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Opinion

US-China relations need ‘planetary realism’ to avoid geopolitical and ecological apocalypse



- Former California governor Jerry Brown has turned his attention towards trying to improve US-China relations in the name of global stability
- For both countries to survive and thrive, they must find a way to cooperate as well as compete

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I submit for your consideration an American political figure named [Jerry Brown](#). He turns 84 this week but is somehow still flamboyant and relevant, if sometimes slightly annoying. I have not only grown to admire him but come to feel this lifelong politician is becoming an important world figure on the issue of China.

His primary cause nowadays is America’s fraught relationship with China, and he has a great deal to say about this. Across the decades, his mind would spin new policy ideas like a one-man think tank, and not everyone could keep up.

During his two eight-year terms as the governor of California – the most populous US state and a leading-edge setting for testing out new policy ideas – he was mocked as “Governor Moonbeam”.

Fighting on the environmental front – or “planetary realism”, as Brown calls it – he would tout windmills to generate electricity, solar panels on roofs to warm homes and other advanced technologies to keep California hip and edgy. He even had a dream of launching California’s very own space programme. Elon Musk was so behind.

While the critical media rarely gave him a break, he was no moonbeam with voters. Nearly three decades after his initial run as governor, voters gave him a second eight years. Launching high-profile but ill-fated runs [for the White House](#), Brown tamped down his ego with unrelenting public service.

Today, he merits the title of a distinguished policy thinker. He is now on the soapbox of what America urgently needs: a more sophisticated [relationship with China](#).

His latest dive into this area comes in an essay in *The New York Review of Books* called “Washington’s Crackpot Realism”. Brown, whose youthful temper is now more tempered by experience, peels away layers of smugness within the East Coast power elite to spotlight a continuing [pattern of thought](#) across US administrations capable of sucking the two powers into a radioactive apocalypse.

Brown has no doubt that American foreign policy is wrong-headed – not to say that China’s is much better – and appears to be truly scared. The US insistence on confrontation and containment makes no sense and looks to be an approach slapped together less with malice aforethought than no thought at all, especially about what might be a sensible end-game to US-China competition.

Brown says that what makes current groupthink on China, “based almost exclusively on zero-sum assumptions”, so alarming is that “very bright people with the best of intentions, no matter their party or ideology, get caught up in ‘rational’ processes that lead to disastrous outcomes”.

In his review, he praises critics of US policy towards China for pushing back on the Harvard-style “[destined for war](#)” types fronting, inadvertently or not, for even more defence spending.

He spotlights the invaluable contributions of [Kevin Rudd](#), the Mandarin-speaking former prime minister of Australia, who rejects the combustible brew of decoupling, containment and confrontation that might lead, in Rudd’s words, to “ultimately the unthinkable itself”.

Brown also calls attention to the views of economist C. Fred Bergsten, whose new book *The United States vs China: The Quest for Global Economic Leadership* breaks with establishment wisdom. He sums up Bergsten’s position as, “work together to stabilise the world economy or risk a disaster on par with the Great Depression of the 1930s”. Both need each other, like it or not.

The timing of these assertions merits greater context. With Beijing evidently eager to hide the level of its [diplomacy with Russia](#) from the eyes of outsiders, the inevitable image of China in the West is that Beijing is doing nothing positive about the Ukraine tragedy and does not care what Russian President Vladimir Putin does.

Only a few Western commentators, including myself, have called on President Xi Jinping’s government to help staunch the river of Ukrainian blood with a diplomatic initiative worthy of a great power. China, the world’s second-largest economy and most populous nation, is evolving its diplomacy much like it is doing with its economy.

However, playing the blame game takes the warmth of mutual trust that is needed for diplomacy and sinks it to a deep chill. As one well-known saying goes, it takes more than one cold day to freeze [three feet of ice](#).

It is not hard to imagine the Xi government calculating that the elite US establishment would scarcely countenance a triumph of Chinese diplomacy. Some “political realists” in the West might even be itching for a fight.

Brown warns that, “Framing the China threat as irredeemably antagonistic, as many ‘political realists’ are currently doing, misses the reality that both countries – to prosper and even to survive – must cooperate as well as compete ... It would be foolish to minimise the military dangers that China poses, but it would be even more foolish to act in ways that actually exacerbate them.”

Brown is showing one way for the US to get back to its best old self of sincerely trying to be on the right side of history. Our past was far from perfect, but our future will be dreadful beyond calculation without the grounding of new self-realizations.

What is needed is a reform policy of “planetary realism” in both geopolitical and ecological terms. China might even want to pitch in somehow. The US should ask, with humility.

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