

China and America: back to the future?

by David M. Lampton



Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks at the podium during the meeting between members of the standing committee of the Political Bureau of the 20th CPC Central Committee and Chinese and foreign journalists at The Great Hall of the People on October 23, 2022, in Beijing, China. China's ruling Communist Party revealed the new Politburo Standing Committee after its 20th congress. (LINTAO ZHANG/GETTY IMAGES)

For the last decade-plus the core issue in U.S.-China relations has been: Could Beijing and Washington make room for one another in Asia and the broader international system as mutual stakeholders? Or instead, would each follow its instincts and seek regional and international system dominance and take actions to weaken and deter one another, thereby running risks of conflict?

Unfortunately, the jury has reached a verdict—the governments of the United States and China now are turning to strategies to deal with each other reminiscent of earlier periods of intense big power competition. The minimal goal of each is to deny dominance to the other; the maximum goal of each is to achieve dominance for itself. How long this period of increasing tension will last is unclear but it is unlikely to be short. It will be expensive—certainly in dollars and quite possibly in lives, unless both sides change course, soon.

As this contest sharpens, the new era into which we are moving has echoes with two past foreign policy periods—the Cold War of the second half of the 20th century and the world of “spheres of influence” in the 19th century and much of the 20th.

DAVID M. LAMPTON is Professor Emeritus at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), where he headed China Studies and was Hyman Chair until 2018. Now he is Senior Research Fellow at the School's Foreign Policy Institute. He also has been President of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations in New York and Chairman of the Asia Foundation in San Francisco. Author of numerous books and articles, his most recent volume, with Professors Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, is entitled: *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

One pristine example of the spheres of influence world was the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 warning Europeans that Washington would not countenance their intervention in the Western Hemisphere. Another example is the Kennedy administration's absolute rejection of the Soviet Union's attempt to place nuclear weapons in Cuba in the early 1960s. In similar fashion, by defining the South China Sea and Taiwan as "core interests," linking these areas to the national security of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Beijing is saying that its interests take precedence in this region over the claims and interests of distant powers, notably the

United States. Beijing's *Global Times* graphically indicated its claims in the wake of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's (D-CA) August 2022 stop in Taiwan.

Similarly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and before that Crimea and Georgia, are yet other expressions of the same sphere of influence impulse. Big powers try to establish buffer zones.

To be sure, the context in which America and China now are operating has some important differences from these earlier eras, three in particular: 1) The degree of global, economic interdependence is greater than ever before, seen in intricate supply chains

upon which everyone depends. Today it is harder than ever to inflict damage on one's adversary without harming oneself and friends. 2) The big powers, and many second-tier powers, have weapons of mass destruction or soon could develop them if they were to determine their security required them to do so. Escalation and proliferation are enormous present dangers. And 3), the world faces existential global issues that could extinguish or severely disrupt life as we know it if cooperation is not forthcoming, particularly Sino-American cooperation. One need look no further than climate change and environmental deterioration.

Looming decisions in a new era

All this requires Americans to make decisions, including:

What fraction of national wealth are Americans willing to spend on this new contest? At the height of the Cold War, U.S. defense spending averaged about 10% GDP, generally falling to the 3–5% range thereafter—"the peace dividend." What is the United States willing to spend in a contest with China (and Russia) given its own competing domestic needs? The PRC is economically and intellectually more dynamic than the Soviet Union ever was (or Russia is). Nonetheless, their combined weight is deeply disconcerting.

How does the United States forge sufficient domestic cohesion to be effective abroad? A majority of Americans—Democrats, Independents, and Republicans alike—believe it is important that America remain the only superpower, but they are sharply divided on how to maintain primacy—through what mix of diplomacy, the exercise of military might, and the use of economic levers? There are voices calling for cutbacks in military and other assistance to Ukraine, for instance.

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Now, China is a global power with extraordinary reach, influence, and ambition. It's the second largest economy, with world-class cities and public transportation networks. It's home to some of the world's largest tech companies and it seeks to dominate the technologies and industries of the future. It's rapidly modernized its military and intends to become a top tier fighting force with global reach. And it has announced its ambition to create a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power. U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China," May 26, 2022.

How can the United States win the support of a critical mass of friends and allies in the international system to offset the dynamism and mass of China? Is ever more foreign aid, direct investment abroad, and military assistance required? If so, what are the implications for the domestic agenda? How far will America's friends and allies go if Washington wants to impose ever more sanctions and export controls on the PRC?

As competition with China becomes

more intense, Washington is responding by adopting industrial policy focusing on R&D and investment in priority areas. What role do Americans wish their government to play in their domestic economy?

As the United States competes strenuously on so many fronts, is it realistic to expect meaningful cooperation from the PRC on world health, environmental and climate issues, counter-proliferation, and global economic system management?

What does “dominance” even mean in a world falling apart?

It is possible that alternative futures will emerge, including a China that greatly adjusts course and gets back on the more accommodative path of Xi Jinping’s predecessors. This could happen if China’s internal weaknesses became maximal constraints and/or if elite solidarity in Beijing splinters due to the rising opposition of those dissatisfied with the domestic and international costs of President Xi Jinping’s current course. However, this is not the future for which the United States or like-minded countries can plan. The United States and China have set out on dangerous intersecting courses and it is hard to foresee a probable scenario that has them changing their headings any time soon. That China is a problem is one of the few things Americans agree about. Among many Chinese the feeling is mutual.

Xi Jinping has just been anointed the maximal leader for what could prove to be life at the October 2022, 20th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and managed to stack the Standing Committee of the Politburo with close allies. Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s May 26, 2022, speech on China policy quoted above was a clear indication of the direction in which American policy is moving. The rising tensions are most evident in the Taiwan Strait, but by no means limited to that strategic strip of water.

How have both nations incrementally created an early-stage cold war world in which sphere of influence thinking plays a significant role? Beijing is doing so to expand its power, assure natural, trade, and financial resource flows to itself, and to push its defense perimeter further from its shores. America is trying to constrain the PRC by sanctions, export controls, and diplomacy, secure its own economic future, and maintain global leadership, all the while trying to maintain its expansive defense perimeter and keep friends and allies under its security umbrella.

If this is the future into which we are moving, how did we get to this point?



GLOBAL TIMES

How did we get here?

Fifty-one years ago Richard Nixon met Mao Zedong in Beijing’s imperial residential compound, thereby initiating the “week that changed the world.”

From the 1970s until about 2010, the U.S.-China relationship went through two phases. In about 2010 the two countries began to enter the third phase in which they now are ensnared. The first two phases occurred under the broad banner of “engagement” and the third, today’s crystallizing policy frame, is “competition.” In moving from engagement to competition, we have simultaneously moved from a world of mutual reassurance to one of increasingly dangerous mutual deterrence. Deterrence is based on threat.

The first phase was initiated by President Nixon and Henry Kissinger and

pursued with variations by four administrations thereafter (Ford, Carter, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush)—joining with China to offset what was seen as surging Soviet power. This led Wash-



In this Feb. 21, 1972, photo, Chinese communist party leader Mao Zedong, left, and U.S. President Nixon shake hands as they meet in Beijing. Nixon’s visit marked the first time an American president visited China. (AP IMAGES)



A Chinese man stands alone to block a line of tanks heading east on Beijing's Chang'an Blvd. in Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989. (AP IMAGES)

ington to see an interest in helping Beijing create greater comprehensive national power to be a more muscular adversary to Moscow and to help achieve other objectives such as arms control agreements with Moscow, and to extricate Washington from Vietnam. In this endeavor, the U.S. citizenry was supportive. Over time this strategic phase involved transferring selected weapons to the PRC, trading some intelligence, cooperating to defeat Soviet troops in Afghanistan, and looking favorably on working with the PRC to increase its human and technological capacities. In the Carter administration, the economic opportunities provided by a reforming China became a growing, positive consideration for Americans.

Then, in the 1989–91 period, a new, more-difficult-to-manage phase of engagement began. With the 1989 violence in Tiananmen Square, human rights was powerfully injected into bilateral relations. Then, in 1991, the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union imploded, removing the common threat that had proven a strong adhesive in U.S.-China relations previously. And shortly thereafter, the 1995–96 missile crisis in the Taiwan Strait, and Beijing's retreat in the face of the U.S. response, convinced President Jiang Zemin and the Chinese military to accelerate defense modernization markedly.

Since 1989 there has been continual contention on trade and human rights

issues and growing concern that as Chinese power grew Beijing would become less observant of the post-World War II order. Every U.S. administration, from Clinton through Obama, sought to gradually shape the international environment and otherwise induce Beijing to become what U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick in 2005 called a "responsible stakeholder" in the post-World War II order and more observant of legal principles and norms.

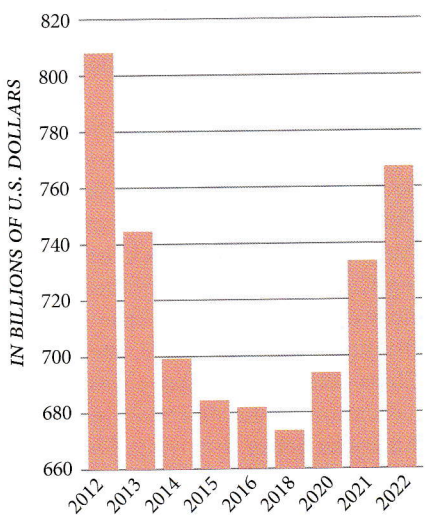
Following China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization, the PRC's comprehensive national power mounted rapidly and its confidence grew as America struggled with economic calamity (2008–9) and was bogged down in conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia. By 2010, China had become noticeably more assertive in the South and East China Seas and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton upbraided Beijing for its activities in those waters at the Regional Forum meeting of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Hanoi in July of that year, in turn eliciting a sharp verbal response from the PRC. In late 2011, the Obama administration initiated its "pivot to Asia," signaling a more muscular turn in U.S. policy in the region.

With a new leader in China in 2012–13, Xi Jinping, and Donald Trump moving into the White House in January 2017, each country had in place a leader

willing to change the frame of relations from "engagement" to "competition." Xi was not only more assertive and ambitious than his three predecessors, he also was more worried about the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) losing internal control. His growing fear of instability at home, married with new tools of surveillance, created the specter of the "surveillance state."

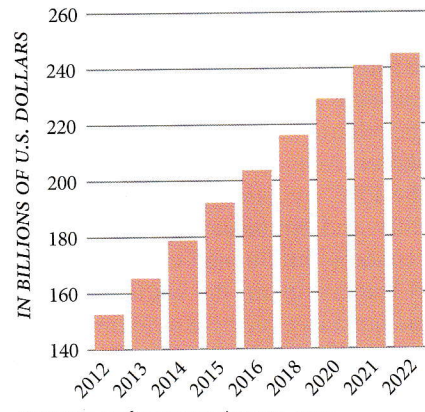
When Joseph Biden entered the White House in January 2021, he changed much about Donald Trump's domestic and foreign policies, but he maintained, indeed strengthened, some of the main contours of Trump's China

U. S. Military Expenditure in 2012–2022



SOURCE: tradingeconomics.com, SIPRI

China Military Expenditure in 2012–2022



SOURCE: tradingeconomics.com, SIPRI

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policies, from tariffs, to investment and export controls, to reduced dialogue. With respect to Chinese students coming to the United States, the number has fallen by more than half since prior to the pandemic, for a variety of reasons, not least Covid, anti-Asian sentiment creating an unwelcoming environment, tightening of U.S. visa issuance policy, improved quality of Chinese institutions so not so many Chinese students feel the need to go abroad, and other factors.

In one important respect, however, Biden strengthened America where Trump had undermined it—alliance and partnership relations. President Biden has built a security relationship known as AUKUS (Australia, the UK, and the U.S.) and strengthened security coordination within the Quad (India, Japan, Australia, and the U.S.). In the case of AUKUS, the United States

and Britain are cooperating to deliver a fleet of nuclear-powered (not nuclear-armed) submarines to Australia.

In another respect, Biden's China policy also was a departure from Trump's—he emphasized that the contest between China and the United States was importantly about autocracy versus democracy.

This, therefore, is the era in which we now are embroiled. The mechanisms of dialogue and exchange that in the engagement era were used to try to smooth-out rough patches have either become moribund due to Covid, or terminated by one side or the other in retaliation for various actions. A major PRC countermeasure in this respect was the August 5, 2022, cancellation or suspension of eight consultative and cooperative activities taken in retaliation for Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan.

In today's era defined by competition, leaders and publics in China and the United States have now adopted a deterrence posture against one another. Mutual threat is the core of mutual deterrence, and an arms race is underway between the two countries, involving conventional weapons, weapons of mass destruction, space, and cyber. A steep upward climb in military expenditures in both countries is well underway. Whereas in the past China seemed content to have a hundred or so nuclear warheads to feel secure in its deterrence, today Beijing could be headed toward a thousand by 2030.

In short, we have, step-by-step moved into a world in which both Beijing and Washington are using a Cold War tool box. The August 2022 military show of force in the Taiwan Strait has brought the relationship to a new and more dangerous stage.

The Cold War frame

Starting with the Obama administration (2009–17), then moving to the Trump and Biden administrations, gradually Washington has adopted serial measures to try to get its own house in order, increase economic capacity, achieve greater self-reliance in key technologies, rebuild and expand alliance and friendship relationships, seek to reallocate military assets in the direction of Asia, adopt a greater degree of industrial policy, and begun to use economic inducements and foreign aid (including infrastructure) to compete with the PRC's global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Emblematic of this entire process was the bipartisan, overwhelming, passage of competitiveness legislation in Congress (The Chips and Science Act), signed into law by President Biden on August 9, 2022. When it passed the Senate, the *New York Times* headline of July 28, 2022, was concise: "In Bid to Counter China, Senate Passes a Sweeping Industrial Bill."

Predictably, these U.S. moves trigger Beijing's propensity to see

neo-containment. In turn, the PRC strengthens its efforts to consolidate security all along its enormous periphery, including becoming more assertive in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, the Taiwan Strait, and the South and East China Seas, pushing its defense perimeter as far offshore as possible, and building an economic network placing Beijing at its center in order to secure its economic lifelines and external markets. The PRC accelerates its development of cyber and space capabilities as well as its basic and applied research in new technologies. A central feature of Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping's report to the 20th Party Congress on October 16, 2022, was the emphasis on investing in R&D, cultivating science and technology talent, and emphasizing industrial policy.

For Washington, all of this constitutes what Secretary Blinken said was Beijing's "ambition to create a sphere of influence" and to "become the world's leading power." It triggers in America the reasonable conviction

that the post-World War II institutional order is being challenged by the PRC.

For their part, PRC leaders observe the past and current behavior of other powers, and indeed China's own historical dynasties, and conclude that China is no less entitled to the greater sway in its region than other great powers have claimed in their backyards.

■ The Biden Administration Gradually Codifies Its Strategy Toward China, 2021–22.

The Biden administration had been in office two months when in March 2021 it issued *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. Donald Trump had been such a large departure from past U.S. practices and current needs that the new American president felt compelled to course correct quickly even before his National Security Council had a chance for the standard, comprehensive review characteristic of presidential transitions. About a year and a half later, in October 2022, the Biden-Harris administration finally is-

sued its long-awaited *National Security Strategy*, the central points of which hewed closely to what it had said previously in its *Interim Guidance*. Even Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 did not displace Beijing as the primary long-term strategic challenge facing the United States in the White House view.

The main features of the *Interim Guidance* were: 1) We will not engage in "forever wars" and "we will right-size our military presence" in the Middle East. 2) We will deter adversaries, notably China, Russia, and Iran. 3) "Our presence will be most robust in the Indo-Pacific and Europe." 4) Washington will be more mindful of allies and the need to win their cooperation and financial support for dealing with China, as well as other issues. 5) America's external capacities depend on a revitalized American economy and democracy, starting with renewal of infrastructure, particularly clean energy, based on augmented R&D. 6) "We must join with likeminded allies and partners to revitalize democracy the world over." 7) The U.S. will "defend trusted critical supply chains and technology infrastructure." Toward the end of the document, in **bold type**, the following was the overall summary: **"This agenda will strengthen our enduring advantages, and allow us to prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation."**

So, from the very opening days of the Biden administration its strategic guidance made clear that China was at the top of Washington's worry list. Trump-imposed trade tariffs continued and a "Summit of Democracies" was soon held in Washington. The *Interim Strategic Guidance* could not have been clearer: "China, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive. It is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."

The final strategically central aspect of the *Interim Guidance* showed how far both sides had come from the underlying strategic logic of the

Nixon-Mao move against Moscow in the early 1970s. Now Russia and the PRC were seen as collaborating against America: "Both Beijing and Moscow have invested heavily in efforts meant to check U.S. strengths and prevent us from defending our interests and our allies around the world."

Fast forward to almost a year after the *Interim Guidance* was issued, Russia was poised to attack, and then invade, Ukraine in February, 2022. Thereafter, the United States urged China to separate itself from Moscow, and not materially support the Russian aggression. But, by then, Beijing was operating in an environment in which Washington and Beijing were each other's biggest adversaries, making Moscow a more attractive partner of convenience for the PRC. Beijing also has sought to position itself as "an honest broker" fostering an end to hostilities while continuing to trade with Moscow in selected areas and to assert that "NATO enlargement" and a growing NATO presence all around Russia's western periphery was a principal precipitating cause of the Ukraine conflict. As one Chinese official affiliated with China's military put it to this author on February 17, 2022, "War in Europe would divert the U.S. [from China]." As of this writing, Washington says it has no evidence that Beijing is trading in military goods with Moscow as it pertains to the war in Ukraine.

■ The Joint Statement of Russia and China.

On February 4, 2022, with President Putin in Beijing for the opening of the Winter Olympic Games which relatively few other world leaders attended, Xi Jinping and the Russian leader took the opportunity to issue a "Joint Statement." Though not having the status of a treaty, coming less than three weeks before Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, this document carried with it faint echoes of the February 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance that solidified the Truman administration's hardline posture toward China in the early stages of the Cold

War. That treaty preceded North Korea's invasion of South Korea.

The February 4, 2022, "Joint Statement" deeply affected Biden administration thinking. Several aspects of the Joint Statement caught American eyes. First was the assertion that there is an ongoing "transformation of the global governance architecture and world order" — read, the post-World War II U.S.-led world order is crumbling. Moscow and Beijing now vowed to "protect the United Nations-driven international architecture...seek[ing] genuine multipolarity with the United Nations and its Security Council playing a central coordinating role." The UN Security Council is a forum in which Moscow and Beijing each have a veto.

Second and notably, China and Russia articulated their mutual support for each other's sovereignty claims: "The Russian side reaffirms its support for the One-China principle, confirms that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and opposes any forms of independence of Taiwan. Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability **in their common and adjacent regions**...and will increase cooperation in aforementioned areas." [Emphasis added]

Third, the two sides equated western support for Ukrainian unity with fascism: "The sides will strongly condemn actions aimed at denying the responsibility for atrocities of Nazi aggressors, militarist invaders, and their accomplices, besmirch and tarnish the honor of the victorious countries."

Fourth, stating that their new relationship is "superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era," they go on to say, "there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation...."

While it would be important to understand exactly how much Xi Jinping understood about Putin's invasion plans prior to late-February, beyond desiring that no Russian military operations disrupt Beijing's Winter Olympic Games, the sequence of developments has made clear that the sovereignty of nations no-longer occupies the same space in Chinese for-



Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks to China's President Xi Jinping during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) leaders' summit in Samarkand on September 16, 2022. (SERGEI BOBYLYOV/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

eign policy that it used to going back to the mid-1950s. If sovereignty does not constitute the unshakeable foreign policy principle to which Beijing used to be committed, on what principle could cooperation with Beijing be based? How could Beijing expect its sovereignty claims with regard to Taiwan to be respected if it does not speak out for Ukrainian sovereignty?

■ The Biden Administration's Increasingly Defined Approach to China, May 26, 2022.

On May 26, 2022, three months after the Sino-Russian Joint Statement, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken delivered a speech that reflected the main contours of the Biden administration's long-incoming review of China policy and the initial impacts of the Sino-Russian "Joint Statement" and the invasion of Ukraine.

Comparing Blinken's speech with the "Conclusions and Recommendations" section of NSC 68 ("United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," April 1950) is illuminating. NSC 68 was an initial Cold War strategic document shaping the U.S. response to the Soviet Union and China for the following two-plus decades. There are numerous and im-

portant similarities between NSC 68's analysis and recommendations of the early 1950s and the key points of Secretary Blinken's speech more than 70 years later.

Though the U.S. Secretary of State emphasized that Washington was putting "diplomacy back at the center of American foreign policy," one can fear that what initially is being sold as a diplomatic strategy will morph into

a militarily top-heavy approach (as George Kennan believed happened to his concept of containment in the 1950s and 1960s).

In 1950, NSC 68 said: "The gravest threat to the security of the United States within the foreseeable future stems from the hostile designs and formidable power of the USSR, and from the nature of the Soviet system." Blinken said: "China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." He went on to proclaim, "We will remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order—and that's posed by the People's Republic of China." Near the conclusion of his remarks Secretary Blinken laid out the implications: "President Biden has instructed the Department of Defense to hold China as its pacing challenge, to ensure that our military stays ahead."

In terms of strategic objectives, NSC 68 said that: "Soviet domination of the potential power of Eurasia, whether achieved by armed aggression or by political and subversive means, would be strategically and politically unacceptable to the United States." Blinken said: "It's [China] rapidly



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks on China at George Washington University May 26, 2022, in Washington, DC. Blinken delivered a speech on the Biden administration's policy toward China during the event hosted by the Asia Society Policy Institute. (ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES)

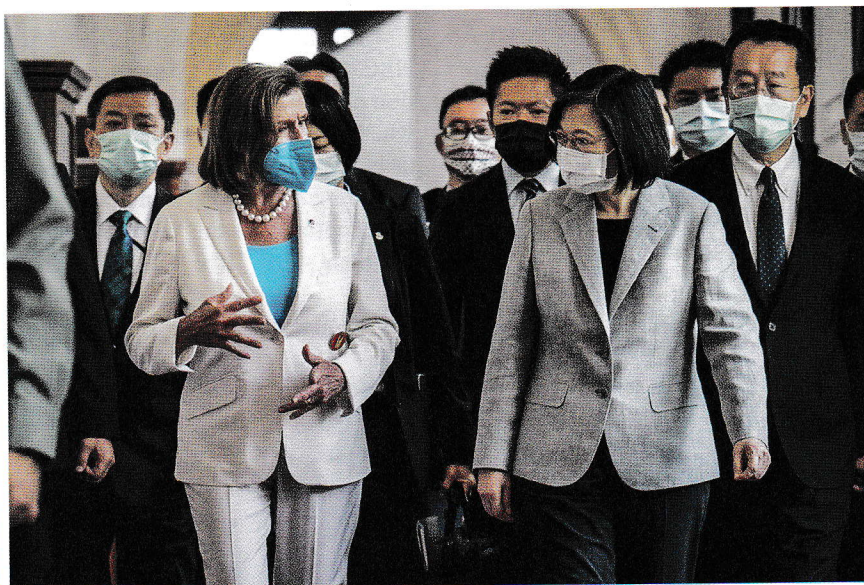
modernized its military and intends to become a top-tier fighting force with global reach. And it has announced its ambition to create a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power....Under President Xi Jinping, the ruling Chinese Communist Party has become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad." NSC 68 said that the purposes of U.S. policy were: "To create situations which will compel the Soviet Government to recognize the practical undesirability of acting on the basis of its present concepts and the necessity of behaving in accordance with precepts of international conduct, as set forth in the purposes and principles of the UN Charter." Blinken said: "But we cannot rely on Beijing to change its trajectory.

So we will shape the strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open, inclusive international system." NSC 68 said: "Strengthen the orientation toward the United States of the non-Soviet nations; and help such of those nations as are able and willing to make an important contribution to U.S. security, to increase their economic and political stability and their military capability." Blinken said: "The second piece of our strategy is aligning with our allies and partners to advance a shared vision for the future. From day one, the Biden administration has worked to re-energize America's unmatched network of alliances and partnerships and to re-engage in international institutions."

It needs to be said clearly that if the

American public had access to Beijing's equivalent policy documents, directives, and decisions, U.S. citizens almost certainly would be justifiably alarmed. The point here, however, is that Beijing sees Washington's policy as "containment" and the U.S. Government views the PRC as trying to surpass American dominance, promote an authoritarian approach to development and governance, and to change the character of post-World War II economic and security systems not only regionally, but also globally. The goal each ascribes to the other is unacceptable. Each side is developing its military, economic, and diplomatic toolboxes of coercive means to deal with each other. Deterrence is the name of the game, not reassurance.

The rising salience, and danger, of the Taiwan issue



Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), center left, speaks to Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen, center right, after arriving at the president's office on August 3, 2022, in Taipei, Taiwan. Pelosi arrived in Taiwan as part of a tour of Asia aimed at reassuring allies in the region, as China made it clear that her visit to Taiwan would be seen in a negative light. (CHIEN CHIH-HUNG/OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT VIA GETTY IMAGES)

A further parallel with the first Cold War is that as Washington and Beijing diverge strategically, each attaches increasing weight to Taiwan, the single most volatile flash point in the U.S.-China relationship since 1950. On May 23, 2022, President

Biden articulated his personal commitment (there is no legal requirement under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, or TRA, to defend Taiwan militarily if it is attacked). Beijing reacted by joining with Russia to send a joint flight of six bombers near Japan and South

Korea, and southward into South China Sea airspace immediately after Biden's remarks. The U.S. president was still in Asia.

Then the day after Army Day 2022 on the Chinese Mainland, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in the face of oblique pressure from the Biden administration not to visit the island at that time, landed in Taipei. Beijing immediately responded by announcing military, live-fire exercises, creating a ring around the entire island consisting of six exercise areas. The PRC military display immediately was followed by a *White Paper* threatening prosecution of Taiwan leaders, reeducation of its people, and equating Taiwan's reunification with the national security of the PRC. As the *White Paper* put it,

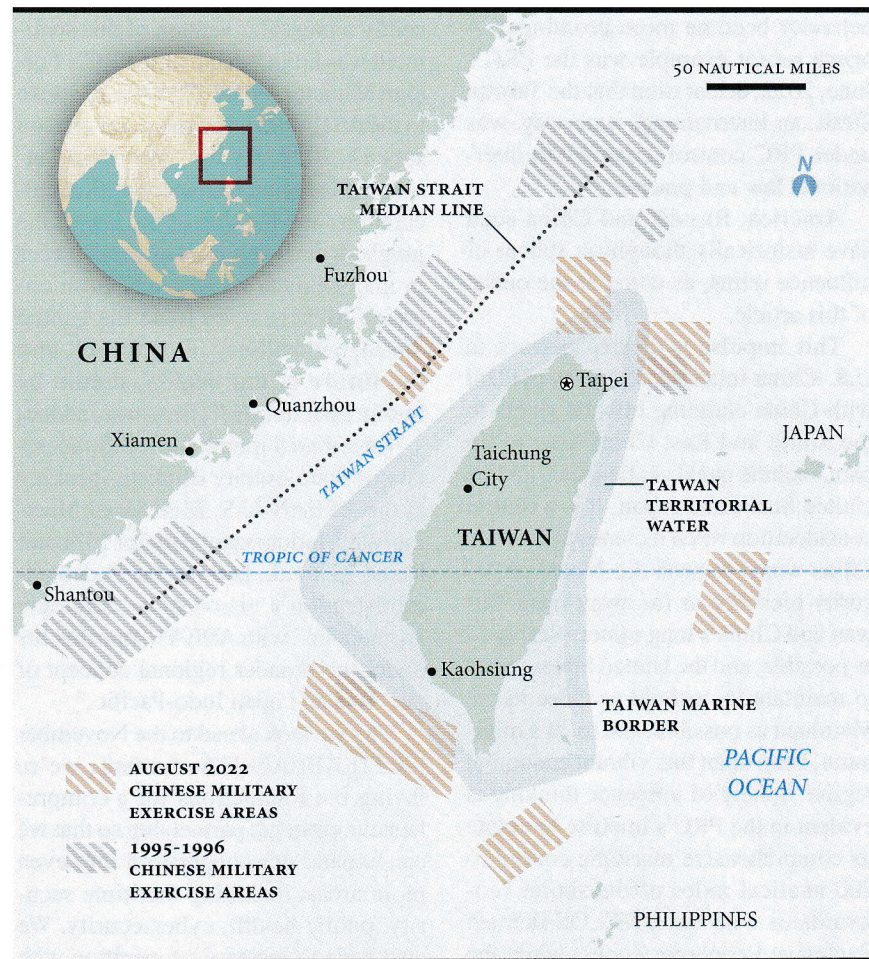
"National reunification is the only way to avoid the risk of Taiwan being invaded and occupied again by foreign countries, to foil the attempts of external forces to contain China, and to safeguard the sovereignty, security, and development interests of our country."

Washington had already moved naval assets, including the carrier USS Ronald Reagan, into the region to the east of Taiwan. Immediately after Bei-

jing said its exercises were over for now, it issued the *White Paper*.

This sequence of developments more than faintly echoes the trends that produced a Korean War, two Taiwan Straits crises in the 1950s, and two decades of Cold War with China. The point is not that the two eras are identical, but rather that they are similar and perilous. Among the dangers is the fact that the norms and practices that the United States and China observed concerning Taiwan over eight successive administrations from Nixon through Obama have steadily eroded. And while China was not a nuclear power until late-1964, today it bristles with a growing number of nuclear and conventional warheads and delivery means. To date, the United States has never launched a direct attack on a nuclear weapons power.

The year 2022 was the 50th anniversary of the Nixon trip to China. The strategic core of the Nixon-Mao rapprochement of the early 1970s and thereafter was using the combined strategic weight of China and the United States to offset the USSR. Today, Beijing and Moscow are cooperating ever more closely to America's detriment. The question is, what will the generations coming to policy dominance in Washington and Beijing do now? Coming out of the 20th Party Congress of



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October 2022, the old, familiar faces in the making of Chinese foreign and economic policy are largely gone. The most familiar faces on the Standing

Committee of the Politburo are Xi Jinping himself, and an ideologue named Wang Huning. Nationalism in both countries is on the rise.

Spheres of influence thinking and action

The definition of “sphere of influence” is: “A field or area in which an individual or organization [or state] has power to affect events and developments.” In international relations discourse this term is associated with the practice of the principal big powers in the 19th and 20th centuries trying to cordon off reliable markets for exports, dependable sources of resources, and to be assured that strategically consequential real estate was not in the hands of unfriendly powers. Taken in this general sense, irrespective of whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged by great powers today, sphere of influence thinking is evident as China and

the United States view each other's actions and as each sets its own strategic course.

In his May 26, 2022, remarks cited at the outset of this article, the U.S. Secretary of State attributed to China the “ambition to create a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power.” The United States was not prepared to accept a Japanese attempt to create such a sphere in the late-1930s and early 1940s, and has declared that the ambitions it sees China pursuing are unacceptable today. Whatever we want to call the current situation, China is trying to extend its regional sway, engaging in efforts to

reduce American prominence in the area. The United States reacts in ways we have seen before—building security relationships, augmenting military might, and reducing reliance on strategic commodities and industries under Chinese control.

Great powers like to have buffer zones, reliable areas in which they feel relatively secure in placing economic assets and building their most reliable security relationships. Sometimes this kind of thinking is less prominent, as it was at the height of globalization. But, at other times, when security concerns become severe among the powers, sphere of influence thinking and

behavior become more prominent. A prime recent example was the PRC's June, 2022, declaration that the Taiwan Strait, an international waterway, was under PRC control, contrary to international law and practice.

America, Russia, and China each have historically thought in sphere of influence terms, as noted at the outset of this article.

This impulse is clearly at work in U.S.-China relations today, as evident with China claiming historic rights to the South and East China seas to, in part, exclude naval challenges from the United States and Japan. It is a central consideration when it comes to Taiwan. China wants to push the American security presence as far away from Taiwan and China's long eastern seaboard as possible, and the United States wants to maintain its toehold as close to the Mainland as possible, and to, at a minimum, keep open this vibrant economic region. Sphere of influence thinking is evident in the PRC's impulse to define its comprehensive maritime control to 200 nautical miles off its shores (co-terminous with the UNCLOS-defined Exclusive Economic Zones) while the United States tries to limit territorial waters to 12 nautical miles.

In pursuit of consolidating its sphere of influence impulses and claims, explicit or otherwise, each power seeks to bring in reliable allies to bolster its claims and help it fight if it must. So, the United States enlists Japan, South Korea, Australia, and others in its Indo-Pacific strategy, and China enlists Russia and strives to keep as many small countries unaligned as possible. In Europe, as Putin seeks to extend his buffer zone to Ukraine, he simultaneously seeks support from China, and uses Belarus and others to help extend his sphere.

An early, unmistakable indication that China under Xi Jinping was thinking in this way came on May 21, 2014, when China's then new leader gave a speech at a conference on security cooperation, saying: "In the final analysis, let the people of Asia run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia." Most re-

cently a muscular version of this sentiment was articulated by the PRC's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, when he spoke to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, on July 11, 2022, saying: "We should insulate this region from geopolitical calculations and the trap of the law of the jungle, from being used as chess pieces in major-power rivalry, and from coercion by hegemony [read the United States] and bullying. **Our future, and the future of our region, should be in our own hands.**" [Emphasis added]

Less than a month later U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking at the ASEAN-U.S. Ministerial Meeting with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, laid out the Biden administration's vision of a "Strategic Partnership" with ASEAN, one that fits under the broader regional concept of the "free and open Indo-Pacific."

"As we look ahead to the November [2022] ASEAN-U.S. summit, we're laying the foundations for a comprehensive strategic partnership so that we can expand our cooperation into even more areas, including maritime security, public health, cybersecurity. We also hope to increase cooperation with ASEAN throughout the broader region. For example, with the Quad [Japan, India, Australia, and the United States] and within the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework [inaudible] for your ideas to advance that kind of cooperation and collaboration."

In short, the United States and China each are defining geographic regions as key to their economic and security futures and seeking, within those regions, to augment technological and economic integration with themselves and to diminish the economic and technological dependence on the competing power.

Predictably, some countries try to avoid tight alignment with either, seeking to play the United States and China off against one another to their own benefit. Southeast Asia is one region where the competition is intense, with the Chinese Foreign Minister and the U.S. Secretary of State each expending considerable time and effort traveling in this region. Islands in the South

Pacific have become one area of Sino-American competition.

In thinking about this competition in East and Southeast Asia, Beijing believes it has three very strong cards to play:

Economic: Since 2020, China and ASEAN have been each other's largest trade partner. The China-sponsored Regional Cooperative Economic Partnership (RCEP) involving 16 Asian economies came into force in January 2022 (for ten of those countries) and the PRC's imports and exports are growing rapidly—the United States is not part of this grouping.

Geographic proximity: Geography confers advantages on China in terms of achieving a high degree of economic integration, high levels of trade and investment, and large human flows. China is taking advantage of this proximity by expanding rail connectivity, cross-border power grid hookups, and port development. In December 2021, Beijing completed the high-speed rail line from China to the Thai-Laos border at Nongkhai, with the PRC's *Global Times* reporting:

"[The] China-Laos Railway is also a convenient logistics channel between China and ASEAN, and a number of provinces and cities in China have started cross border freight trains on [the] railway. In the first quarter [2022], the import and export by railroad transport between China and ASEAN increased significantly by 3.5 times...."

Military and maritime power: Because almost all of the economically significant countries of South and Southeast Asia are maritime nations, naval and merchant marine fleets are key national assets. While just counting ships is an imperfect measure of power, it is indicative of trends. By ship count, China is the largest navy in the world and in terms of maritime fleets it is enormous, particularly if you count the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and PRC merchant fleets together as one. Predictably, China is building ports and acquiring access rights (in some cases military) extending from its own coast all the way to the Persian Gulf. Its shipbuilding industry

is now the world's largest as measured by deadweight tons completed per year. Two of the top four shipbuilding companies in the world are PRC.

Top 10 Largest Navies in the World (by total number of warships and submarines—2020)

| |
|---------------------|
| China - 777 |
| Russia - 603 |
| North Korea - 492 |
| United States - 490 |
| Colombia - 453 |
| Iran - 398 |
| Egypt - 316 |
| Thailand - 292 |
| India - 285 |
| Indonesia - 282 |

Because Southeast Asia is a massive, rapidly growing market, embracing geographically strategic real estate, and has enormous human resources, both China and the United States are competing in this region. Nonetheless, America is playing catch-up.

One indication of the importance of the region is the fact that in the days preceding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Secretary Blinken was making the rounds in the Asia-Pacific. At a February 7, 2022, press briefing, the State Department spokesperson was asked why the secretary was making this trip when war was imminent in the heart of Europe:

Question: "Considering that we are in that window now and there's talk of a potentially imminent invasion [by Russia into Ukraine], was there ever a discussion about postponing the Australia trip? Is now the right time to be crossing the world, going to Fiji, when this invasion could happen at any time?"

Part of the State Department's response was that the PRC was rapidly expanding its foothold in Pacific Islands that had been aligned with Washington since the Second World War and that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping had met three days earlier in Beijing.

In short, strategically, the United States finds itself stretched, facing one Pacific-oriented great power dissatisfied with the post-World War II order,



President Joe Biden arrives to deliver remarks at a new Intel semiconductor manufacturing facility site in New Albany, Ohio, Sept. 9, 2022. The plant is part of Biden's efforts toward rebuilding American manufacturing through the CHIPS and Science Act. (PETE MAROVICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX PICTURES)

China, and a Europe-facing power, Russia, dissatisfied with the post-Cold War order in Europe and Central Asia. As the State Department spokesperson

put it: "What we have seen over the course not of days, not of weeks, but of years...is an increasing closeness between Russia and China."

The growing American response

Washington's response has thus far had three central components, the first of which is the most fundamental and would be a foundation upon which any sound strategy must be built—increase American comprehensive national power and get America's own governance house in order. To this end, one sees bi-partisan adoption of legislation to increase U.S. R&D funding, gigantic efforts to renew America's aging infrastructure, massive investment in critical technologies (notably silicon chips), new investments in clean energy technologies (batteries and solar panels, for example), in part to compete with China, in part to boost American manufacturing, reduce reliance on the Middle East, and in part to meet greenhouse gas emission reduction targets.

A second component of the American response in the Biden era is to enlist friends and allies and broaden comprehensive cooperation. U.S. policy now refers to the "Indo-Pacific" rather than the Asia-Pacific. America is putting

new effort into the Pacific Islands and seeking to improve relations with India, as well as reduce tensions between Japan and South Korea. Even the U.S.-Philippine Security Pact, weakened since 1992, is being revived.

And third, militarily, the United States is animating new, and strengthening pre-existing, military undertakings, as noted earlier. The U.S. also is considering several arrangements for basing missile defense assets in the region, something Beijing has long adamantly opposed and a subject that already has caused considerable friction between Beijing and Seoul.

These moves already are deeply embedded in the American system and policy, and China's current policies and actions are equally deeply anchored. While there are forces in each society that would like to see a different direction, their numbers do not seem large, and the actions each side takes toward the other undermine more moderate elements in each society.

discussion questions

1. Given trends toward a Cold War frame for U.S.-China relations and sphere of influence thinking, is it likely we will be able to secure the cooperation that Washington wants, and the world needs, on global and transnational issues? Beijing's recent unwillingness to address the North Korea problem is one example.
2. Historically, the United States has resisted the Eurasian landmass being dominated by a single, much less hostile, power, or coalition of unfriendly powers. The United States now finds itself in the position of facing a China and Russia working ever more intimately together. What policies are required to address this adverse circumstance? Is it possible to improve relations with China, to win cooperation in the struggle against Russia in Europe?
3. With increasing Sino-American friction, Taiwan is becoming a progressively more volatile issue. Beijing sees Washington weak-

ening its commitment to the "One China Policy" and moving toward a "One China, One Taiwan Policy," which for about seventy years the PRC has said it will not accept. President Biden says he is personally committed to intervening militarily in the Taiwan Strait if the island is attacked. What dilemmas and policy issues do these circumstances create? What posture would Washington adopt if China seizes smaller, offshore islands currently occupied by Taipei?

4. To what degree does U.S. policy place sufficient emphasis on multilateral economic relationships to effectively compete with Beijing? Was it a mistake by the Trump Administration to pull out of efforts to build the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017?

5. In the event that China continues to strengthen bonds with Russia and U.S. relations with China continue to sour, what steps should the U.S. take to balance power in a region characterized by Sino-Russian cooperation? Aside from U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea, which nations should the U.S. look to improve relations with to strengthen its presence in the region?

suggested readings

Blinken, Antony J, **The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China**. U.S. Department of State, May 26, 2022. A comprehensive look at how the Biden Administration plans to engage China.

The Executive Secretary, **A Report to the National Security Council**. U.S. Objectives and Programs for National Security, April 14, 1950. On U.S. national security policy at the beginning of the cold war. Includes an assessment of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as U.S. and Soviet nuclear weapons capabilities.

Lampton, David M, Selina Ho, and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, **Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia**. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, October 13, 2020. 336 pp. What China's railway initiative can teach us about global dominance.

Rudd, Kevin, **The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict Between the U.S. and Xi Jinping's China**. New York: Public Affairs, March 22, 2022. 432 pp. A war between China and the United States would be catastrophic, deadly, and destructive. Unfortunately, it is no longer unthinkable.

Silver, Laura, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, **Negative Views of China Tied to Critical Views of Its Policies on Human Rights**. Pew Research Center, June 29, 2022. Large majorities in most of the 19 countries surveyed have negative views of China, but relatively few say bilateral relations are bad.

Thurston, Anne F. ed, **Engaging China: Fifty Years of Sino-American Relations**. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. 472 pp. Multidisciplinary and comprehensive, *Engaging China* is a vital reconsideration for a time when the stakes of U.S. policy toward China have never been higher.

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