

Reframing of China in the US political context

The 2012 United States presidential campaign invoked China as a proxy for all that is ostensibly wrong with the US, writes **David Firestein**, and unlike before, China is increasingly viewed through a domestic policy lens.

A CONVERGENCE of the United States political season (specifically a presidential election) and a Chinese political transition is something that happens only once every 20 years. The last time this happened was in 1992. The next time it will happen will be in 2032. That's because China is on a five-year political cycle and the US is on a four-year cycle.

In 1992, the last time when these two events happened in the same year, there wasn't a power shift in China. Then President Jiang Zemin, who came to power after the Tiananmen incident in 1989, didn't leave high office. Rather, he continued as general secretary and president for another 10 years, and as chairman of the Central Military Commission for a little longer still.

So this really is the first time in history in which there is going to be a power transition in China and a possible presidential transition in the US in the same year.

That is very significant. What it means is there are political pressures being brought to bear on both the US and the Chinese leaderships in a way that we have never seen in the modern history of US-China relations.

What are the ways in which China enters into the question of US politics and, specifically, how does China manifest itself in the context of US presidential politics and the campaign?

In 1992, in the first US presidential election after the student protests in Tiananmen Square, the key issue in the race vis-a-vis China was human rights.

In fact, the presidential election in 1992 was really the first in the post-Nixon era in which China was a controversial campaign topic. And it manifested itself as essentially a proxy for the question of human rights.

Accordingly, when Mr Bill Clinton was Arkansas governor and running for president, he spoke a lot about human rights problems in China. He even referred to the leadership, as he put it, as the "butchers of Beijing".

This was the dominant theme – and the dominant prism through which China was viewed and addressed in presidential discourse.

Today's domestic context

THERE has been a clear evolution in the way that China is framed and discussed in the context of US presidential politics today. I see three significant shifts.

The first is a shift from looking at China through the prism of human rights to looking at China through the prism of economics, trade and, more broadly, national competition.

The second significant shift is that China is looked at less as a foreign policy issue than as a domestic policy issue. That represents a rather radical reframing of China in the US political context. The Republican Party's presidential primary debates earlier this year and last year, for example, offer a great insight into US politics.

What is remarkable is that China virtually never came up in the foreign policy segments of those debates. On the contrary, when China did come up, it was in relation to issues like education, manufacturing, the loss of jobs, economic growth, trade and so on.

The third shift is that whereas China used to be a measuring stick for the toughness of US presidential candidates, it has now become primarily a measuring stick for US national inadequacy.

It used to be that when US presidential candidates talked about China in their campaigns, without fail they would use the word "tough" in the same sentence: "I'm going to get tough on China if you elect me president." Or: "My opponents aren't tough on China, but I am."

In the 2008 campaign, and even in rare instances in the current campaign, candidates have talked tough about China.

But even in those cases, it is about China's impact on the US economy – not China's role in human rights or China as a foreign-policy issue.

These are some examples: First, in 2010, Mr Ed Rendell, then Governor of Pennsylvania, made a very interesting comment. A Monday night National Football League game was cancelled because of a blizzard – the first time this had happened in the NFL's modern history.

This happened in Philadelphia, where the Eagles were hosting the Minnesota Vikings. (To the uninitiated, or to non-Americans, Monday night football is a television institution, a big football game broadcast nationwide.)

Here is what Mr Rendell, a Democrat equipped with a folksy as well as populist streak, said: "We've become a nation of 'wusses'. The Chinese are kicking our butt in everything... If this was in China, do you think the Chinese would have called off the game? People would have been marching down to the stadium, they would have walked and they would have been doing calculus on the way down."

The existential competitor

THE next comment that illustrates the notion of China as a kind of existential competitor was made by President Barack Obama.

In his State of the Union address last year, he referred to China as basically a threat to the US, not in a military sense, but rather in areas such as education, manufacturing, economics, job creation and clean energy. (He has often made similar points on this year's campaign trail.)

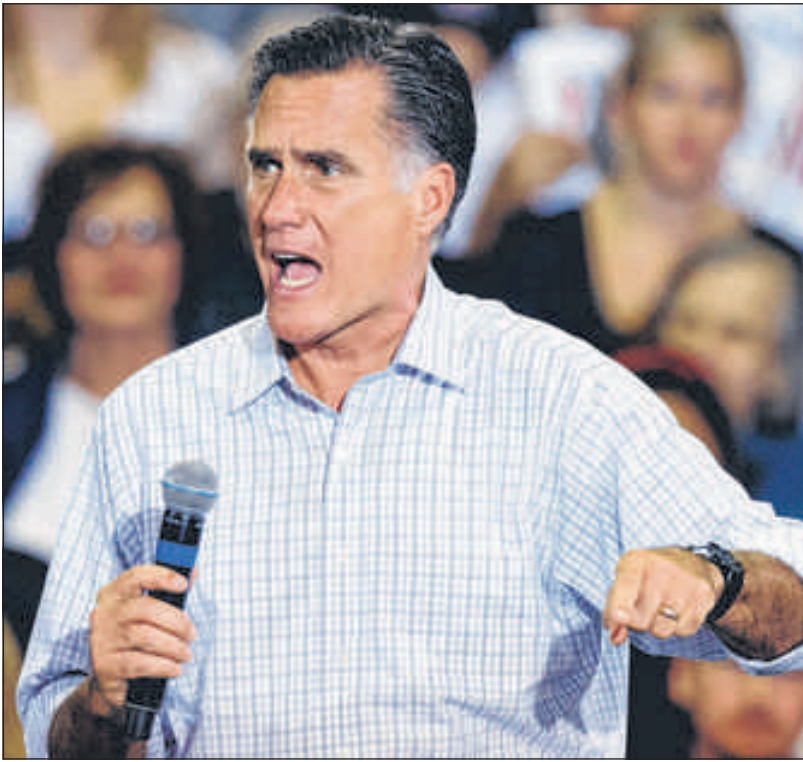
That was striking for an official presidential address – and it may have been the first time in American history that a president spoke about China not in the foreign policy section of the State of the Union address, but rather in the domestic policy section.

And then there was Mr Newt Gingrich earlier this year.

The former speaker of the House of Representatives, a self-proclaimed futurist and history buff, made this comment in his run for the White House: "I do not want to be the country that having gotten to the moon first, turned around and said, 'It doesn't really matter, let the Chinese dominate space, what do we care?' I think that is a path of national decline, and I am for America being a great country, not a country in decline."

So he's talking about an enormous and significant domestic policy programme – space – and a classic frontier on which modern America has defined its own greatness. But this proud American patriot and unrelenting America booster is now doing so with reference to the Chinese.

And then, most strikingly perhaps, here is a comment made by



Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney has said he will look into federal spending and question if each programme is so essential that "we should borrow money from China to pay for it". PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mr Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee for the 2012 presidential campaign, at the Defending the American Dream Summit in Washington, DC: "For each programme that we have in the government, I'm going to look at them one by one. I'm going to ask this question: Is this programme so critical, so essential, that we should borrow money from China to pay for it?"

Mr Romney doubled down on this statement in his debates with Mr Obama, giving this viewpoint even greater exposure to the American electorate.

In my recollection of US presidential contests, I have never heard a candidate before Mr Romney measure all federal spending dollars against the China test. Is it worth borrowing from China or is it not?

That, I would suggest, demonstrates just how deeply China has got into the American psyche and under our skin.

Neither friend nor foe

CHINA is no longer just about human rights in American eyes nor, oddly enough, even about foreign policy. Now, China is invoked as a presumed existential competitor to the US.

Americans no longer feel China can be compartmentalised or pushed to the side of presidential discourse. Instead, China has become a proxy for all that is ostensibly wrong with the US.

We have moved, in short, from a narrative of "they don't share our values" to "they're eating our lunch".

We have moved from a narrative of "they're different from us" to "they're beating us". And that is going to complicate the relationship.

China and the US are not pre-ordained to be either friends or foes. It will take effort to make them the former, rather than the latter.

Given the political season here in the US – to say nothing of the political season in China – that work promises to become quite a bit more complicated from late this year onwards.

THE GLOBALIST

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