

# ***Vicious Circle: What Accounts for the Deteriorating US-China Relation***

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**Abstract:** Nationalism serves as an important base of citizens' identification of the state. When the economy is not promising, elites tend to use nationalism as a tactic to stabilize people and channel their discontent to foreign states. However, the panacea has serious side effects. This essay will demonstrate how such a tactic could lead to a vicious circle that fulfills and reinforces itself until losing control, which accounts for the deteriorating US-China relation, which is far worse than the underlying interest requires and severely hindering the development of the world. More details will be analyzed to find what particularly accelerates the circle so that possible exits from it could be found. Other common explanations for the rising tension between the US and China are also discussed to make the vicious circle more comprehensive and further unveil the possibilities to ameliorate the status quo.

**Keywords:** US-China relation, nationalism, vicious circle.

## **1. Introduction**

In the era with economic deceleration and inequality, the competition between the US and China has soon escalated from trade to a confrontation in politics, economy, military, and ideology in the past decade, posing an inestimable threat to world peace and development. The interaction between the US and China should be a bargain between a rising power that has fallen behind the globe since the century of national humiliation and power with vested interests in the status quo order, but now is skyrocketing towards a full-on confrontation between the US and China. Beijing's attitude towards Washington has become tougher and tougher explicitly; a more confrontational posture toward Beijing has also been adopted by Washington [1]. The rising tension between two largest powers on earth has started a circle in its growth, which is growing worse than the underlying interest requires. This circle is a vicious, self-fulfilling prophecy: State A, in order for stability and cohesion, educates its people that State B a committed aggressor and is responsible for A's domestic failure; its citizens should unite and fight against B together. But the hostile attitude also convinces State B's citizens that A is likewise a belligerent bully who must be fought back firmly, not to mention that B's government might deliberately so propagate similarly for cohesion. B's unyielding posture proves the education in State A and annoys the populace in A even more. The populace's bile will push State A to be more confrontational. As the rotation rate increases, authorities' domestic persuasion is no longer necessary. People's opinions and emotions will grow spontaneously, restrict domestic policy choices, and make the circle more vicious and eventually lose control. This essay will discuss the source and effect of people's discontent in the context of economic recession and inequality,

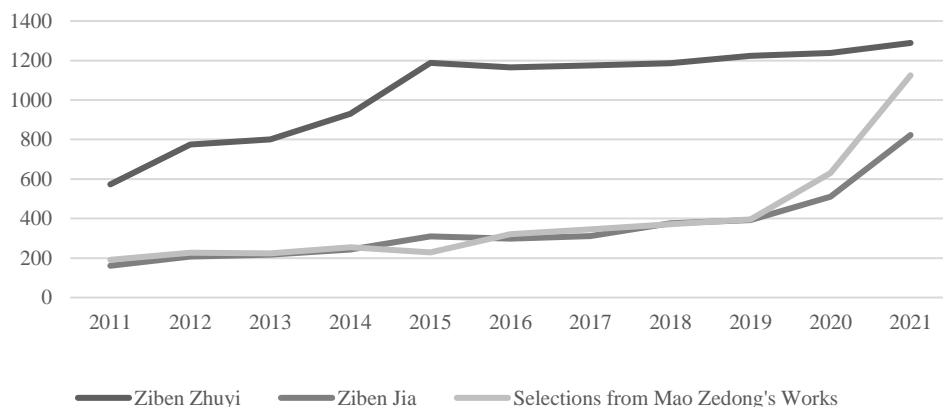
demonstrate the pros and cons of using nationalism as a tactic to deal with the emotion, unveil the formation and mechanism of the self-reinforcing vicious circle in general and specifically in US-China relation, analyze in what circumstance the circle becomes particularly vicious, provide three possible exits from it, and finally examine three other popular theories on the rising tension between the US and China.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Economic Deceleration, Inequality, and Discontent

Dividends of the third scientific and technological revolution have been gradually exhausted; the glow of the fourth revolution is still too dim for people to hope. Global economic growth has long been decelerating. In the past decade, the world's two greatest economic powers have been growing significantly slower: China's GDP growth rate undergoes a generally constant fall from 9.6% to 2.3% [2], while that of the US oscillates slightly around the mean of 1.7% compared to 3.5% in the decade before 2000 [3]. With limited room for expansion, the market is entering the era of involution. In other words, people are working harder and harder not to grow the pie, but to edge others out of the market.

In contrast to the lethargy of economic growth, inequality is much more 'energetic,' making the situation even worse. The US Gini index has been maintaining over 0.4 since 1996 and is still growing [4], indicating there is a large, expanding income gap among US citizens. When it comes to China, things are more complicated. The income gap between the rich and the poor in China is one of the main concerns of the Communist Party of China because realizing Common Affluence (*gongtong fuyu*) relates to the ideology of communism and legitimacy of the Communist Party of China. Due to the political sensitivity, access to China's Gini index is quite secluded, for a long time even banned. From the current estimate by the National Bureau of Statistics, the Gini index between 2003 and 2017 has never been lower than 0.462, the highest being 0.491 [5], while according to the report of Southwest University of Finance and economics, China's Gini index in 2012 was as high as 0.61 [6]. Either way, it is not difficult to understand the inequality of income distribution in China. The Gini index, an indicator so important and relative to the idea of *gongtong fuyu*, if adorable, would be immediately propagated as a political achievement of the CPC.



**Figure 1.** Weighted search frequency of Ziben Zhuyi, Ziben Jia and selections from Mao Zedong's work in January.

Source: Baidu index.

Because of the increasingly serious economic deceleration and inequality, people, especially the grassroots, are more and more discontented, which could be destructive if not channeled appropriately. Today, Chinese chatrooms are filled with sarcasm and disappointment on the current government and nostalgia for the communist past. According to the Baidu Index, the weighted search frequency and headline frequency of capitalism (*ziben zhuyi*) and capitalist (*ziben jia*), two derogatory terms for business and the rich in the Chinese Marxist context, sharply increased in the past decade [7] [8], indicating the Chinese people are angrier and angrier to the rich. Searches for *Selections from Mao Zedong's Works* have increased from fewer than 200 at the beginning of 2011 to more than 1000 in the recent two years [9]. A more representative to illustrate the destructiveness is the yellow vests protests. Claiming the economic burden falling on the working and middle classes disproportionately and asking for economic justice initially, the protestors demanded the resignation of Macron and involved demonstrations and road blockings, some of which developed into violent riots so fierce that even blast balls were put into use.

## 2.2. Nationalism

Nationalism is one of, if not the most powerful bases of popular engagement and mass cohesion [10]. By excluding the “other,” nationalism holds that the nation should be bound with the state. Anderson attributes this to the power of imagined communities [11]. The community impacts people’s imagination and enhances and specializes the shared social characteristics so much that it constructs a strong sense of identity and belonging to one’s own community and severs the connections with other communities. Inside, there are warmth, empathy, and relationships, while outside there are fear, unknowns, and risks. In terms of who the “other” should be, though unity via exclusion of a group within would prove more popularly salient, effective, and permanent, it is less risky (in the short-run) to exclude those without—by antagonizing and condemning other states [17]. Thus, with the discontent over the reality being strong enough to be dangerous so that it is urgent to channel while the root economic problems remaining difficult to resolve, it has become a more and more common practice for the authority to channel the mass emotion to foreign states.

Modern states, even those not self-defined as nation-states, constitute collective memories of their own nation, such as histories, beliefs, and cultures, whether based on everyday communication, such as oral history [12] or detached from that, such as texts and monuments [13]. Education buries the seed of nationalism; stimulations are also necessary to urge it to grow. Anniversary is a typical example of regular stimulation; other simulations such as wars and diplomatic conflicts are more irregular and more intense. When elites’ privilege is under threat, nationalism is particularly attractive to promote. By setting anniversaries, reporting conflicts with foreign states, elites could persuade people that the cleavage between the elites and grassroots is unimportant compared to that between nations so that the inequality within the community is easily neglected [14].

Nationalism prevails over other solutions mainly because of two reasons: effectiveness and convenience. Firstly, the victory of Trump in the 2016 election reflected a strong discontent of the traditional Americans over liberalism. The “red necks” complained about low employment rates, foreign citizens stealing their jobs, and a depressed economy. Without explanations about how the state ran and why their status quo sacrifice was necessary (they might not listen even if there were), it is easy to imagine them protesting on the streets against the US government for its negligence and omission. But instead, Trump cleverly pinned the blame on China: it is China that steals our jobs dishonorably! They gain a comparative advantage by violating the human rights of workers! We should take it all back and “Make America Great Again!” The last slogan echoes Regan’s words, which was similarly under the context of Japan’s fast growth and rumors of the US decline [15]. People believed, Trump won, and the mass discontent at the domestic government shifts naturally to a state across the entire Pacific Ocean. In the case of China, leaders also adopt a hardline foreign

policy as a maneuver to earn public support, which is normatively believed meaningful and shore up their power and that of their potential allies [16]. Secondly, it is convenient to blame almost everything bad in China on “foreign power” (*jingwai shili*). Criticism of sexual inequality in China is claimed to be incited by foreign feminist organizations; reporters of corruption in state-owned enterprises are condemned as employed by outside enemies; even with regard to discussion on China’s labor rights, Chinese economists warn the public to be cautious of Biden playing Marxism card.

So far, though within the construct of nationalism there are things seemingly unreasonable, it is still acceptable because nationalism does help stabilize the state. However, the two advantages of the practice could also hijack the domestic authority and bind it to the mass emotion of the populace.

To be effective for state-building, nation-building cannot be fully controlled from above, for it will not then bind [17]. When nationalism is effective enough, it can move from “not fully controlled” to “fully not controlled.” For example, imagine a pre-war negotiation between two engaging parties. Since to benefit from a bargain, besides interests to exchange, one party can restrict some of its freedom of choice in a credible and observable way to enhance its negotiating position [18], in the pre-war negotiation, an officer can order his soldiers to write suicide letters to show the determination of winning the battle, so that the opposing side might agree to retreat with a less expensive condition. However, when the soldiers have long been incited to hate the opposing side (very likely by the officer to stimulate combat effectiveness), they might discard all their food supply and explode the bridge behind. By restricting their own freedom of choice, showing their determination to win the fight, they do get a privileged position in the bargain. However, when the rational officer finds it unnecessary and would like a reliable food supply and one way to retreat, he must be extremely careful when showing his rationality in front of the emotion of massive soldiers; he must be extremely careful when making any compromise as opposed to criticize the opposite badly because any dove action could be regarded as a betrayal of the army. The officer either follows the will of his soldiers or be executed by the soldier in the name of his own honor and then be replaced by another hawk officer. One example, in reality, illustrating this is the dilemma that faces Vladimir Putin. Putin has been in charge of Russia for more than 20 years and has fallen into the paradox of conflict between internal affairs and diplomacy. The more powerful and confrontational Putin is to the United States, at the cost of the Crimean War and the Georgian war, the more Russian people support him, but the worse his diplomacy is. The better he is in diplomacy, negotiating with the US for economic growth and identification from Europe, the more anger from Russian he has to comfort. The more the United States attacks and blockades Russia, the more Russian people support Putin against the United States. In other words, the more successful Putin is in internal affairs, the more passive he is in diplomacy; the worse he is in diplomacy, the more successful he is in internal affairs. The paradox has made the road of Russia narrower and narrower.

Another advantage, convenience, at the same time allowing the nationalist practice to apply so broadly, makes the trouble bleed everywhere. Whenever an event comes, any space between black and white is wiped out. It doesn’t matter why people are so choosing, but which side they are on. During Tokyo Olympic Games, there was a mass condemnation of judges for favoring the Japanese player in horse-vaulting. Most Chinese people regard this as stealing a gold medal from China. Even after the release of the Men Gymnastic New Code of Point by the International Gymnastic Association, those who explained that the Japanese athlete deserved the gold medal were slandered as traitors. Similar situations also happen when those who point out the flaws of the Chinese government are asked to give up Chinese nationality, and those who propose environmental protection are suggested to be born in America or Europe. In the worst case, every difference in every aspect is ‘conveniently’ classified as conflicts between nations; therefore every slight disagreement could also ‘conveniently’ lead to an acceleration of the circle.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. Vicious Circle

As is pointed out in the spiral model by Jervis, if State A believes that State B is a committed aggressor who can only be managed by unyielding threats and so A does, the threats would convince B that the A is likewise a belligerent bully who must be firmly resisted. Even if both sides are mainly interested in the goal of security, once they go down the path of these tactics, the hardline view of the opponent becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy [19]. In this model, two question remains: why would State A believe State B is an aggressor, and why cannot State A and B just stop when it becomes so costly?

The presence of nationalism solves both and makes the model even more vicious. To the first one, Jervis and lots of other realists explained through anarchy. Countries do not trust the intentions of other countries, so they always try to maximize their own security, which could hurt other states' sense of security [20]. However, this view would lead to the war of all against all as is suggested by [21], which does not explain why, particularly, the US and China are in such a confrontational relation more than either of them with other states such as the US and Israel as well as China and Russia. Secondly, Jervis himself agrees that a world of small states is more inclined to be affected by anarchy than a world of large ones [22]. With large populations, broad territories, abundant resources, and the largest ocean on earth between, the US and China own such a large margin of safety that they could have wait until the other defect before they defect.

It is natural in politics that State A depreciates B as a tactic to unite its people and release some domestic pressure. This in essence does not require pressure from State B, but to the question of why State A chooses B as opposed to C, D, or E, but history (domestic collective memory consciously shaped for the construction of a nation) and national emotion plays an important role, which means B need not necessarily be hostile towards A currently or recently, but it is highly likely to have been so in the past or its power makes A feel threatened. The unfriendly message delivered to B is likely to arouse national emotion in B too and makes B resist firmly, which consolidates A's oversimplified and overgeneralized prophecy of B and further stimulates nationalism in State A, pushing it to make an even more vicious prophecy.

Nationalism also severely restricts the range of political options open to those who make decisions, which answers the second question. It is not to say that the US and China could impossibly break the circle, but nationalism will significantly hinder Washington and Beijing from doing so. Because of the deceleration of the economy, people become more discontented. To channeling this emotion to foreign states to maintain stability and cohesion, the authority instills in the populace that the other state is aggressive, is to blame for economical depressions, is inhuman, etc. This cultivates nationalism, in the short run, elixir, in the long run, poison. Persuaded by the authority to pin the blame on each other, the American and Chinese people would perceive them in a state of "negative interdependence," so they would engage in "existential combat," seeking a foundation for offense by dehumanizing each other [23]. In the long run, the instillment would be so deep in mind that when the decision-makers want to be less confrontational, the public opinion will disagree. The populace may feel betrayed, cheated, and force spokesmen to be aggressive as before. Therefore, the authority would find it extremely hard to make a change. Generally speaking, when the populace in both State A and State B starts making vicious prophecies of the other state due to nationalism, the circle starts, in which spokesmen are asked to be confrontational considering the prophecy of the opposite's belligerence, which fulfills each other's prophecy, ignites the national emotion even more, and further excludes dove actions from available options.

### 3.2. The US and China

Both the US and China have been criticized by their citizens for economic inequality and standing-still living conditions. The Elephant Curve indicates that in globalization, the income growth of emerging countries and the global elite is the highest, whereas the income of the upper-middle class has hardly changed [24]. Although the statistical caliber of this chart has been questioned by many people, it is undeniable that the gap between the rich and the poor between the American elite and the American blue and white collars has been sharply widened. This fact made the mainstream population in the United States feel betrayed by the East coast financial capital and the West coast scientific and technological capital. They see that, along with the increase of elites' wealth, their wages do not increase, but the unemployment rate, divorce rate, suicide rate, and crime rate do. On the other hand, Chinese people are pressed tight under the weight of three mountains: housing, medical care, and education, especially the first one. Over the past decade, the house price in Shenzhen has quadrupled, while the average wage is only doubled. Given the special state condition of China, the growing anger at the rich and capitalists would also be projected on the government, because back in the 1970s and 1980s, in the struggle and debate of Reform and Open, it promised that those who got privileges would also make others rich after they are, but now that the people only find that the cleavage between them and the privileged is only increasing, they naturally see the government as failing the promise, betraying the idea of gongtong fuyu which the government is still promoting.

Besides the huge domestic pressure both states are enduring, the international perceptions and actions are what really promote the growth of the circle. China is more and more inclined to the narrative of a victim in history, in which a foreign state needs to be characterized as an evil violator to fulfill the subject. The "Century of Humiliation" (1840-1945) is always the emphasis of Chinese History of Politics textbooks, but the narrative focus shifts to how the West bullied China from how Chinese heroes fought back every time the books are edited: for the Second Opium War from Sengge Rinchen's victories to England and France's ruining the Old Summer Place, for the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 from the sacrifice of Deng Shichang to Lushun Massacre. By emphasizing how China suffered miserably, the victimization narrative pushes the West to a position against China. "Many educated Chinese today are painfully aware of the "unequal treaties," states [23], "Readers would simultaneously generate a righteous anti-Western anger." This change also accompanies another vicious prophecy explicitly written in today's History textbook: imperialists have not given up the wild ambition to subjugate us (*diguo zhuyi wangwo zhixin busi*). Indeed, this is an effective tactic in building cohesion within a state, but it hurts the national emotion of other states. For instance, the Anniversary of Nanjing Massacre emphasizes the brutal and inhuman image of the Japanese and hurts Japanese national emotion while uniting all Chinese people under a symbol of suffering. Some Japanese argue back that they shouldn't be nailed to the pillar of shame because of things done by their fathers as opposed to themselves, but this argument is only seen as a tricky evasion of responsibility in China's public opinion, which further tensed up China-Japan relations.

The US, on the other hand, is usually self-styled as victors. A victor view focuses more on the courage and strength of the nation itself, in which the opposite is not necessarily even mentioned. The US narrative of victor can be attributed to the Jacksonian tradition that derives from their traditional family farm home has never vanished since the birth of the US [25]. Indeed, as opposed to the morality of the slaves, in which identification of the "self" is an after-creation as an opposite of their hatred [26], American's Jacksonianism is more inclined to the morality of the masters: the Americans honor themselves; they take themselves as the yard of good, in which the existence of "others" is weakened, not to say unnecessary. Such a code of honor is more magnanimous to historical wounds and protect other states' emotion involved [25], but also lead the Americans to not tolerant the dishonorable free-riders, especially during a depression, just as when there's no harvest, farmers would not tolerant a

thief; their self-honor narrative also does not allow no ongoing challenges, not to mention losing it. The Americans have long been dissatisfied with China because it *is doing* both to them: free-riding in institutions maintained by the US and threatening the authority of the US in international events. Therefore, in response to the emotion of the populace, Donald Trump was elected as president in 2016. He started a trade war with China, which fulfilled the promise he made during the election, but also the vicious prophecy of Imperialist America made by the Chinese victimization narrative. Consequently, China fought back, imposing a reciprocal tariff on the US, which also confirmed American's view of China's challenging them. Insofar, the spiral escalation itself is at risk of losing control, not to mention that nationalism stimulated by each other's unyielding actions would prevent the spokesmen to negotiate and compromise.

How does nationalism do this? For the US, professional politicians understand that in a general election where almost every citizen can vote, it is better to obey the opinion of the public instead of changing it, even persuading for it. Since anti-China has become such a universally accepted political correction that criticizing China has become a significantly effective technique to gain constituent support, few politicians would risk releasing a friendly signal to China. Those who believe the change of the president marked the change of China policy and the mainstream view on China mistake correlation as causation. Indeed, Trump lost the election in 2020, but Biden also condemned China in public debate with him. In fact, even after the winning election, when there's one less excuse for play-acting, Biden still succeeded Trump's anti-China policy, as is evidenced by the approval of the *United States Innovation and Competition Act of 2021*, the draft of which formed in 2020.

On the flip side, Chinese leaders are not generated through general elections that they do not have these concerns, but a more severe problem is facing them: though Beijing never admits it and calls it socialism with Chinese characteristics, the Reform and Open is widely perceived as giving up communism, even socialism, which was the idea that bounded the Chinese people together to stand with the CPC in the mid-twentieth century. Therefore, the Western world predicted that the "party is over," indicating that the CPC wouldn't last long in China, but the CPC persists by claiming it could bring happy life to the Chinese and bring the respect lost since the Century of Humiliation back to China. This idea of "Revive China", together with the idea of gongtong fuyu, has somehow become the alternative legitimacy of the CPC. The Chinese have been waiting and waiting, during which they disappointedly witness the expansion of the cleavage between the rich and the poor. Luckily, now Beijing, after so many compromises with the US on the 2001 spy plane collision, with Japan on Diaoyu Islands, and with South Korea on Sade, is finally taking an unyielding posture. The populace finally sees the hope of getting out of the shadow of the humiliating apology diplomacy. Criticism on Western epidemic prevention measures, rejections of Australian commercial and communication requests, and ridicules on the Afghanistan issue, each time Beijing is being tough, people get more satisfied, but also more fanatical, and more thirsty for the next victory: at this time, the populace is expecting China's hardline diplomacy so high that any dove action would disappoint the people. Even worse, it could remind people of the humiliating past, lead to a sense of betrayal, not only for this soft diplomacy but for failing every promise that people are supporting the CPC for. Such risk to regime legitimacy is never acceptable for the China authority.

Given the special political system of China, the traditional Western view on China sees it as an authoritarian country [27], which is further consolidated by 2018's deletion of "The chairman and vice chairman of China shall serve no more than two consecutive terms" in the Constitution. The "wolf-worrier diplomacy" on the issue of South China Sea, Sino-Australian trade relations, the Alaska Dialogue, etc., which seriously damages China's image in global public opinion, further suggests the people's and institutions' lack of control over Xi [28]. Together, a "Boss", where the civilian leader is personalistic and out of elite control seems so appropriate to describe the current China [29]. Considering the military family background of Xi, the extreme international ambitions and tendency

to be hardline of the “Boss” leader [29], and China’s strong state apparatus, no wonder the top-down state nationalism view is widely accepted. However, as [27] points out, “[n]ationalist politics is never a one-way street.” The top-down view is not wrong, but incomplete. Actually, offline demonstrations and online petitions initiated by popular nationalists during the Belgrade bombing in 1999 and the spy plane collision in 2001 severely restricted political options open for the Party’s foreign policy [23]. They left the Party no way but to condemn the West, even that was much to the disappointment of the nationalists. Admittedly, these cases happened in the “Machine” China after Mao until the Eighteenth CPC National Congress, where leaders, where the civilian leader is still elite-constrained and must be attentive to the preferences of their people [29], but the Cultural Revolution under Mao’s administration could surely reveal the power of the bottom-up popular opinion even in the “Boss” China.

Both China and the United States are trapped in the vicious circle. Beijing’s diplomacy shifts from forbearing (at least from the Chinese people’s perspective) to unyielding. Largest Military parade on National Day, sarcasm at American anti-pandemic measures, Closure of the US embassy in Chengdu... Event after event, each brings massive support from below, strengthens people’s identity of the CPC, fosters national confidence, and stimulates the national emotion even more. Beijing has made this history step, telling its people that they no longer need to swallow insult and humiliation silently, it must be extremely cautious when rationally compromising for any step back, would be inclined to be taken as falling back to the dark humiliating days. Not only Beijing is keeping emphasizing that China has been strong enough to no longer swallow hard, but Washington has also generally denied Clinton’s “Engagement policy.” Several American presidents called letting China join WTO "the biggest failure of American diplomacy" in public. If either of them contacts or negotiates with the other, the people are likely to see them as lying and betraying their own oath, whose fate would be as unfortunate as the army officer that tries to make compromises with the enemy. It is a vortex of mass emotion, instigation, and nationalism, which encroaches room for reason, objectivity, and neutrality inch by inch. Any discussion or action presupposes a political position of national interests so that the rational voice and peaceful action on both sides will quickly decline, disappear, or even reverse. The preset national position is most likely to eventually become a reality, and all the struggles become a conflict between nations. From the sanctions on ZTE and Huawei, to the restriction of 5G, to the anti-epidemic measures, the preset conflicts of national interests were finally fulfilled by each other. In the vicious circle of extreme nationalism, once everything in the two countries is elevated to "political correctness," then a comprehensive confrontation will be inevitable. Once over a critical point, it is not difficult to foresee things lose control.

### 3.3. Offense or Defense

Quite similar to the security dilemma—the increase of armed forces could weaken other states’ security—the increased national confidence and promotion of nationalist emotions could also weaken other states’ national confidence and arouse their negative nationalist emotions. That being said, some circumstances are significantly more offensive to foreign states than other defensive ones. To distinguish them, negative effects on foreign states and positive effects within the state must be analyzed in two dimensions. The first one is the comparison of the relative effects on both sides involved. A defensive circumstance, such as the fireside chats, fosters national confidence significantly more than the discontent it raises in other states, while for an offensive one the difference might not be so obvious—the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day indeed reinforces the concept of the Chinese nation, but also seriously affronted Japanese nowadays—not to mention that some states intend for provocations consciously on purpose. Second, the absolute value of the effects should also be taken into account. Once the negative influence on other states exceeds a threshold, despite the possible fact that the circumstance builds national identity within the state effectively, it is an



offensive one. Similarly, sometimes a circumstance that may be impolite might not be taken as offensive because it is too minor.

The narrative of a victim is inclined to be offensive to other states while telling the story of its own nation, because, under the narrative of a victim, the presence of a violator is necessary, otherwise the story is incomplete. If the violator is absent, readers would be confused and the effect of education would not be strong; if it is generalized to a collection of multiple states without the description of particular brutal actions, as opposed to the expectation of “courage comes after shame,” as the people would turn out to doubt the ability of their own nation, as is evidenced by the trend of Complete Westernization (*quanpan xihua*) in Chinese young intellectuals in the early twentieth century. Therefore, the narrator must dehumanize the violator as much as possible, so that it could raise national emotion among the people while minimizing the damage to national self-esteem. On the other hand, a victor view focuses more on the courage and strength of the nation itself. It is much more defensive because the losers may not even be mentioned: in the narrative, the US is already the subject itself, so whether the other states’ role is omitted or generalized hardly impairs the effect on national identity. Therefore, other states involved in this story are therefore much less inclined to be annoyed in the narrative of a victor. A typical proof of it is the contrasting Tokyo’s attitude and Japanese popular opinion towards China and the US, by both of which Japan was defeated in WWII. Besides historical narratives, the distinction between offense or defense also applies to other events. Similarly to the contrast between the focuses of the victim view and the victor view, on the same event, criticizing others is likely to be offensive, while praising oneself is more defensive. Specifically, during the pandemic, criticism of other states’ anti-pandemic measures is more offensive than showing how careful and dedicated the state itself is; On human rights issues, reporting domestic progress in legislation and administration is more defensive than naming and shaming other states’ negligence. In short, offensive circumstances push the world closer to danger, while defensive ones slow it down.

Theoretically, whether there is a clear boundary between offensive actions and defensive ones and whether there is an absolute defensive one, that is, strengthening national confidence without any inflammation among other states, could be crucial to decelerate and even stop the vicious circle. Unfortunately, in practice, various interference makes things much more complicated. Between the actions of the others and one’s reaction invariably exists a gap of misperception. Under a great contrast, praising oneself could be misperceived by others as insinuating their weaknesses. For instance, a master’s showoff of his power may mean no offense but could seriously hurt the dignity of the weak and sensitive slaves. Even worse, in international relations, there are multiple cases in which, for its interest, a state deliberately distorts the defensive actions of other states into offense or exaggerates the extent of the offense, such as Japan using the September 18th Incident as an excuse for the War of aggression against China, Britain using the Destruction of opium at Humen as an excuse for the First Opium War, and the US using a tube of white powder (possibly washing powder according to Putin) as an excuse for the Iraq War. Offensive circumstances also happen because of the prevalence of slave morality: criticism and hatred toward others are easier to be accepted by the populace. In addition, criticizing others has a much lower threshold compared to that of praising oneself. For instance, although winning the most medals in the Olympic Games could cultivate national confidence, only 6 countries won over 40 medals in Tokyo Olympic Games, and the cumulative number of gold medals since 1896 of nearly 100 countries does not even exceed twenty, which means most countries would find it hard to praise themselves in the Olympic Games. It is no wonder that even the misperceptions all excluded, offensive circumstances may still occur from time to time.

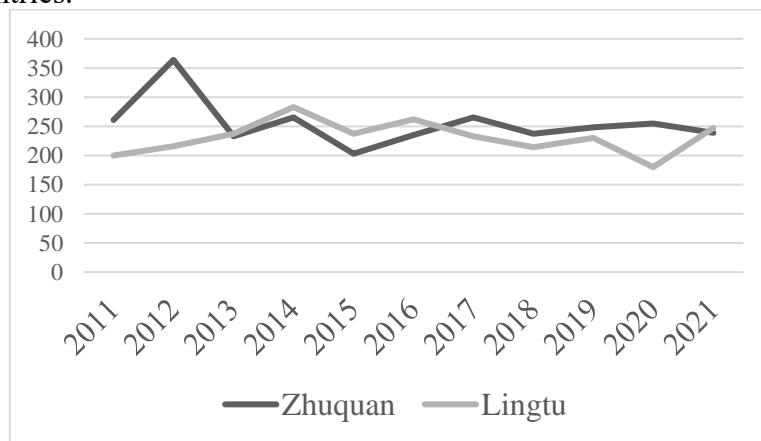
### 3.4. Possible Exits

Given such a vicious circle, the US-China relation seems on a one-way street that ends up losing control, the price of which could be too high for the world to pay. Considering the theory itself and the reality, three exits of the circle will be provided, all of which are possibly effective, some may have been put into practice to some extent, but with possibility come risks.

First, since the root of this vicious circle lies in the discontent raised by domestic economic deceleration and inequality, and there perhaps is not much that the government could do for the deceleration, left populism could be adopted to deal with the inequality through patronage, taxation reform, and welfare improvement. Franklin Delano Roosevelt did all during the New Deal and successfully saved the US from the Great Depression. Nowadays China and the US are doing so similarly. China, as an alleged socialist country, is dedicated to poverty alleviation (*tuopin gongjian*), claiming to have completed the process of building a moderately well-off society in all aspects (*quanmian tuopin*). Despite some voices that it was actually benefiting the top 1% of the rich (Maldonado, 2019), Trump Tax Plan was also passed in 2017. By reducing the cleavage between the rich and the poor, the government can release some domestic pressure without channeling it to foreign states. However, Chinese patronage has long been described as unsustainable, fulfilling the illusion of *gongtong fuyu* at the cost of the middle class, real economic growth, and future developments. Similar criticisms also face the US tax reform, unveiling that it only increases the pressure on people with upper middle income [31]. Moreover, FDR's New Deal has some similarities to left populism, which focuses on social welfare and equality. Both Biden and trump are pushing for more and more progressive taxes, and China's anti-corruption measures are becoming only stricter. However, left populism is just the other end of the genealogy, the opposite one of which is right populism, which is not far from nationalism. If with fast economic development, ordinary people find they have not shared the development achievements appropriately, the voice of the left wing for redistributing income and improving people's welfare will be higher and higher. On the other hand, when economic development is unsatisfactory and social contradictions are prominent, right-wing populism is more likely to gain the upper hand, pointing the spearhead at foreigners, external forces, or a domestic minority. The reality is an unfortunate combination of inequality where breeds left populism and deceleration which brings right populism; shifting from the right end to the left only shifts the contradictions which have been transferred to foreign states back and transforms risks of wars or conflicts to that of revolutions.

Second, some people believe that views of both the United States and China on each other are extremely biased, and the people will eventually realize this, and the public opinion will return to normal, just as the disappearance of McCarthyism and the Yellow Peril theory. Now, the US public opinions including academic communities tend to discuss China from the perspective of "New Assertiveness" since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis [16], which indicated China's aggressive and hardline diplomacy and evolved into that of "Wolf-warrior" during the COVID-19 pandemic, but such perspectives both underestimate assertiveness of past China and overestimate the assertiveness of current China [16]. Indeed, the perspective of either "New Assertiveness" or "Wolf-warrior" is skewed since, on issues of sovereignty and territory, China is always hardline, whether prior to 2010 or after [16]; [32] [33]. Similarly, though the CPC has always been dedicated to ideology propaganda. The attitude towards the West before wasn't so one-sided as today. In fact, during the Century of Humiliation, the idea that the West was an advanced example to China was quite popular among a considerable number of intellectuals and government officials, as is evidenced by the 1861 Westernization Movement, 1898 Hundred-Day Political Reform, and 1915 New Culture Movement. In the 1990s and 2000s, criticism of the dictatorship and praise for the Western democracy, liberal economy, and checks and balances were extremely popular in public opinion, especially among the

middle-aged males. At that time, such statements were viewed as critical, independent, and profound, while the defenders of centralization and political system with China's characteristics were ridiculed as blinded, simple, and naive Little Pink (*xiao fenhong*). It wasn't until the administration of Xi that the pro-west narrative gradually languished, under which the priority of media control is raised to a new level. In schools, it launched a comprehensive reform of liberal arts textbooks, emphasized the devil image of the West in Chinese history, and incorporated "party-loving" into the semantic of "patriotic" (*aidang jiushi aiguo*). In society, the party both restricts the source of primary information, creating frictions for the public to collect data, and floods the public media with official, censored, and omnipresent statements, crowding out the noise outside the main melody [34]. Even the fear strategy from the Maoist era is put into practice [35], under which the alleged reactionary statements are reported and punished [34]. The repeatedly emphasized concepts of National Confidence, National Identity, and National Pride, etc. buried a vicious prophecy of the West in the subconscious of the Chinese people. Though at first, they might not believe or even realize it, since then, every time China reports a Western scandal and every friction between China and the west, the correctness of this prophecy will be proved, and the view of the West will become more and more one-sided. Inspired by the natural disappearance of McCarthyism, some people believe the populace will eventually calm down and realize the impression of foreign states are only vicious prophecies as opposed to objective facts. Indeed, the mainstream value may be misled, but it always goes back to the right track; given the risks brought by unknowns, perhaps viewing the tension and confrontational public opinions as a deviation and waiting patiently until the mainstream opinion corrects itself is the safest choice. Nevertheless, the fall of McCarthyism was largely attributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. The growing threat from the Soviet Union could no longer fulfilling the prophecy Americans made for it, so people realized that there was no reason to regard communism as dread. However, when it comes to its hatred of China, which is still growing fast and becoming increasingly aggressive, the vicious prophecy made for China could still fulfill itself. With the capacity to severely harm each other [36], the obsessive hostility between the US and China is unlikely to languish anytime soon [36], while in the long run, it is hard to say which would come first, the fall of China or the US, or all-out war between the two countries.



**Figure 2.** Weighted search frequency of Zhuquan and Lingtu in January.

Source: Baidu index.

Third, since frequent and meaningful contact could improve intergroup relations and reduce biases [37], a reliable and stable channel to communicate seems of great importance to maintain good relations between nations. In the later period of Trump's administration, almost all communication channels between China and the United States were cut off, leaving room for the people of the two countries to imagine, misunderstand and distort each other's actions. This accelerates the spin of the

circle so badly that the Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University center for Chinese and American Studies even initiated a petition in 2021, suggesting China and the United States strengthen communication. These experts and some others believe more intellectual contact would reduce hostility and misunderstanding between the US and China. They are not wrong; however, an ideal communication must fulfill a strict series of standards: “meaningful, voluntary, extended in duration, varied across contexts, generalized beyond the immediate situation, and must occur among individuals who are similar in all but cultural background.” [23] More frequently, unsatisfactory communication worsens the relationship, which happens particularly when both sides misperceive their relative status. A typical example is the US-China Summit in Alaska, where Yang Jiechi famously (at least in China) said, “The United States is not qualified to say in front of China that you talk to China from the position of power.” Despite the fact that spokesmen of both states were willing to sit and converse, the content of the dialogue was no more than an output of emotions and confrontation. The summit that could’ve been a chance to ameliorate the intense US-China relation became only a stage for play-acting, the audience being their own people.

### 3.5. Alternative Explanations

Besides the theory of the vicious circle, other alternative explanations for the rising tension of the US-China relations also have some truth in them, including perspectives from economics, realism, and ideology. Discussions on them are helpful to unveil the mechanism of the deteriorating US-China relation more comprehensively.

Trump blamed China for stealing jobs from America and started the trade war with it, but those who believe conflicts on trades and jobs are the actual reason accounting for the deteriorating US-China relation have unrealistic illusions for basic international economics. If not China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and even some African countries will still occupy most of the basic manufacturing industry in the United States, not to mention that with rapidly increasing labor and factor costs, China is losing the potential to attract jobs. Adidas, Nike, and Philips closed their direct factories in China a few years ago. In October 2019, Samsung also closed its last mobile phone factory in China and planned to move to Southeast Asia. Even Chinese enterprises have the same idea: Xiaomi, Oppo, Vivo, and Foxconn have also started to build new factories in Southeast Asia. However, neither China-Southeast Asia relation nor the US-Southeast Asia relation has significantly deteriorated. In fact, due to the limitation of its population and advance of technology and finance, it is best for itself and the world that the US makes full use of its resources in high-end industries, which it has great comparative advantages. Moreover, the trade war is a lose-lose scenario, blocking goods and cargoes from the two largest markets and manufacturers. Either way, purely from a perspective of economics, the US-China relation is going far worse than the underlying interest requires. Admittedly, sometimes in a game, both sides may join a competition to see which side can tolerate a serious but limited competition in risk-taking and endurance of uncomfortable but bearable costs. In this view, the competition would reveal which side is more determined to prevail in the issues under dispute and which side has the greater confidence to face stronger struggles. However, first, this is a game that can easily get out of control, for both sides are expecting and waiting that the other side will eventually make concessions for de-escalation [18]. Second, states are in essence different from men, not to mention economic men. States, however integrated, are made of multiple factions, with multiple minds, speaking in multiple voices. For example, despite the persistence of the US military, taxpayers’ pressure still led Biden to confirm the withdrawal of troops in Afghanistan in August. In reality, the fitting degree of hypothetical economic models for the international games, participants of which are complex states as opposed to a completely autonomous man, remains to be considered cautiously.

Though that the heavy economic interdependence between the UK and Germany failed to prevent them from fighting against each other in WWI has proven the liberalists too optimistic [38], either

could realism alone explain the rising tension convincingly. Admittedly, the realists are right about the confrontational attitude and actions that Washington adopts towards China, because China, as a rising and fast-growing power, is challenging the dominance of the US in East Asia. The increasingly uncompromising stand on the Taiwan issue, the military exercise in China South Sea, establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are all proving China's power and ambition without exception. With 1.4 billion people, China has the potential to wipe the US out of the second island chain, which must be considered seriously by Washington. Therefore, it is reasonable for the US to take more aggressive and deterrent gestures to confine the rise of China. However, Beijing has no motive to be so confrontational in diplomacy with the US. After all, "Time is on China's side," states [39] in his lecture in Yale. Within the past twenty years, China has developed from the verge of bankruptcy to the world's second-largest economy, the largest manufacturing country, and the largest goods trading country. Shall there be more time to keep developing their economy and translating it into a military force, China will naturally have control in Asia, just as the US does in the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, realism could partly explain the tense Washington-Beijing relation, but couldn't do Beijing-Washington by itself.

Ideology difference is indeed one way to see the cold war between the US and the Soviet Union: the liberal democracy-capitalism versus communism battle, and one might find it hard to resist the temptation to see the US-China relation from the perspective of ideology. However, Beijing doesn't seem to care about communism much [40], and the Communist Party of China does not have much legitimacy from communism but is in fact playing the card of nationalism [41] [42]. Moreover, if this was really a battle of ideologies, then the US-China relation in the 1970s and 1980s shouldn't have been in the honeymoon period but much worse than now, during which China had not embarked on the road of neoliberalism yet.

#### 4. Conclusion

For a long time, Chinese elites have had extensive and in-depth interest relations with American institutionalists, chambers of commerce, and Wall Street. Both sides have never considered seriously that they would reach this intense level, but continue to release confrontational statements as tactics to channel domestic discontent and gain popular support, underestimating each other's determination while not really ready for a break and full-scale conflict. This dangerous and irresponsible behavior eventually leads to large back reaction. In the era with both economic depression and inequality, people's emotion gets out of the control of the authorities, creating vicious prophecies of other states one after another, severely restricting state's policy choices, pushing spokesmen to be more and more belligerent, fulfilling each other's prophecy and making it even worse. This is a vicious circle that fulfills itself, reinforces itself, escalates itself; possible exits include left populism, spontaneous and equal-status communication, self-correction of the mainstream, etc.; unfortunately, none comes without risks. Which one to choose, where the balance is, and what the outcome will be, all remain unknown. But one thing is for sure: there isn't much time.

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