

Chaguan | How China sees America

Nothing will change China's view: America is bent on blocking its rise



SHORTLY BEFORE election day in America, Chaguan spent an instructive morning in central Beijing listening to a senior Chinese official explain why his country does not care who sits in the White House. This was partly bravado, for China's rulers do not care to play up the idea that mere voters might hold world leaders to account. But the official's disdain also reflects an elite consensus that a full reset of us-China relations is difficult to imagine.

China wants smoother ties with America, said the official. But given their deep roots, present-day tensions will be hard to reverse unless America comes to a new understanding of the world. Westerners are a self-centred and judgmental lot, he charged. They never expected the Chinese—a diligent, studious people—to rival them so soon. No matter which party runs Washington, the official said, “The us has to answer this question: can the us or the Western world accept or respect the rise of China?”

To Chinese leaders, Donald Trump's aggression in office merely accelerated some inevitable trends. To them, the Trump era shows that talk of values is a sham, that China alarms Americans because it is getting stronger—and that the solution is to become more powerful, until Western critics are shamed into silence by China's success. They also think that American weakness is making that ex-hegemon (even more) vicious and determined to scapegoat China. Back when Xi Jinping was China's vice-president, he spent many hours with his counterpart Joe Biden, who is seen as an establishment centrist close to business sectors that want better China ties. But struggle with America is seen as unavoidable.

Ordinary Chinese citizens never followed an American election so closely. But many watched with more scorn than envy. Instead, abetted by censors who allowed mocking jokes and memes about the race to flood social media, a common view is that the result is irrelevant. The Chinese internet is full of posts backing Mr Trump. Most reflect glee over his pugnacious style and a hunch that his incompetence, notably in handling covid-19, has usefully harmed America. Other fans include nationalists grateful for Mr Trump's reluctance to condemn official abuses in places like Xinjiang and Hong Kong, as well as, confusingly, dissidents and Hong Kongers who think him tough on the Communist Party.

Americans may object that Chinese views of their politics are

cartoonish, incoherent and self-serving. But cynicism about the democratic West—among both elites and the general public—matters. For it helps to explain how the party will approach what its Central Committee described on October 29th as a “profound adjustment in the international balance of power”.

Elite cynicism about America preoccupies Chairman Rabbit, a Harvard-educated Chinese blogger whose 1.7m followers on Weibo, a social-media platform, include business leaders and officials in government ministries. Ren Yi, the chairman's real name, is a mainstream nationalist with princeling blood: his grandfather was a reformist party secretary of Guangdong province in the 1980s. His posts explore the nuances of American politics. But the wider public associates such nuance with naivety. Mr Trump was liked in China until 2018, says Mr Ren over coffee in a Beijing hotel. His populist nationalism resonated, as did his praise for President Xi. His slogan “Make America Great Again” mirrored talk of a great Chinese rejuvenation. Even the trade war had fans, at first. When Mr Trump's envoys pushed China to speed up market-opening reforms, some influential Chinese were sympathetic to American arguments, recalls Mr Ren. Three events changed the mood. Canada arrested Meng Wanzhou, a boss at Huawei, a Chinese tech giant, on behalf of American prosecutors investigating alleged sanctions-busting. Then American politicians cheered on anti-government protests in Hong Kong. Finally came America's bungling of the pandemic, even as the Chinese public complied with strict health controls that tamed the virus at home.

Mr Ren saw friends concluding that all American politicians are as bad as each other. Most Chinese “think of us politics as a huge conspiracy to keep China down”, a suspicion that they flaunt as a badge of sophistication, says the blogger. Where once the Chinese romanticised America as an advanced nation, “Now because of covid they see the us people as selfish, anti-science, anti-intellectual.” It is no accident that events that angered Chinese—Ms Meng's arrest and the protests in Hong Kong—touched on sovereignty. Homogeneous China finds it hard to comprehend pluralistic, divided America, says Mr Ren. What Chinese really care about is China's strength and territorial integrity. “They think that it is China's destiny to rise, and so to come into conflict with America.”

Too late to contain China, still time to compete

Popular opinion concerns Wang Yong, who directs the Centre for American Studies at Peking University, one of China's most prestigious institutions. A frequent guest on state media, he made a series of short election-eve videos about America for Jinri Toutiao, an online platform, racking up over 10m visits. As he describes it, America's China policies are guided by competing interest groups, with Mr Biden heeding the Wall Street financiers and Silicon Valley bosses who seek “more rational” ties with China, while hawks and “deep-state forces” push for a new cold war. China and America can work together on such shared interests as climate change, public health and enabling global prosperity, he insists. Yet people should be realistic, says the professor over jasmine tea near his university. America “has been accustomed to the top position in world affairs and will use all means to defend its status”.

Amid such distrust, any Chinese rapprochement with America should be understood for what it is: a bid to buy time while China races to become stronger. China's rulers are not hiding their worldview, which is based on the idea that only the powerful are treated with respect. America can choose whether or not to compete. But it has been warned: American gridlock would be a win for China. ■

Chaguan | China doubles down in Xinjiang

Chaguan pays an uninvited visit to a factory complex accused of using forced Uyghur labour



A VAST EXPANSE of sand dunes, studded with the wind-eroded ruins of lost Silk Road cities, the Taklamakan Desert is a fine place to hide a guilty secret. At first glance, shame is a plausible explanation for a mini construction-boom under way in this remote corner of Xinjiang. For outsiders are increasingly shocked by China's rule over this north-western region, where millions of Uyghurs, an ethnic minority, endure oppressive, high-tech surveillance and the constant fear of detention for alleged Islamic extremism.

For the past few years overseas human-rights groups and scholars have used satellite images and Chinese government documents to track dozens of factories rising on the Taklamakan's southern edge in Lop County, a poor and almost entirely Uyghur area. The factories line the newly laid streets of an industrial park sponsored by the city of Beijing, 4,000km to the east. More alarmingly, satellite images and the Xinjiang government's own propaganda suggest that as the park rose from the desert sands, at least one political re-education camp lurked amid the factories.

Across Xinjiang over a million Uyghurs have passed through such camps in recent years. Officials eventually admitted to the camps' existence in 2018. Pointing to terrorist attacks by Muslims from Xinjiang, they said China had set up vocational training centres to cure minds infected with religious extremism. In October 2018 China Central Television toured a camp in Hotan, an ancient oasis city. Detainees were shown in Mandarin-language classes, studying Chinese laws and learning such skills as sewing, before thanking authorities for saving them. In contrast, critics call the campaign both brutal in its methods and horrifyingly arbitrary in its application. Leaked government files record Uyghurs interned for such "suspicious" acts as growing long beards, applying for a passport or using foreign messaging services like Skype. Ex-detainees have accused camp staff of beatings and rapes.

Now this giant social-engineering project is evolving. In late 2019 officials said that all detainees have graduated from compulsory studies. On a recent weekend Chaguan visited the Hotan city camp toured by state television and found it apparently abandoned, observed only by a clutch of camels and locals digging for white jade in a dried-up riverbed. Closing highly visible sites signals shifting tactics, not a change of heart. China is merging coun-

ter-terrorism work in Xinjiang with nationwide campaigns to assimilate ethnic minorities and push the rural poor into formal employment, in the name of development and social stability. A State Council white paper from September, detailing training and job placement campaigns in Xinjiang, found 2.6m "rural surplus workers" in the region, notably Uyghurs with "outdated ideas".

Hints of trouble abound. The white paper blames "terrorists, separatists and religious extremists" for inciting locals to "refuse to improve their vocational skills". Global firms that audit multinational supply chains for labour abuses increasingly decline to operate in Xinjiang, blaming authorities for obstructing their work. Earlier this year the American government said that it suspects several businesses in Lop County of using forced labour, specifically firms trading in human hair. American customs officers seized tonnes of wigs and hairpieces in June, then afterwards banned all hair imports from the Lop County Hair Products Industrial Park, a zone within the Beijing Industrial Park. Chinese government spokesmen and state media dismiss talk of forced labour as a smear by Westerners bent on keeping China down.

To an optimist, such shrill denials might suggest that sanctions are biting. Xinjiang has a lot to lose: it supplies almost a fifth of the world's cotton, among other commodities. Your columnist, who is not generally an optimist, headed to Lop County to take a look in person. Chaguan travelled with a reporter from another Western newspaper. As happens in Xinjiang, police were already waiting for the foreign journalists at Hotan, the nearest airport to Lop County. An hour later, goons blocked an access road to the industrial park, turning Chaguan's taxi away. He and his colleague finally arrived on foot after a long desert walk around the park boundary, a metal fence topped with four strands of electrified wire.

Defiance in the desert

American sanctions have yet to paralyse Lop County's factories, it can be reported. On a freezing but sunny weekend morning, the entrance to the hair-products park was busy with traffic. Nearby, construction workers toiled on new buildings. The arrival of foreign reporters triggered bouts of pushing and arm-grabbing by unidentified men bent on stopping the Westerners from proceeding further, one of whom called himself "the person responsible for the park". Trying to grab reporters' smartphones, they demanded the deletion of pictures of their industrial zone and of what appears to be a training facility at the park's southern end, resembling a secure boarding school, down to young adults lined up in rows on a playing field. Questions were greeted with evasions. "We don't really have dealings with the outside world," replied one of the men when asked about American sanctions. Initially asserting that his company only sells to domestic markets, he then claimed that it makes nothing at all and "is still being put together".

The men staged one more physical confrontation when a hulking, prison-like complex with tall grey walls and guard towers came into view. Failing to stop the foreigners from seeing the prison, they focused on preventing photography.

Still, evidence-destruction is not a sign of a sore conscience. Bits of the park designed to be seen from the ground by locals are unapologetic. Giant rooftop characters in the training facility spell out such slogans as: "Labour is glorious" and "Serve the economy". A poster by the main gate shows President Xi Jinping surrounded by smiling Uyghur children. China's regime is secretive because it has no patience for debating its policies with foreigners. It is proud of its iron-fisted rule in Xinjiang, and is not about to change. ■

Chaguan | The downside of bullying

China's habit of humiliating those who defy it could backfire



CHINA BULLIES other countries because it works. Once told that they have crossed a “red line” by harming China’s interests or calling out its misdeeds, many governments crumble swiftly. Others fold after suffering months of threats, trade boycotts and cancelled official meetings. But in China’s long experience, almost all—even sometimes America—climb down eventually, sending envoys to sue for peace. True, some Western leaders pay public lip-service to their own country’s values as they land in far-off Beijing. Once the press is shooed from the room, however, the foreign visitors get down to dealmaking. They bow to China’s mix of market power, geopolitical importance and ruthlessness.

Lately, bullying others into furtive submission has not been enough for Communist Party chiefs. Increasingly, they seem bent on humiliating countries that show defiance, notably small or mid-sized allies of America. Just now, it is Australia’s turn for punishment. Its transgressions include taking a lead among American allies in banning the use of 5G network equipment from Huawei, a Chinese telecommunications giant, and calling for an independent probe into the origins of covid-19. China has imposed hefty tariffs on Australian wine and blocked imports of everything from coal to lobsters. In November Chinese diplomats made public a list of 14 ways in which Australia was “poisoning bilateral relations”. The charge-sheet rebuked Australia for allowing news outlets, members of parliament and think-tanks to criticise China. Late last month China’s foreign ministry pounced on an Australian government report into unlawful, brutal killings of prisoners and civilians in Afghanistan by Australian troops. Zhao Lijian, a ministry spokesman and licensed provocateur on social media, said the report exposed the hypocrisy of Western concerns about human rights. On November 30th Mr Zhao tweeted a crude photo-montage made to look like an Australian soldier slitting an Afghan child’s throat. Mr Zhao demanded that troops be held accountable—serenely ignoring the fact that Australia’s inquiry had already recommended that 19 soldiers face criminal investigation.

At first sight, such Chinese provocations look clumsy, indeed self-defeating. By offending lots of ordinary Australians, they complicate life for those businesspeople and politicians who want their government to placate China in hopes of restoring normal,

profitable trade flows. That underestimates the calculating nature of Mr Zhao’s tweets and other Chinese attacks, which are not intended to win over Australian hearts and minds. Their aim is partly domestic: to demonstrate the foreign ministry’s fighting spirit to Chinese leaders and online nationalists. The intention is also to demonstrate China’s strength and to provoke such a sense of crisis that Australian political and business leaders are desperate to seek a truce. China’s outlandish attacks are pseudo-populism: a calculated ploy to press elites into cutting a deal.

China may yet feel vindicated in its choice of tactics. Australia may cave. If it does not, and China decides to sacrifice relations with Australia for years to come, a ghastly warning will be sent to other trade partners that imagine they can criticise China with impunity. The world is a rough place on the eve of 2021. China feels in better shape than most. While other large economies remain battered by covid-19, it has already returned to growth. When enunciating their core national interests, Chinese leaders are at least predictable. In contrast, America’s allies have spent four years absorbing hard lessons about the impermanence of American interests that once seemed carved in stone—lessons that will outlive the Trump presidency.

Yet conversations in recent weeks with more than a dozen ambassadors in Beijing reveal a striking change of mood. Westerners know that they often struggle to understand the incentives that guide Chinese officials. But envoys in Beijing increasingly suspect that China’s rulers are misreading the mood in democracies. In particular, Communist Party bosses are too disdainful of Western public opinion, which is swinging against China in ways that will constrain governments, at least somewhat, as they strive to balance economic interests and democratic values.

China prefers to be admired, but will settle for fear

Western unity is too fragile to enable many formal displays of solidarity with Australia. And multinational corporations are not about to leave China. For lots of big firms, their only profitable business unit this year is Chinese. But China’s assertiveness abroad, and its hardline ideological turn at home, are creating political uncertainties that businesses cannot ignore. The talk is of hedging now, and of diversifying future investments. There will be no binary moment when the West switches from engagement to decoupling. However, China is teaching the West to be more defensive. Over time, more individual, seemingly unconnected decisions will be a no, not a yes: whether to allow this Chinese investment, buy that sensitive technology from a Chinese firm, or sign an exchange deal with a Chinese university. That could have surprising cumulative effects. Western defensiveness will not stop China from rising, but it could alter China’s trajectory, perhaps steering it towards dominance of only part of the world: a techno-authoritarian sphere in tension with a more liberal bloc.

For decades, countries have tolerated Chinese bullying. For that, thank pragmatism, naivety and cynicism among politicians and business bosses, and broad indifference among publics. Now, however, China seems bent on changing countries that it deems hostile, so that governments, news outlets, universities and other institutions never defy China again. Some trade partners, especially in China’s backyard, will feel bound to submit. Others may prove more stubborn. China is no longer just a foreign-policy puzzle. As its confidence swells, and its technological footprint grows, it is ready to challenge how Western societies work at home. Imposing that sort of humiliation comes with costs. ■