

Competition, Cold War, or Conflict: Another “Great Decision”

Natalia Gladysz | Editor-in-Chief



St. Norbert College welcomed Joe Dennis from the University of Wisconsin-Madison for the second year in a row on Feb. 19, 2025, following Professor Robert Kramer’s lecture on Gaza and the Middle East earlier in the month. Dennis presented on US-China relations in a virtual lecture titled “Competition, Cold War, or Conflict? Navigating US-China Relations in Tense Times,” based on an article of the same name by Thomas J. Christensen.

St. Norbert organizes an annual series of lectures as part of the “Great Decisions” discussion program, which aims to educate participants on current world affairs. At St. Norbert, these panels and lectures often fulfill EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) and educational requirements to incentivize students to attend.

Beginning with a brief introduction and ending with a Q&A supported by David Coury, professor of humanistic studies and global studies at UW Madison, Dennis led participants

through an approximately 40-minute information-rich lecture on the intricacies of China's relations with the US.

After being introduced, Dennis guided viewers through some of the contents of Christensen's article on US-China relations. Heightened territorial aggression, military growth and expansion, concerns over unethical economic practices, and human rights abuses of ethnic minority groups in China (particularly Uyghur Muslims, Tibetans, and Mongols) have raised tensions between the two global superpowers.

Dennis then delved into the history of US-China relations, beginning with trade in the early 1800s. This history, described by Dennis as a "love-hate relationship for over 200 years," has been tumultuous at times. Relations are marked by US involvement in the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion to drive foreign influence out of China around 1900, harmful legislation including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the United States' backing of Nationalist forces in the Chinese Civil War.

Current events, including national sentiments surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, China's participation in fentanyl production, the United States's support of Taiwan, and the ongoing trade war, have further escalated tensions.

A key point in Dennis' argument on how to proceed with China was to stand firm but not respond with hostility. "I think it's a bad idea to be reflexively hostile to other people," Dennis remarked. Dennis also recommended giving up short-term thinking driven by election cycles in the US and evaluating the roles of companies in making policy, arguing that the US needs to "take a hard look at that."

When talking about US-China relations in early 2025, it's hard not to think of the temporary TikTok ban in January. When asked about his thoughts on the app, Dennis responded that he's "a little skeptical of the idea that somebody is going to be extorted... because they posted some dance video." He recounted the Chinese ban on US companies for many years, explaining that reciprocity is important in trade. Instead of fearing the hypothetically malicious collection of

data, Dennis believes that this banning of US platforms would be a more solid argument against the app.

Though there may have been many not-so-great decisions in the history of US-China relations, attending lectures that keep you up-to-date on current events is a great one. This lecture has been recorded and is expected to be made available on YouTube. For more information on future “Great Decisions” lectures, visit <https://www.snc.edu/greatdecisions/>.

Photo: Samantha Borges –

<https://unsplash.com/photos/macbook-pro-on-brown-wooden-table-q3zZHY5GHu0>