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America and China Are Not Yet in a Cold War

But They Must Not Wind Up in Something Even Worse

By **Wang Jisi** November 23, 2023



Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in San Francisco, California, November 2023

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS



The original Cold War ended in December 1991 with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. But the idea that the world is witnessing the early phases of a new cold war—this time, a strategic competition between China and the United States—has taken hold in many quarters, especially in Washington. There is no question that as China's power has surged since the early 2010s, the Chinese-U.S. relationship has become increasingly contentious. And in recent years, it has fallen to its lowest ebb since 1972, when Chinese leader Mao Zedong greeted U.S. President Richard Nixon in Beijing and the process of normalization began. But it is up to the two countries to decide whether to engage in a cold war; their perceptions and assumptions will, in turn, shape the reality of the relationship. Handled properly, the relationship might foster global stability. Handled poorly, it might plunge the world into something much worse than the Cold War.

The current situation does resemble the Cold War in a number of ways. The United States and China are the only countries that can be considered superpowers, as were the United States and the Soviet Union for most of the second half of the twentieth century. As in the Cold War, there is an ideological dimension to the competition, with China's embrace of communism and the unchallenged rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) contrasting with the U.S. system of democratic capitalism. And today, Beijing and Washington compete for support and influence in what is referred to as "the global South," just as the Soviet Union and the United States did in the so-called Third World during the Cold War.

But those similarities are offset by important differences. The relationship between the closely linked U.S. and Chinese economies bears little resemblance to that between the U.S. and Soviet ones, which operated almost independently of one another. Despite the ideological differences between Beijing and Washington, China does not seek to export its version of Marxism in the way that the Soviet Union did. Although hardly noticed in the West, it is significant that the CCP now rarely extols Leninism separately and more commonly refers to its leading ideology as Marxism. Thus, although the U.S.-Chinese competition involves rival models, it is not the kind of global ideological contest that Washington and Moscow fought.

Those factors make the current situation less dire than the Cold War. Other differences, however, push in the opposite direction. For one thing, the Cold War played out in the context of a globalizing world; the Chinese-U.S. competition, on the other hand, is taking place in a world that is de-globalizing and fragmenting. And in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, Washington and Moscow maintained mechanisms for preventing crises, and managing them if they did occur. The contemporary Chinese-U.S. relationship lacks such coordination.

Last week's meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Joe Biden in San Francisco has rekindled hopes that the two countries will find a stable trajectory and avoid a catastrophic conflict. Both leaders have declared many times that they do not seek a new cold war. The key will be for their governments to better understand how the U.S.-Chinese competition differs from that historical precedent: acknowledging the similarities, embracing the differences that make things less dangerous today than during the Cold War, and working to minimize the effect of the differences that could make it even more dangerous.

A WORLD DIVIDED

The Chinese-U.S. strategic rivalry most resembles the phase of the Cold War that began in the early 1970s and ended in the early 1980s, when Soviet economic and military capacities were regarded as having reached a rough parity with those of the United States. No third power could match the capacities of either superpower in those years. Similarly, in today's world, the comprehensive strengths of the United States and China far exceed those of any other single country.

As during the Cold War, Washington today sees its rival as an ideological foe. The CCP holds high the banner of Marxism. The party dominates China's politics, economy, and society and does not allow any deviation that might challenge its authority. This reminds Americans of the Soviet communism they loathed. For their part, Chinese elites view the United States as a sinister challenge to China's internal political security and to the CCP's authority. As they see it, Washington has more tools to influence China than it had to influence the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the Cold War, Washington and Moscow regarded one another as their gravest security threats and strategic rivals. The same is true today of the United States and China; the latter has achieved a rough military balance of power with Washington thanks to the growing Chinese nuclear arsenal, even though overall U.S. military capabilities still exceed those of China.

The United States and the Soviet Union actively divided the world into two parts. Moscow referred to them as “the socialist camp” and the “imperialist/capitalist camp,” whereas Washington spoke of “the communist world” and “the free world.” Then there was the Third World, which belonged to neither side—and to which China claimed to belong after it broke with the Soviet bloc. Beijing and Washington nowadays also look at the world as bifurcated (although not yet bipolar). From Beijing's perspective, China inhabits “the developing world” or “the global South,” which is gaining more power and influence, whereas the U.S.-led “Western world” or “developed world” is declining. In American conventional wisdom, by contrast, the world is split between democracies, on the one hand, and nondemocracies and dictatorships, on the other—and the democracies should lead the way.

A DIFFERENT ERA

For all those similarities, there are some salient differences between the two eras. For one thing, unlike the Soviet Union, China today has little interest in converting other countries to its version of Marxism. Indeed, it strongly opposes “color revolutions” and movements such as the Arab Spring that have disrupted the internal order of other countries, and it does not seek to inspire or cultivate such changes. Although the CCP would be happy to see its practices in remolding China shared by other countries, the party's recent promotion

of a “Chinese path to modernization” and a “fine traditional Chinese culture” is defensive in nature; it reflects a desire to resist further westernization at home.

Another difference is that China’s economy, compared with that of the Soviet Union, is far more integrated into the global economy and intertwined with the U.S. economy. Through the 1970s and 1980s in the United States and the Soviet Union, trade with the other superpower averaged about one percent of the global total. In contrast, in 2022, China was the largest trading partner of over 140 countries in the world, and trade with China accounted for about ten percent of total U.S. foreign trade.

And unlike the Soviet Union, which hung the Iron Curtain around itself and its client states, China’s economic openness since the late 1970s has permeated every aspect of the country’s society and has been coupled with international technological cooperation, humanitarian exchanges, energetic tourism, and high levels of immigration to the United States. Over three million of the five million people of Chinese origin now living in the United States were born in China. Between 2001 and 2020, nearly 90,000 Chinese students (including ones from Hong Kong) earned doctorates from U.S. universities—by far the largest group of foreign doctoral students, and more than double the equivalent number of Indian students, who made up the second-largest group.

U.S. and Soviet societies were virtually closed to each other, and U.S.-Soviet cultural, educational, and people-to-people exchanges hardly existed. Consequently, Soviets and Americans were largely ignorant of the internal features of each other’s country. and unable to exert much political influence on one another. Even in years when U.S.-Soviet contact intensified, U.S. officials could talk to only high-level Soviet officials and leaders and were barred from reaching out to ordinary citizens.

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Today, in contrast, China and the United States are both capable of using their societal connections and economic ties to exert political influence on the other side, which has a dramatic impact on their respective domestic politics as well as on bilateral relations. On

the one hand, Chinese and American individuals and groups who have benefited from interdependence deplore the corrosion of bilateral ties and call for stability. In China, they are known as “soft-liners” and may be criticized for being enticed by American ideas and interests; in the United States, they are derided as “soft on China.” On the other hand, those with political weight who have gained little from U.S.-Chinese cooperation see national security as a reason to prevent deepening ties. In this sense, the Chinese-U.S. strategic competition is multilayered, reflecting interactions between different domestic priorities and interests. It is not simply an interstate affair. Instead, it is an intricate set of intrastate political and economic games. If geopolitical and national security concerns override economic considerations and nationalist populism swells in both China and the United States, conciliatory voices are likely to be drowned out.

Another dissimilarity between the historical Cold War and today’s competition is the global context. During the Cold War, especially in its later stages, globalization and regional integration gradually melted great power tensions. The Berlin Wall was brought down by East Germans’ aspiration to have what they saw in Western countries. Extensive communication and trade between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan eased their hostility. But in the post–Cold War era, a tide of antiglobalization has surfaced, caused by a combination of economic protectionism, political populism, and ethnic nationalism, and exacerbated by numerous global problems such as climate change and pandemics. This makes for a more challenging environment for superpower competition.

After the Cuban missile crisis, Washington and Moscow developed techniques to avoid disasters, culminating in the creation of the Moscow-Washington hotline, which allowed for direct communication between the countries’ leaders. Partly as a result, no direct military conflict ever took place between U.S. and Soviet armed forces. Regrettably, today, even as U.S. and Chinese warships and aircraft risk clashes in the western Pacific, in particular near the Taiwan Strait, and as U.S. and Chinese strategic nuclear missiles target population centers, the two countries lack robust crisis prevention and management mechanisms. The resumption of military-to-military communications announced last week represents a step in the right direction.

WORSE THAN A COLD WAR?

Unfortunately, the two powers seem to be moving into an intensifying strategic competition that carries some features of the Cold War but may be even more damaging if the downward spiral of their relationship is not arrested in time. Part of the problem is that both countries have questionable assumptions that are deeply rooted in their political and cultural traditions. As the American statesman Henry Kissinger puts it in his book *On China*, some U.S. activists “would argue that democratic institutions are the prerequisite to relations of trust and confidence. Nondemocratic societies, in this view, are inherently precarious and prone to the exercise of force.” In this view, as long as China maintains communist ideals and the CCP dominates Chinese politics and society, Washington must contain China’s technologic advancement and global influence under the pretense of protecting U.S. security. This view is reflected in the “small yard with high fences” that the Biden administration is attempting to build around Western technologies—in order to keep China out.

Kissinger also points out that some Chinese triumphalists, similar to some U.S. strategists, “interpret international affairs as an unavoidable struggle for strategic preeminence” and as essentially zero-sum. Indeed, in China, elites and ordinary people alike generally view politics as a struggle for power and material interests. The most common Chinese understanding about U.S. strategy toward China is that unless and until China’s national power exceeds that of the United States, there will be no way to modify Washington’s arrogant, aggressive approach.

Both sets of assumptions are unrealistic and fatalistic: the CCP and its basic policies will remain firmly in place, and the comprehensive strength of the United States will remain greater than that of China for the next decade or beyond. Still, these assumptions are not likely to fade away.

There are five things, however, that could stabilize the relationship and avoid catastrophe. First, the two economies must remain intensively intertwined. Business groups, technology companies, and scholarly organizations should join hands to resist unreasonable and counterproductive policies and measures that confine their collaboration.

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Second, Beijing and Washington should defuse tensions over Taiwan. China's Anti-Secession Law stipulates that "to reunify the country through peaceful means best serves the fundamental interests of the compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Straits. The state shall do its utmost with maximum sincerity to achieve a peaceful reunification." Beijing remains committed to peaceful unification. The United States and Taiwanese authorities should do everything they can to encourage that commitment and not persuade China that it must employ nonpeaceful means. Whoever wins the election next year in Taiwan should act in a prudent manner with the goal of resuming cross-strait contacts, an approach to which Beijing might respond in kind.

Third, to dispel the specter of a new Cold War, Beijing and Washington should learn from arguably the best agreement Washington and Moscow reached during the Cold War, which established crisis-prevention and crisis-management mechanisms between their two militaries and top leaders. The two sides should think of setting up a hotline between their operational military headquarters. In particular, they should also hold discussions about reducing the potential risks posed by artificial intelligence.

Fourth, the two countries should also strengthen cooperation on issues concerning the health and well-being of their citizens. The agreement Biden and Xi reached last week to reduce the flow of fentanyl components from China into the United States was a good start. But there are other ways that Washington and Beijing could work together on projects relating to global health. The United States should allow and encourage China to take part in Project Orbis, a cross-border collaboration run by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that seeks to accelerate regulatory approval of new cancer drugs. China should also participate in the Biden administration's Cancer Moonshot project, which aims to cut the cancer death rate by at least 50 percent over the next 25 years.

Finally, in an era characterized by global ecological crises, it is also imperative that the two largest economies and largest emitters achieve tangible results in their climate change coordination. In early November, U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and China's Special Envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua reached an agreement to revive a bilateral working group on environmental issues including advancing renewable sources of energy and reducing methane emissions.

The Biden-Xi meeting has put the two countries on a less threatening trajectory in the short term. But one meeting alone cannot halt the long-term momentum in the direction of conflict. Influential citizens in both countries must mobilize to find ways beyond official engagement to promote the common good. Whatever new paradigm leaders in Beijing and Washington choose must do more than just avoid a new cold war; it must prevent a hot one, as well. 🌐

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