

# The Impact of Differences between Chinese and American Values on Sino-US Diplomatic Relations

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the impact of cultural differences between China and the United States on their diplomatic relations. The cultural differences between the two countries include collectivism versus individualism, respect for elders and hierarchy, and different economic and political systems. The differences in values and approaches have led to recent severe antagonism between the two nations, with the treat of a potential “cold war 2.0.” The paper argues that the United States; attempts to impose its values and culture on other nations and its history of attacking countries to spread democracy have further escalated tensions. The study concludes that these cultural differences play a crucial role in determining the nature of the relationship between the two nations and have significant implications for the world.

**Keywords:** China, United States, Diplomatic Relations, Cultural Difference, Collectivism.

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## 1. Introduction

It was not until the last decade that the bilateral relationship between China and the US became important and the most talked about in international relations. The countries went into a trade war during the Trump era and are likely to get trapped in the Thucydides trap given the nature of the relationship and power that the two most powerful countries possess in the current era (Allison, 2015). The future of these two countries not only has great implications for the countries involved but also for the whole world because both are economic and nuclear giants. The declining relationship between the two countries has many causes; however, one of the major causes is the cultural differences between the two countries (Jisi & Ran, 2019). It has been pointed out by Samuel P. Huntington in his work, “The Clash of Civilizations” as well that countries will go to war because of their cultural differences (Samuel, 1993). Both the United States and China have different cultures and values which have become the major bone of contention and roadblock to the good relationship between the two countries. While China practices collectivism and focuses on shared values with a political and economic system of communism, the United States practices individualism and freedom of speech with a political and economic system of democratic values and capitalism. The same issue became the cause of the cold war between China and Russia in the second half of the 20th century and scholars are worried about a similar situation of a cold war 2.0 between China and the United States this time (Khong, 2019).

## 2. Literature Review

In his writing, “The clash of Civilizations” Samuel P. Huntington warned about a possible cultural clash between Western cultural values and Sinjc cultural values (Huntington, 2000). According to Huntington, “the very notion that there could be a ‘universal civilization’ is a western idea, directly at odds with the particularism of most Asian societies and their emphasis on what distinguishes one people from another.” The West has always perceived the world from a ‘universal Western’ perspective and never took into account the cultural values and differences of other nations (Allison, 2017). The

current differences are also the result of these western perceptions which will be discussed in detail in the sections below.

As discussed, China and the United States have very different cultures and values. While one’s culture and values revolve around shared values, reverence for elders, and communist thoughts, the other’s culture, and values revolve around freedom of speech, individualism, and democratic norms. Chinese put the hierarchy very high and respect their elders and people in higher positions (Yang, 2014). Not only this but the Chinese also put great emphasis on interaction among people from different hierarchal positions. Familial links and positions are also very important and relatives at different ranks are treated and addressed differently based on their positions. On the other hand, in the United States, these restrictions are quite relaxed, and younger often call their elders by their first names. Similarly, in the Chinese culture collectivism is practiced. Collective values and actions are put above individual benefits. If an act is serving a greater good for the community, it is considered better than an act that only serves an individual purpose. While on contrary, in the United States, the success of the community is not associated with the success of an individual. Every person is encouraged to work hard for their betterment and excel in life (Cohen et al., 2016). The capitalist and communist economic and political systems adopted by the two countries also share somewhat similar approaches and are in contradiction with one another. In the post cold war era, these competing ideologies became the leading cause of the differences between the United States and China (Qi, 2005). Before the cold war, the two had maintained a strategic relationship based on mutual trust and the issue of human rights never caused a roadblock in the relationship between these two major powers. The Reagan administration used the issue of human rights against China to counter the Soviet Union for the first time (Forsythe, 1990).

The conflicting values between China and the US have also led to disagreements in areas such as human rights, economic policies, and territorial disputes. For example, the Us has criticized China for its policies towards Hong Kong and its treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, while China has accused the US of interfering in its internal affairs. These cultural differences and disagreements have hindered

progress in diplomatic relations and cooperation between the two countries. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has only further exacerbated these tensions, as both countries have blamed each other for the spread of the virus and engaged in a propaganda war (Silver et al., 2020)

### 3. Case Study

As discussed above in many arguments, the differences in values between China and the United States have a major impact on the diplomatic relations between the two major powers. While the United States values individual freedom and promotes individualism, China promotes collectivism and believes in upholding shared values. These contrasting and at times contradicting cultural values are gravely impacting the nature of the relationship between the current superpower and the rising superpower. While both the United States and China were enjoying a non-antagonistic relationship earlier, the two have recently been engaged in severe antagonism and the world is afraid of a possible cold war 2.0 (Allison, 2017). Both China and the United States have different values and approaches. China has its way of perceiving and allowing freedom of speech in its country. The communist government in China has censored all forms of western social media in its country and has launched an alternative channel for all these platforms. China has its own Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, etc. These practices are perceived as a crime against humanity by the West and the United States, therefore, reiterating the opening of all these social media channels to allow freedom of speech. Another major issue with the United States is that it tries to impose its values and culture on other nations. It has been said by other nation-states time and again that western culture is not universal and many other cultures exist that hold their values and culture differ from that of the western culture and values (Huntington, 1996). The United States in its endeavor to uphold world peace and spread democracy has already attacked and destroyed many countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, etc.

Another major issue between the two countries is the human rights concerns raised by the United States. As per the Office of the UN Human Rights Commission (OHCHR, 2022), there are possible human rights violations taking place in the Xinjiang province of China. In this region, the predominantly Muslim population of Uighur Muslims is targeted by the Chinese authority and they are then detained in the Chinese “re-education” camps where they are tortured and forced to labor and abide by the Chinese government while asked to leave their religion. However, China debunked the propaganda of human rights violations in Xinjiang. According to Wenting & Weilan (2022), “an important characteristic of US national and international communication is that it pursues “ideological thrust” and “weaponized information.” PRC claims that Xinjiang enjoys similar rights and privileges as the rest of the state. Moreover, Xinjiang has more advanced agricultural technology compared to other parts of China.

In addition to the cultural differences and human rights concerns discussed preciously, economic rivalry is also a major factor that exacerbates the tensions between China and the United States. The United States views China as a major economic competitor and accuses it of indulging in unfair trade practices, such as currency manipulation and intellectual property theft. These allegations have led to the imposition to tariffs and sanctions on Chinese imports, further straining the

economic relationship between the two countries. On the other hand, China has been rapidly expanding its global economic its global economic influence through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive infrastructure development project aimed at connecting China with Asia, Europe and Africa. The United States sees this as a strategic move by China to gain greater global power and influence, and fears that countries involved in the BRI will become economically dependent on China (Ohashi, 2018).

Furthermore, the United States has also accused China of being involved in cyber espionage and cyberattacks, which has resulted in the theft of sensitive government and corporate data, this has further strained the relationship between the two countries and increased the level of distrust.

All these events, the blame game by the United States, and the possibility of a war between the two major powers because of the Thucydides trap and the clash of civilizations have made the two countries more alienated. Many of these issues are to result of the cultural differences between the two major powers which have created a void that does not let the two countries understand and respect the difference in their values and cultures. Having said that, it is high time the United States stopped looking at the world from the western cultural perspective as mentioned by Samuel P. Huntington in his work, “western culture is unique however it is not universal.” Similarly, the United States should also stop interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries and not project itself as the Saviour and only beacon of hope for freedom, democracy, and champion of human rights. It is important for both countries to engage in constructive dialogue and find a common ground on these issues in order to engage in constructive dialogue and find a common ground on these issues in order to maintain a stable diplomatic relationship. The United States should seek to understand China’s perspective on these matters and China should be open to addressing concerns raised by the United States and other countries. Failure to do so could further strain the relationship between the two nations and have negative impacts on global stability. If these differences are not resolved timely and the two major powers kept dragging and pulling each other down, the world order will be threatened and the world will move closer to another major war.

### 4. Conclusion

All in all, there are major differences between the culture and values of the United States and China. While China practices and preached collectivism, the United States practices and preaches individualism. Similarly, the United States practices capitalism while China practices communism. These major cultural differences have therefore resulted in a major gulf between the approaches of both countries to one another. The cultural differences between China and the United States have negatively impacted the diplomatic relationships between these two major powers. Therefore, to avoid a war and further deterioration of the relationship, both the United States and the People’s Republic of China will have to revere each other’s different cultures and values and must maintain a positive relationship which will also be beneficial for global peace.

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