

In a Dangerous Time: Toward Preventing a Disastrous U.S.-China War

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I want to thank Gensuikyo for the opportunity to join today's World Conference plenary. It is an honor to be sharing this digital stage with Lee-san, Cuong and Achin.

U.S.-Chinese relations are worse than at any time since the renewal or relations began in the early 1970s. As in the late 1940s, we are witnessing, and suffering, the restructuring of the global disorder into a new, extremely dangerous, and totally unnecessary confrontation analogous, but not identical, to the Cold War. As Zhu Zhiquan, my colleague at the Committee for a SANE U.S.-China Policy has written, "the Biden Administration has convinced itself that China is an existential threat to US national interests and...must be pushed back at all costs." Trump, and now Biden, Blinken and others, blinded by their self-righteousness, have forged a new Washington and national consensus: China poses an existential threat to freedom and democracy around the world; therefore the U.S. must aggressively defend freedom and democracy – militarily, diplomatically, technologically, and otherwise.

That the U.S. has enforced an Asia-Pacific empire since 1898, that human rights do not exist in Guantanamo, that racist Republicans – like Modi, Washington's new partner in India – are disenfranchising minority voters, and that the U.S. is deeply allied with repressive governments around the world are inconvenient truths consigned to an Orwellian memory hole.

At root are the inevitable tensions between rising and declining powers, the Thucydides Trap, that many times in history has climaxed in catastrophic wars. Compounding the Cold War analogy, there are disturbing parallels to the years before WWI: tensions between rising and declining powers, complex alliance structures – now including the QUAD, intense nationalism with attendant hatreds, territorial disputes, arms races with new technologies, international economic integration and competition, autocracies, and wild-card actors.

Like the 1914 Sarajevo gunshots, an incident, accident, or miscalculation – a collision of warships in the South or East China Seas or near Taiwan – could escalate to a major, potentially nuclear, war.

China's economic transformation is the foundation for its aggressive diplomacy and increasingly advanced military. The deepening integration of Asian and Pacific economies with China's, Beijing's aggressive actions in the South China/West Philippine Sea, and its area denial air and cyber capabilities increasingly call into question Washington's long-term ability to continue its Indo-Pacific dominance.

Like Obama, and Trump before them, the Biden Administration, Congress and much of the country remain rooted in the self-defeating ideologies of U.S. exceptionalism, manifest destiny, which in turn feeds anti-Asian racism. Meanwhile, China's leaders, marked by the nation's century and a half of humiliations, are in no mood to back down as they seek to fulfill General Secretary Xi's China Dream, restoring China to its leading historic role.

Trump doubled down on the Obama pivot to the Asia-Pacific with his administration's 2018 *National Defense Strategy*. The Strategy which shapes all U.S. military planning, and now NATO's, reduced military commitments to the Middle East and prioritized planning and preparations for possible great power war.

The Biden Administration has since issued its Interim Strategic Guidelines, which are consistent with the Trump Strategy. China remains a “strategic competitor. Preparations for possible great power war against China or Russia remain the Pentagon’s and the ‘all government” priority. This and the commitments to contain and manage China’s rise should come as no surprise with Kurt Campbell, lead author of the Obama era Pivot to Asia and the Pacific doctrine the lead figure making U.S. Indo-Pacific policies in the National Security Council. The Administration’s “get tough” approach to China was previewed in the confrontational run up to the Anchorage mini summit. June’s NATO summit formalized adoption of the NATO 2030 doctrine, which makes containment of China one of the alliances two priorities. Beginning with the dispatch of an aircraft carrier fleet to the South China/West Philippine Sea within days of Biden’s inauguration, the administration has engaged in provocative military operations, and Biden’s record high military budget spells danger as well as jobs and profits.

One change from the Trump era is the priority Biden gives to reinforcing U.S. military power with alliances. Prime Minister Suga and President Moon were the first foreign heads of state invited by Biden to Washington. Secretaries Blinken and Austin met with their QUAD alliance partners before confronting their Chinese counterparts in Anchorage, and a QUAD summit is scheduled for September. Biden has reaffirmed the U.S. “ironclad” commitment to its alliance with South Korea, its military backing to Japan’s Senkaku/Diaoyu Island claims, and to the military defense of the Philippine interests in the South China/West Philippine Sea.

Taiwan is the Indo Pacific’s most dangerous flashpoint. Neither side wants war, but accidents and miscalculations happen. While U.S. support for the island’s liberal democracy is a major source of tension with authoritarian China, two geostrategic realities lie at the heart of great power tensions over the island. Like

Cuba, just 90 miles from Florida where the 1962 introduction of Soviet missiles sparked the Cuban Missile Crisis, Taiwan is 100 miles from the Chinese mainland. It is thus seen as a source of Chinese military vulnerability. Taiwan is also the world's leading source of advanced semiconductors on which the U.S., Chinese and Japanese economies depend. These make the island a coveted strategic prize.

China has long been clear about its red line in Taiwan. Despite Beijing's repeated preference for peaceful reunification with what it calls its 'renegade province', it has long been clear that if Taipei takes irreversible steps toward de jure independence, it will respond militarily.

Biden and Blinken have thus been playing with fire. For the first time since the renewal of U.S.-Chinese relations in 1979, Taiwan's functional ambassador to the U.S. was invited to January's presidential inauguration. Contrary to Washington's five-decades old commitment to a one-China policy and to "strategic ambiguity" regarding U.S. commitments to defend Taiwan, Blinken has trumpeted Washington's "rock solid" commitment to Taiwan's defense. This, when polls indicate that increasing the U.S. commitments to defend Taiwan fuels Taiwanese support for independence. This, in turn, pushes the limits toward China's red line.

Biden has repeatedly dispatched warships to the Taiwan Strait, and dispatched a so-called "unofficial" delegation of former top officials to meet with senior Taiwanese leaders. Guidelines that long restricted U.S. diplomats from meeting their Taiwanese counterparts are being revised to encourage such meetings. And discussions are proceeding for the likely deployment of a permanent U.S. naval presence near Taiwan.

We need to bear in mind that China is no innocent. In addition to Beijing's repression of human rights in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and elsewhere, its People's Liberation Army welcomed the Biden Administration by repeatedly sending

warplanes into Taiwan's air space and warships into Taiwanese waters. It interfered with Taiwan's efforts to obtain Covid vaccines, and General Secretary Xi marked the Chinese Communist Party's 100th anniversary by stressing the importance of "peaceful reunification" with Taiwan as a principle for China's "national rejuvenation."

The situation is no better in the South China/West Philippine Sea, where even the Pentagon recognizes that China's defining military doctrine is "strategic defense." Encircled by hundreds of U.S. military bases and installations and by the U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet, in total disregard of other nations with legitimate claims and of international law, China has expanded its South China Sea defense perimeter with its neo-imperial nine-dash line and construction of military bases on disputed rocks and islets. In the imperial tradition of great powers, China is mimicking the U.S. Monroe Doctrine that has been the foundation of U.S. Western Hemisphere hegemony.

The Sea's 17.7 billion tons of crude oil makes it the world's fourth largest oil reserve. Add to that its massive amounts of natural gas, and other minerals. Of greater strategic importance is the fact that the Sea lies astride sea lanes over which 40% of the world's trade transits, including the fossil fuels that power the Chinese, Japanese and South Korean economies. Much like the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf throughout the 20th century, the Sea functions as the jugular vein of the world's most dynamic capitalist economies. Were the Malacca Strait or its other sea lanes to be blockaded, the region's economies would face disaster. The Sea is thus this century's geostrategic center of the struggle for world power.

Add to all of this the Sea's waves lap against China's most vulnerable frontier – its coastal economic powerhouse.

To reinforce U.S. regional hegemony, Presidents Obama, Trump and now Biden have encouraged resistance to China's South China Sea territorial claims and

have conducted frequent and provocative “freedom of navigation,” (FONOP) naval and air forays near the disputed islands occupied by China. As a Chinese Maritime think tank reported, in 2020, the U.S. military exerted "maximum pressure" in the South China Sea” with "unprecedented" Navy and Air Force deployments to the area. U.S. aircraft carriers, destroyers and their supporting fleets conducted more FONOP forays near China’s militarized islets than ever before.

Consistent with its alliance strategy, the 7th fleet is now being joined by British, French, German, Dutch, and Japanese warships. China, too, has been conducting its naval drills, the most offensive being its deployment of more than 200 ships, ostensibly fishing trawlers, that have blocked access to Whitsun Reef, within the Philippine’s Exclusive Economic Zone.

U.S. and Chinese warships operating aggressively in close and sometimes dangerous proximity to one another are invitations to potentially deadly accidents and miscalculations. Given the stakes of the competition and power of nationalist forces each country, we should not underestimate the danger of an incident unleashing forces that cannot be politically contained.

A new and global Cold War with China or, worse, a hot and potentially nuclear war with China, are the last things that humanity needs. Instead of the U.S., Japanese, NATO, and Chinese military ratcheting up potentially deadly tensions, human survival demands overcoming vested interests and the pursuit of diplomatic solutions to stubborn and impacted disputes.

We cannot establish a nuclear weapons-free world if no one is left to create it . That means organizing to prevent great power nuclear war and the nuclear winter. As we learned from the Palme Commission’s 1982 Common Security report, which provided the paradigm that led to the INF Treaty and ended the U.S.-Soviet Cold War before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, security cannot be achieved via spiraling

arms races with a nation's rival. It can only be achieved by creating mutual trust and pursuing mutually beneficial diplomacy. Common Security is not peace, or nuclear weapons abolition, but it can prevent catastrophic war and open the way for nuclear disarmament, collaboration to reverse the climate emergency and to address this and future pandemics.

Toward these ends, demands in or organizing should include:

- U.S. adoption of a no first use nuclear war fighting doctrine, renewed military to military consultations to prevent miscalculations, and credible U.S. and Chinese steps toward fulfilling their Article VI NPT obligation.
- Ending ALL provocative and dangerous military shows of force.
- Honoring the one-China formula and encouraging Chinese-Taiwanese negotiations
- Engaging the ASEAN Regional Forum to renew U.S.-Chinese-ASEAN multilateral negotiations, including a binding Southeast Asian Code of Conduct regarding military operations in the South China/West Philippine Sea and for joint development of the sea's mineral resources.
- Nuclear umbrella states signing and ratifying the TPNW to put pressure on all the nuclear weapons states.

Thank you for your attention. May we prevail in our collective efforts to prevent nuclear war, ban all nuclear weapons, assist nuclear weapons victims, reverse the climate emergency, and stanch this and future pandemics.