



# Charting a New Course for the U.S.-China Relationship

Findings from the Center for American Progress  
2016 U.S.-China Rising Scholar Strategic Dialogue

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By Melanie Hart August 2016

# Introduction and summary

The relationship between the United States and China is at a critical juncture. On the Chinese side, Beijing is shifting toward a more proactive foreign policy stance that aims to expand China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region and around the world.<sup>1</sup> This proactive approach is opening up new opportunities for U.S.-China cooperation in some areas but creating new tension in others. On the U.S. side, Washington is trying to figure out how to deal with a new, more confident and engaged China at a time when U.S. leaders are also realizing that some of the assumptions that guided U.S. policy toward China for decades may no longer apply.<sup>2</sup> It is increasingly unclear whether past U.S.-China interactions can be used as a blueprint for the future, and that is creating a new nervousness.

At a time of rising uncertainty, one resource both nations can draw on is a strong cohort of U.S. and Chinese foreign policy experts who have dedicated their careers to understanding and guiding this critical bilateral relationship. Exchanges at the mid-career level are becoming particularly interesting. Today's mid-career U.S.-China experts have had more opportunities to travel between the United States and China to live, work, and study than any generation before them. Many of these experts are bilingual: The Americans speak Mandarin, the Chinese speak English, and they can communicate in a mix of the two languages to get their points across as clearly as possible. Because they began their careers in an era of unprecedented openness on both sides, many have known one another for years and can debate sensitive issues with a frankness that can be harder to achieve at senior leadership levels.

With support from the Ford Foundation, the Center for American Progress is bringing these American and Chinese experts together to foster groundbreaking dialogues on some of the bilateral relationship's most difficult issues. On June 13–15, 2016, CAP brought seven U.S. experts and seven Chinese experts to Honolulu for a three-day U.S.-China Rising Scholar Strategic Dialogue. On both the U.S. and Chinese sides, roughly half of the participants work primarily on energy, climate, and ocean issues, and the other half works primarily on security

issues. These are the two halves of the U.S.-China strategic relationship: One is going very well, while the other is facing new challenges. The Center for American Progress combined the two sides to see what these experts could learn from one another and about the U.S.-China relationship as a whole. The security experts were impressed at the depth of U.S.-China alignment on energy, climate, and ocean issues, while the energy, climate, and ocean experts were struck by the deep differences in U.S. and Chinese views on security issues. We discovered that there may be opportunities for security experts to leverage some of the strategies that have been successful at bringing the United States and China into alignment on climate change. The discussion also revealed that there may be more maneuvering room on security issues than current officials realize.

The experts in this group<sup>\*</sup> believe that they are more likely to find answers to current challenges if they invest the time to better understand each other's views and show genuine respect for the differences between U.S. and Chinese perspectives. They also recognize that they can engage one another with a frequency and frankness that was harder for earlier generations to achieve. That openness bodes well for the future of this critical bilateral relationship. This report will convey key areas of agreement and disagreement that emerged during the three-day, closed-door discussions.

<sup>\*</sup> The views shared in the conference discussions and in this report are the participants' personal views and not representative of any U.S. or Chinese government agency.

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And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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