

## Global Cooperation and Role of Think Tanks in a Post-Covid World

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It is difficult to say what triggered the competition between hegemonies that is so characteristic of the current world system: Was it an unavoidable outcome of the multipolar setting, a Thucydides Trap – as often depicted?<sup>1</sup> Or was it the fact that Chinese and Russian elites and entrepreneurs had built their own tech multinationals and digital platforms, thus avoiding onboarding onto Western platforms and domains? Despite this incomplete reasoning, it might be appropriate to describe the current situation as one of simultaneous “rivalry and cooperation”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, despite all the competition, there seems to be an increased thinking among the powers, that it is also in their interest to cooperate in global and civilizational areas such as ecology and health.

Of course, this ambiguity is a tough task to master. Lately, President Biden intensified geopolitical rivalry with China while also stating that the US is welcoming cooperation on common challenges. However, Beijing has for some time taken a tough line, ruling out selective engagement unless the US jettisons its hostile attitude toward China altogether. It took a direct talk between the two presidents in September to advance the issue. The salience of the White House readout is that a “broad, strategic discussion” has taken place, resulting in a mutual agreement to engage “openly and straightforwardly” on areas where their interests converge as well as where “our interests, values and perspectives diverge”.<sup>3</sup> And here, according to the Chinese readout, President Xi preserved a room for diplomacy: “When China and the United States cooperate, the two countries and the world will benefit; when China and the United States are in confrontation, the two countries and the world will suffer. Getting the relationship right is not optional, but something we must do and must do well.”<sup>4</sup>

In this fragile situation, the question is whether think tanks from the West and from China could be in position to fill out this diplomatic field. There are insightful examples for the role of think tanks for precisely such delicate situations. During the Cold War, the United States forged new lines of cooperation by bringing leading scientists over from the USSR to intermingle with their US counterparts as part of a “track two diplomacy”, using the illustrious Californian Esalen Institute as a platform. It only recently came to light that strong impulses radiated from these discussions with the

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<sup>1</sup> Rudd, K. (2019): The Avoidable War.

<https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/The%20Avoidable%20War%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Elsenhans, H. (2011): Kapitalismus kontrovers: Zerklüftung im nicht so sehr kapitalistischen Weltsystem, Potsdam.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/09/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1906035.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1906035.shtml)

Silicon Valley techno-culture community, and some even assume that the thinking about technology “being our partner – or even successor” was initiated during these sessions.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless, if one agrees with the content of this encounter, one conclusion might be think tanks could play an important role that in situation of rivalry between powers by opening and maintaining lines of communication and even jointly developing ideas and solutions for problems of mutual concern. But – and this is also obvious – think tanks must be nominated by their governments for this task. While the “default” mode for think tanks seems to support their governments in their hegemonic quest and stance, the switch to “collaboration” must be explicitly activated and safeguarded by the involved governments.

Having said that, what gainful cooperation activities are thinkable? Clearly, the topics of climate change and pandemic crisis management are the most pressing agenda points. It seems hard to believe, that any meaningful measures on climate change and pandemic management can be developed if nations continue on their isolated, individual policy paths.<sup>6</sup> To this list, it would be worthwhile adding topics like culture/museology and also regulating tech-enterprises, as both the West and China see this as an important topic and struggle with similar issues (although I assume the West will be rather hesitant cooperating on this one).

The final question is, when such a cooperation could or would take place? As cooperation seems more difficult to achieve than rivalry, we must assume that the underlying problems must reach a level of urgency before nations understand that there is no alternative to cooperation.

When it comes to urgency, we seem to talk about the near future. For instance, one of the scenarios developed by the US National Security Council for the early 2030s is that ecological upheavals become so immanent by this time that China moves to support joint activity with the European Union (by then mainly dominated by Green parties) to develop meaningful countermeasures. The US and Canada meanwhile join only later and with reluctance.<sup>7</sup>

In principle, the possibilities and capabilities for think tanks to play an important part in cooperation in a multipolar world are given. The question is when will governments switch into this mode and start enlisting think tanks for this role. At least in the area of climate change, this urgency is in clear sight.

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<sup>5</sup> Rushkoff, Douglass (2019) Team Human. New York, 164ff.; Kripal, J. (2007): Esalen. America and the Religion of No Religion. Chicago.

<sup>6</sup> See here the comic „Contagion“ published by the EU in 2012, which plots the effects of a pandemic which are only succumbed after the EU and China cooperate: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4cc2ea93-d003-417e-9294-1103a6ee877d>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/GlobalTrends\\_2040.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/GlobalTrends_2040.pdf)