

# GLOBAL VIEWS



**Editor's note:** The world has undergone many changes and shocks in recent years. Enhanced dialogue between scholars from China and overseas is needed to build mutual understanding on many problems the world faces. For this purpose, the China Watch Institute of China Daily and the National Institute for Global Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, jointly present this special column: The Global Strategy Dialogue, in which experts from China and abroad will offer insightful views, analysis and fresh perspectives on long-term strategic issues of global importance.

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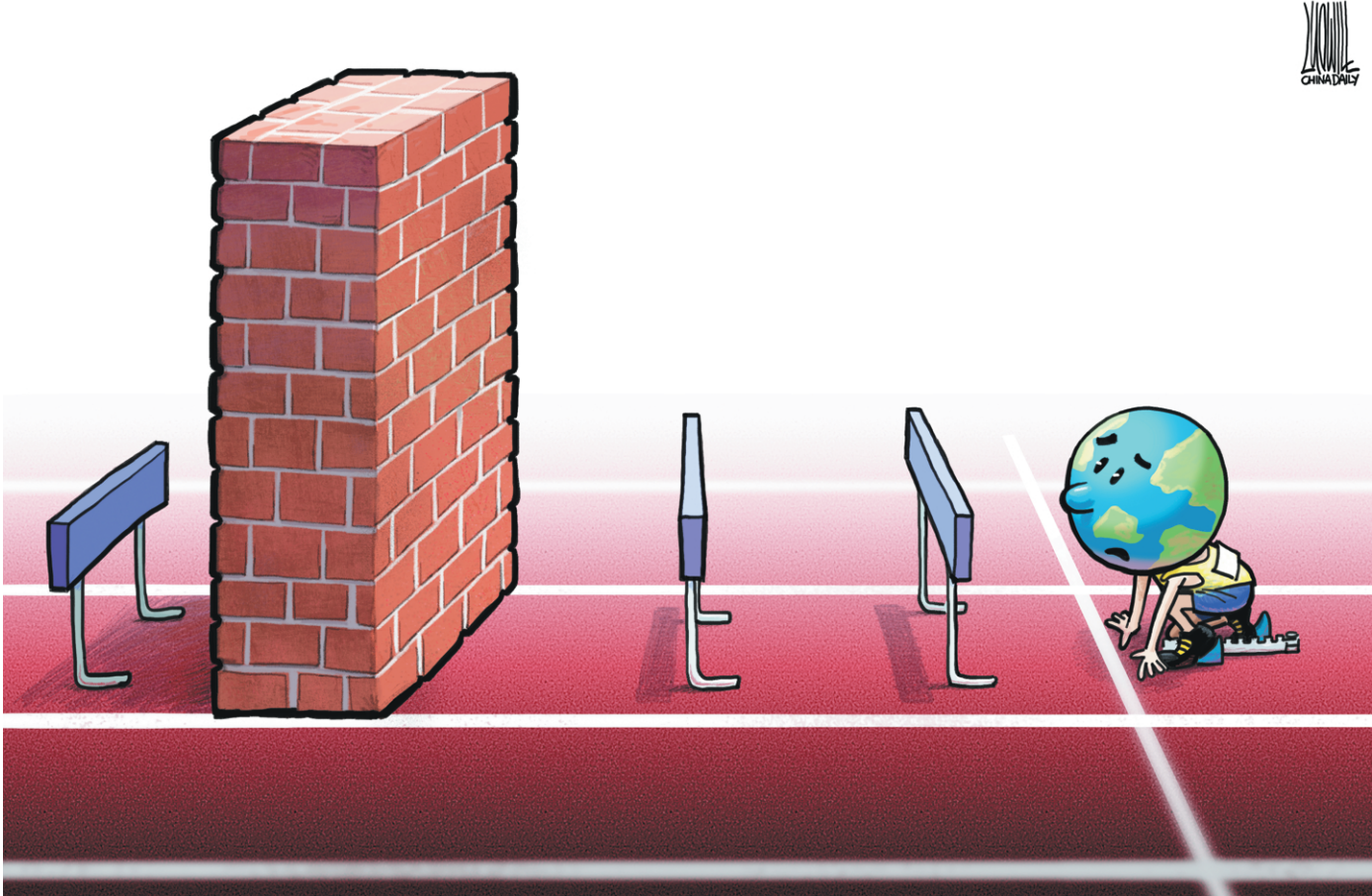
## Good fences make good neighbors

Successful China-US Bali summit started making “good fences” for the bilateral relations, but more needs to be done to make “good neighbors”.

In 1914, Robert Frost wrote in his poem *Mending Wall* that “good fences make good neighbors”. There was a ritual in rural New England that every spring, neighbors would meet to rebuild a stone wall between their properties. Frost questions the purpose of borders between people over the course of the poem. And it seems fitting to ask the same questions on the relations between China and the United States, as well as the future of our world.

About 102 years after Frost wrote his poem, US citizens elected Donald Trump to “build walls” and he tried to do that. He pushed very hard to build a physical border wall between the US and Mexico, made of \$15 billion worth of materials. When Joe Biden took office as US president, he promptly shut down the project, and now, \$265 million leftover wall parts are being donated to state and local governments. By quitting the Paris Agreement, Iran Nuclear Deal and many other international agreements, Trump built another more important wall between US leadership and its obligations. Again, Biden came in and returned to some pre-selected organizations and agreements that he deemed useful to his administration’s objectives. But the most consequential wall erected by Trump and yet to be mended by Biden was a “China Wall” that meant to decouple the US from China, allegedly for “US national security”.

The ramification of disengaging and fencing-off of China is deeply felt around the world. Trump built the wall with tariffs against Chinese products, but Biden hardened the wall with ideological mortar, multiple Western alliances, tech export controls and much more. If Trump was moving to wall US citizens in and to give them back their sense of self-control, Biden is apparently aggressively constructing an encirclement against China to prevent it from “taking control of the world”. So now the bilateral relationship is so walled up that it is not effectively keeping peace but actually



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leading to misperceptions and miscommunications, just like Ezekiel Rogers remind John Winthrop in his 1640 letter, “that a good fence helps to keep peace between neighbors; but let us take heed that we make not a high stone wall, to keep us from meeting”.

That’s why the summit between President Xi Jinping and Biden at the Bali G20 Summit on Nov 14 was critically important at this historical juncture: both sides need a good fence (“guardrails” in the US terminology) to clarify boundaries and reduce disputes; and both want the fence to be porous enough so that necessary and normal communications and cooperation are not completely blocked. Luckily, against all

odds, the two top leaders did their best to clear the air and far exceeded the “low expectations” of the Western media and pundits prior to the meeting.

First, Biden upgraded the “five noes” to “nine noes” and in particular reiterated that the US would not play the Taiwan card against China or seek economic decoupling from China, and in return, President Xi promised that China “does not seek to change the existing international order or interfere in the internal affairs of the US, and has no intention to challenge or displace the US”.

Second, the two leaders tasked their teams to develop principles on managing competition and maintaining open lines of

communication. In addition to the resumption of dialogue and cooperation on climate change, public health, agriculture and food security, respective diplomatic and financial teams as well as the China-US joint working group are also beginning to restore regular consultations and coordination, and find solutions to more issues.

Make no mistake, despite the efforts and progress made in the summit, the reality is that the world’s most important bilateral relationship is still at a low point, and there won’t be fewer quarrels in the process of mending the fences based on mutual agreements. A century before Frost, H. H. Brackenridge wrote that “good fences restrain

fence-breaking beasts, and preserve good neighborhoods”. Today, the “fence-breaking beasts” are out there, aiming to trample the ground and gain benefits from the conflicts of the neighbors. Racists, protectionists, extreme nationalists, arms dealers, pro-Taiwan lobbyists, anti-communist ideologues, opportunist politicians are all seeking the soft panels of the fences, ready to rip them open and reap a chaotic and degenerative world, or opt for a self-serving reinforced concrete wall to usher in another beggarly-neighbor era.

“Before I built a wall I’d ask to know, what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offense. Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” Frost narrates in his poem. Having good fences demarcates clear boundaries, helps both sides keep the peace and respect each other’s rights and space. But the more revealing question is, what exactly do countries need fences for and ultimately can they gradually reduce the physical fences and still co-exist peacefully? Merely setting up “guardrails” is not enough for the future of China-US relations. Reducing excessive barriers, increasing neighborhood activities, building safety and prosperity for a community with a shared future are the real guarantees for the fences to remain functional. China has made it crystal and abundantly clear that the Chinese modernization is a path of peaceful development and China’s doors once opened will never shut. Any misrepresentation of China’s strategic intentions should therefore cease and desist. As long as the fences are good enough for trade and investment, cyberspace, space, maritime, and regional stability, the US and more broadly the West, should focus more on healthy competition based on an open market, and global cooperation on those pressing common challenges.

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## Building on experience

Chinese infrastructure projects in Latin America and the Caribbean have learned the lessons of the past

Since it was first proposed in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative has highlighted “interconnectivity”, specifically infrastructure projects, in addition to trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. This is no coincidence since connectivity has become one of the centerpieces of the Chinese development process since China launched its reform and opening-up to overcome absolute poverty and substantially increase the quality of life of its population. China helps developing countries construct telecommunication networks, ports, airports, highways, hospitals and schools, among many other facilities under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the projects include such aspects as conception, design, construction as well as multiple post-construction processes. Based on its experience, China is able to provide turnkey solutions, that is, integrating all of these aspects agreed on through a negotiation process with the host countries and with multiple options for implementation.

These issues are relevant since the Academic Network for Latin America and the Caribbean on China has been annually publishing the Monitor of Chinese Infrastructure in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the most recent version was released just a few weeks ago, containing several notable points for discussion.

First, the 129 finished and effectively realized infrastructure projects by China in Latin America and the Caribbean until 2021 had an accumulated investment of \$98.4 billion and generated more than 673,000 jobs (for the host countries); they have increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, the employment per project had fallen from 4,004 jobs during 2010-2014 to 2,988 jobs

during 2020-2021, signaling important changes.

Second, most of the Chinese infrastructure projects in LAC during the period from 2005 to 2014 were in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador, and Chile, Colombia and Mexico, all of them with practically no prior projects, accounted for 31 percent of the projects during the 2020 to 2021 period.

Third, the Chinese infrastructure projects in LAC have become more diversified. While the share of energy infrastructure projects was 60 percent from 2005 to 2009 and mainly concentrated in fossil fuel resources, it dropped to 22.81 percent from 2020 to 2021; even in these recent projects, non-fossil energy infrastructure projects have increased their presence in countries such as Chile and Mexico. Today, transportation (ports, airports, roads and electric public transportation) accounts for the highest share (57.66 percent in the period 2020 to 2021).

Fourth, the same dataset indicates there has been a slow diversification process in terms of geography: in the first stages of the Chinese infrastructure projects in the 2005 to 2009 period, 80 percent of the companies located their headquarters in Beijing, which fell to 56.14 percent in the 2020-2021 period. Guangdong province, Hubei province, Shanghai and Hong Kong are playing an increasing role in their relationship with LAC in this area.

The trends are significant from several perspectives.

On the one hand, the LAC-China cooperation in infrastructure projects overcomes an effective gap in LAC by leveraging decades of experience of the Chinese companies in China and becomes increasingly international. These projects are having an important effect in the quality of life of dozens of millions of people in the LAC region, in addition to a small but increasing



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impact on employment. The Chinese companies and LAC governments at all levels have importantly learned from the implementation of these complex and sophisticated infrastructure projects, after initial misunderstandings and mistakes in some cases. Today public and private Chinese companies are participating and winning

in dozens of bidding processes in the region.

On the other hand, the Chinese infrastructure projects in the LAC region reflect that Chinese companies can offer state-of-the-art technology with competitive conditions, including financing, for non-fossil energy sources and thus are effectively sup-

porting and implementing the energy transition and its acceleration in the Global South. Thus, China is also proving to other countries that infrastructure projects in developing countries with a long-term perspective can have an economic and sustainable rationale; massively committed international resources for these objectives could even further incentivize these global processes.

The Chinese infrastructure projects in LAC reflect that important challenges remain, such as the transfer of technology and know-how which can help the Global South develop these technologies endogenously, and increasingly difficult, but possible, dialogues with local, regional and national populations affected by infrastructure projects. These challenges are probably most evident in regional LAC-China institutions such as the Forum of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)-China and the LAC-China Business Summit that require reports of activities to evaluate and improve infrastructure projects. As in the first two decades of the Chinese infrastructure projects in LAC, the next decades will provide fertile ground for additional learning processes.

All in all, these experiences should provide an important and concrete basis for the overall South-South cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, but also for the developed countries in their relationships with developing countries.

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