

## WANG JISI

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Thank you very much, Thomas. I am happy to join you although I cannot join you physically, but I hope to be with you in person in the future.

You asked those questions but I cannot answer them all. As some people said, China is facing strong materially, but in public perceptions of China around the world, the picture is mixed. Many media reports indicate that public opinion in Western countries, Japan, South Korea and India is increasingly unfavorable to China. I recently heard that Mr. Kishida may be elected Prime Minister in Japan soon and it is related to what he and other Japanese see as today's China. He was educated in America and he is pragmatic but probably unsympathetic to China's political values. I would like to know from my South Korean colleague how he will assess the upcoming election in South Korea and if the next President of South Korea may have another approach on China.

Last week, leaders of the four nations that make up the informal grouping, the United States, Japan, India and Australia, known as the QUAD, met for the first time in person at the White House. Its unstated goal is to stop China becoming Asia's undisputed hegemon. There have been other trends and developments unfavorable to China in recent months. However, they are hardly reported in China itself and are hardly known to the general public in China. Chinese media is full of China's triumphalism, meaning, "We are winning, we are winning and we are winning. We have friends all over the world praising our achievements". This self-image makes it difficult for Beijing to show any conciliation towards whoever is hostile to China.

I do not see any prospects that Beijing will back down on major foreign policy issues and become less assertive, at least in terms of rhetoric. Our French participants asked China to be humble but that does not seem likely in the near future. China has been engaging in a protracted strategic competition that may last for decades. However, at this moment, both Beijing and Washington are preoccupied with their respective domestic imperatives. On the Chinese side, power outages took place in many provinces, especially in the Northeast. The debt crisis regarding the Evergrande is another example of China's weakness. But the most damaging problem is the slowdown of economic growth. There are issues related to decreasing fertility rates and the aging population. It is difficult to achieve the goal of "common prosperity" when economic growth is slower, private-owned enterprises are repressed and not doing well, and the social safety net has not been remarkably improved.

On the US side, we see continued political polarization, the fight between Democrats and Republican in Congress, the stagnation of infrastructure construction, the COVID-19

pandemic, illegal immigration, and gun control, here to name just a few. I envisage an image of temporary stage in the bilateral relations between China and the United States on this point, in the months ahead. Some positive bilateral issues are emerging, but I do not see this as improvement. There could be resumption of consulates in Houston and Chengdu. There could also be high-level economic dialogues between the two countries. However, three possible problems are lying ahead for China in the next few months. First, the continued US effort to trace the origins of COVID-19 that worries China. Second, the Winter Olympic Games, which the Western countries are not going to boycott, but public opinion polls show that these countries are not sympathetic and may not wholeheartedly support the Games and that could embarrass China. Third, there is talk about the “Democratic Summit” towards the end of the year, and that is of course not very favorably perceived in China. China is especially concerned about Taiwan’s participation in the Summit, maybe not President Tsai Ing-wen or some top leaders, but even lower-level participation will annoy China.

We have seen the intensification of China’s propaganda war, both at home and internationally against the United States. We see reports on racial tensions, gun control issues, bad management of the pandemic, human rights violations in the United States and international failures like in Afghanistan. However, the propaganda campaign is more directed at domestic audiences to enhance their confidence in the Communist Party, rather than at international audiences who are going to have a better understanding or positive understanding of China. I see China’s international behavior as mostly defensive in nature. I do not buy the theory that China desires to be the hegemon of the world or even of Asia. As I said in my recent articles, I think the China-US competition is basically a game between China’s domestic order maintained by the Communist Party of China and the international order maintained and advocated by the United States. In the United States, you have seen the slogan “America First”, but in China, the slogan here was “Communist Party First”.

I see the US-China trade war degraded last year. In climate change issues, China’s effort is serious. I am more worried about “technological decoupling”, as Thomas mentioned, that is a real issue in the US-China relationship. There is also a possible cyberwar. And I am not very worried about a confrontation despite the increasingly militant adventurism among some Chinese netizens and commentators. We know that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff made a phone call to his Chinese counterpart last year to prevent a war between the two sides, and there would be improved crisis management arrangements between the two sides. I think that China’s Taiwan policy is consistent. Xi Jinping sent a telegram to his counterpart, the Chairman of the Kuomintang in Taiwan, and said that China and Taiwan should be engaged in finding a peaceful solution. Of course, China will upgrade its military preparedness and there could be fighters and bombers flying over or near Taiwan for example, but I do not see a real war between the two sides.

### **Thomas Gomart, Director of Ifri**

Professor Wang Jisi, I am afraid I have to interrupt you. As Marcus Noland emphasized the domestic factors, I also think what you have said about Chinese opinion will be very useful in fueling our debate.

