolster support for Taiwan's democratic government; provides additional support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations and in multilateral trade agreements; takes concrete steps to counter PRC's aggressive influence campaigns; creates a Taiwan Fellowship Program; and establishes a robust sanctions regime to deter further PRC aggression against Taiwan.

The [Taiwan Policy Act](#) of 2022.

Do you think Pelosi should not have made the visit to Taiwan?

There is a good argument to be made that her visit, coming when it did, was particularly inopportune, and that a later trip, especially after the midterms and the 20th party Congress, might have been wiser or less provocative. I don't know that these visits are particularly meaningful. Of course, they are welcome in Taiwan, which seeks to expand the circle of its international supporters. But we should think really hard about meaningful ways to increase morale in Taiwan and to strengthen Taiwan's defenses. A visit by a House speaker? It's not clear how Taiwan's security or way of life was advanced by her visit.

What are those more substantive ways of supporting Taiwan?

A lot of things are underway – the United States has consistently helped provide Taiwan with arms, as per the Taiwan Relations Act. There's also a lot of training and other low-profile measures designed to help Taiwan defend itself. Taiwan has, to its credit, a lot to contribute too, from how it handled the Covid-19 pandemic to LGBTQ rights. There are so many things that Taiwan offers, and of course it's a vibrant economy as well. Arguably, you could do more for the island by, for example, moving forward with the trade and investment agreement that has been mooted.

A big theme in Washington this year has been that competing with China seems to galvanize bipartisan

support for legislation and initiatives in the otherwise polarized American political environment. Your piece seems to argue that there are real downsides of constantly using the 'China competition' frame. Could you explain what those downsides are?

The upsides are a bit exaggerated. Yes, the [CHIPS and Science Act](#) passed, but this is a relatively narrowly-scoped set of investments. At one point in time, folks were talking about how competition with China would produce support for childcare and all sorts of other domestic spending that will renew our society. I just don't see that. And what I worry is that the effort to outcompete China makes it hard to keep in focus those sources of our comparative advantage and continues to fuel a tendency, whether it's on Capitol Hill or in think tanks, for politicians or analysts to reflexively position themselves as more hawkish than the next person. That really constrains the space for discussion and debate.



Congress, China and the Plan to Compete

BY ELIOT CHEN

A look at the CHIPS and Science Act: what made it in and what got left out.

I'm not saying that any one set of views should dominate, but

that dynamism and debate is essential to our democracy. Unfortunately, the current trajectory is having chilling effects on our broader society. It has created the perception that foreigners, particularly those of Chinese descent or origin, are increasingly unwelcome. That's a combination of the effects of rhetoric, which, particularly around elections, can get quite heated. But it's also in part about policies in this effort to protect the United States from CCP influence. Of course, there are legitimate concerns about Chinese espionage and illicit technology transfer. But this overall climate of trying to beat China tends to reward and encourage broader restrictions, rather than more tailored or narrowly scoped efforts to address problems without having the broader chilling effect on society and on scientific research and collaboration where it can be in our interest.

I fear that people in the United States, whether they are government officials or analysts, are saying things not because they are analytically true, but because they are politically what needs to be said in order to get confirmed, or have a seat at the table, or be invited to meetings.

Have you, both as an academic and during your time in the State Department, experienced the impact of this out-hawking competition you are describing?

As an academic, it was really surprising to me to hear from people who work at think tanks and other places in D.C. and around the country that they feel that they need to shade their views so as to seem more hawkish than they actually might be. I received very similar advice about how to present my views in ways that would make them more politically palatable, or perhaps persuasive. Maybe on an individual case by case basis, that could make sense. I always, even before spending time in government, understood that one needs to call it like it is. And that means not shying away from criticizing what needs to be criticized in China. And the article does that — there is a real set of challenges coming from Beijing's increasingly coercive behavior. There is a real threat. It's not all exaggerated. But I fear that people in the United States, whether they are government officials or analysts, are saying things not because they are analytically true, but because they are politically what needs to be said in order to get confirmed, or have a seat at the table, or be invited to meetings. That adds up to a really challenging environment for contrary views, even questions, to be raised. And that, in my mind, is antithetical to who we are as a democracy.

Earlier, you mentioned climate change and pandemics as

potential areas for collaboration. These issue areas are often invoked as the most fruitful areas for U.S.-China collaboration, but have you seen that actually come to fruition over the course of the Biden administration?

John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua, China's special climate envoy, at COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, November 13, 2021. *Credit: UK Government via [Flickr](#)*

There has been some significant progress. First of all, the administration rejoined the Paris Agreement. Secretary [John] Kerry released an important [joint statement](#) [with China] at last year's COP [the U.N. Climate Change Conference], and has continued to try to work with counterparts in China on those issues. But the broader problem is that even though we

might like to compartmentalize issues, Beijing isn't interested in playing along. In general, there's a concern in Beijing, but also in Washington, that efforts to coordinate and work together may too easily be construed as a lack of resolve that can translate into bad outcomes on other issues. And so this desire to project strength and avoid any perceptions of weakness is something that is ultimately crowding out attention, effort, and resources to some of these shared challenges, like climate change, and pandemics. Even though respectively, our two countries are likely to continue to take unilateral actions to address these issues, it's not as much as we might be able to do if there were more coordination.

Are there specific steps or initiatives from the Biden administration which you see as successes related to China?

The fact that the two sides have had high-level contacts is an important step, after a period where those kinds of contacts and channels were pretty much shuttered. And the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS Act have helped show that democracy can still deliver despite political divisions at home. By showing up again, working multilaterally, not only with small groups, but also at the UN General Assembly, the Administration has recommitted again—at least to the extent that our domestic politics allow—to working within inclusive international institutions. The question is, how far can those

efforts to reform and modernize those institutions go? And is there the kind of political will in the United States for the United States to continue to lead within those institutions?

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan deliver statements to the press following their meetings with Chinese officials, in Anchorage, Alaska, March 19, 2021. *Credit: U.S. Department of State via [Flickr](#)*

And what about specific wrong choices the Biden administration has made related to China?

There's a fairly broad recognition that the kind of fireworks that we saw at [Anchorage](#) [which were contentious high level meetings between the U.S. and China last March] coming out of the gate wasn't the best foot to start off on. It's one thing to do what's necessary to strengthen the United States. And it's

another thing to tell the Chinese that we are going to talk to them from a position of strength, rather than a more respectful and equal footing. That's a rhetorical choice. That phrase hasn't been used since, at least not in public or even in private discussions. That's a recalibration that's already to some extent taken place. And I'm hoping that we can see further progress toward the vision of human progress and prosperity that Secretary Blinken laid out at the end of his [speech](#).

You have talked recently about the challenge of balancing symbolic actions with actions that the U.S. knows will impact the reality on the ground. Is there any room for symbolic actions, like sanctions related to human rights abuses in China, for example?

There's probably room for some symbolic actions. But there's also privately raising some of these concerns, then there's utilizing the power of economic sanctions and dollar dominance to try to forcibly change behavior. And then there are also efforts to limit our exposure to practices that we deem abhorrent inside China. So there's a broad range of possible actions, and there's always a matter of degree. But I would just caution that with many of these efforts to take a stand publicly, to chastise and condemn, we also have to bear in mind the countervailing effect they're going to have, not only on whatever retaliatory sanctions Beijing slaps on American officials or entities, but also the effect on opinion inside

China.

... if ultimately we want to foster a more humane, less abusive society and government inside China, these kinds of sanctions and punitive efforts may not be moving the needle...

There's political science research suggesting strong evidence of a backlash effect, where condemnation of such practices by an outside government that is seen as frankly a bit hostile, actually has the effect of undermining or reducing concern for human rights abuses amongst those in that country. So if ultimately we want to foster a more humane, less abusive society and government inside China, these kinds of sanctions and punitive efforts may not be moving the needle and maybe even moving a bit backwards the broader opinion in society. That said, there will always be a place for standing on principle.

How do you think the [Joint Statement](#) Russia and China put out before the Ukraine invasion impacted the Biden administration's thinking on China? What were the conversations like at the State Department after the joint statement?

First of all, there was a widespread recognition that the February 4th statement between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin signified a much more assertive stance by Beijing in the run up to the 20th Party Congress than had perhaps been anticipated. Folks anticipated blowback from the [Summit for Democracy](#) and the boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics. But I don't think the February 4th statement, which in many ways was a response to those things, was the kind of response by China that was anticipated. But it was also understood that this was not an alliance or even an axis per se, but an alignment. There was a desire to prevent that alignment from becoming a full-fledged alliance. In particular, there was a successful effort by the administration to deter material assistance in the form of munitions or other military assistance to Russia's invasion, and to prevent and deter widespread sanctions evasion. And that was successful.

A CGTN video covering Xi's February 4th meeting with Putin.

Beneath China's rhetorical support, there was a degree of surprise in Beijing at the scale and extent of the Russian invasion. I don't think that Xi Jinping knew exactly what he was signing up for when they released that joint statement on February 4th. Nonetheless, the fact that Beijing continued to amplify Russian disinformation, and tried to provide some political cover, reinforced a real sense of alarm—but also a sense that this might help galvanize, particularly with folks in Europe, a shared sense of concern about China that may have

been a little bit more mixed before Russia's invasion.

With recent events like the Putin-Xi [meeting](#) in Central Asia last month, what can the U.S. do to prevent this type of Russia-China alignment going forward?

So far, the effort has really focused on making sure that Beijing knows the costs of standing too close to Moscow. But the overriding strategic logic of Beijing looking to Moscow as an important source of support in resisting what Beijing sees as a comprehensive effort to contain and undermine China's rise, will only continue to strengthen if U.S. foreign policy cannot show that there are benefits, not just risks, to allowing some distance between Beijing and Moscow. There is an ongoing debate inside China about the wisdom of hewing so closely to Russia after the invasion, and concern in particular from those inside China who know that for China's continued modernization and economic development, access to international technology and capital is more important to China's so-called rejuvenation than whatever Russia can give China. But the fear of a looming showdown of some variety with the United States really has enabled those that want a stronger relationship with Russia to win that debate inside Beijing.

SHANXAY HAMKORLIK TASHKILOTIGA A'ZO DAVLATLAR
RAHBARLARI KENGASHI YIG'ILISHI
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ЗАСЕДАНИЕ СОВЕТА ГЛАВ ГОСУДАРСТВ-ЧЛЕНОВ
ШАНХАЙСКОЙ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА
15-16 сентября 2022 года, Самарканд



上海合作组织成员国元首理事会会议
(2022年9月15-16日, 撒马尔罕)

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL OF HEADS
OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION MEMBER STATES
15-16 September 2022, Samarkand



Xi Jinping (4th from left), and Vladimir Putin (3rd from right) at the 22nd Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. September 16, 2022. *Credit: Prime Minister's Office via [Wikimedia Commons](#)*

In the same issue of *Foreign Affairs* as your piece, Cai Xia, a former professor at China's Central Party School who was expelled from the Party and fled to the U.S. several years ago, published a striking [essay](#) titled "The Weakness of Xi Jinping." Her final point, as I interpret it, is that the only way for China to change course from Xi Jinping's approach would be a defeat in a war over Taiwan. What are your reactions to that argument and the piece in general?

So first of all, let me say that I have great respect for Cai Xia and other pieces that she's written. But the idea that we would want to base policy on speculation about what might come as

a result of a defeat in wartime, or with any kind of change of leadership or regime in China, is quite dangerous because we may not like the result. It certainly is unlikely to result in China's overnight democratization. And given the strength of popular and elite nationalism in China, it's far from clear that whoever were to succeed under whatever kind of regime would necessarily pursue a set of policies that would be more appealing or more moderate.

Jessica Chen Weiss at the launch of her book, [Powerful Patriots](#). Credit: CSIS via [Flickr](#)

What are other takeaways about how China policy is crafted from your year at the State Department?

The essence of strategy is figuring out what actions to take in

anticipation of how the other side and other players will respond. I've spent my academic career studying how and why China has behaved as it has, and the role of domestic politics in Chinese foreign policy. The time that I spent in Washington really impressed upon me that a mirroring dynamic has set in, with this action-reaction spiral. It means that we have to always consider the first, second and third order repercussions of what we do. Too often, there's a desire to do something, to react without necessarily pricing in all of these downstream consequences. And when we look at those, and then try to anticipate those consequences, then the question is, how does that feed back into the policy choices we make today?-



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