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Brief

No. 11

February 2022

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This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement N. 959143.

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Summit proves fruitless or even ominous

In spite of a few concrete instances of cooperation – all quite limited, indecisive and likely temporary – the 16 November 2021 online summit between Presidents Xi Jinping and Joe Biden demonstrated how wide the disagreements between China and the United States are, how difficult it is for both countries to achieve a lasting shared understanding in any major issue area, and even how easily several of them can deteriorate further from an already high level of tension.

The issue of Taiwan of course is the most prominent and significant hotspot. The White House declared four days before the bilateral online summit that President Biden would not seek concrete results from the meeting. Rather, his main concern was about setting up the conditions for effective competition management. This was compatible with the general principle repeatedly declared by the Biden administration that “stiff competition”, as National Security Advisor Jack Sullivan described it on 11 November, is the fundamental assumption underlying the White House’s view of relations with China. For Biden, the best way to prevent US–China military conflict is a combination of deterrence and diplomacy. This means that on the issue of Taiwan in particular and the US–China strategic-military rivalry in general the Biden administration strongly strives for a situation in which the United States can safely broaden and deepen the almost comprehensive support it gives

Taiwan, including military support, together with broadening and deepening the rivalry against China in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond without risk of military conflict.

Such a guiding assumption has been prominent in Biden's statements during the summit and even more so after it in his administration's words and deeds. During the short time span of only about one and half months, the Biden administration has displayed a very hard-line approach, harder than almost ever before, on such issues as Xinjiang, realignment of supply chains mainly against China, high tech "containment" toward China, and Indo-Pacific regional rivalry.

An emerging New Cold War

I have repeated again and again in the past few months that I personally believe a Cold War between the United States and China is emerging. It is a New Cold War, the appreciation of which depends on whether one puts emphasis on the word "New" or on the phrase "Cold War". If one emphasises "New", one could find numerous differences between US–Chinese relations and the "original" Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union (although many people today tend to overstate those). On the other hand, if one emphasises the term "Cold War", it is easy to find that the current rivalry and confrontation between Washington and Beijing already has some major essential features of the old Cold War between Washington and Moscow, and even more so of the many rivalries between two antagonistic greatest powers in world history. We already have ever more severe geopolitical and geo-strategic hostile actions, an intensifying arms race, a growing ideological contest, mounting struggles in the area of high tech, as well as more hostile and nationalistic public opinions in both countries, which political leaderships partly drive and partly are driven by.

With respect to both the current situation and historical experiences, what is "New" in the US–China emerging Cold War mainly concerns the critical "decoupling" from economic interdependence, making more and more critical areas fragmented and group-oriented separated. In contrast with the strategic stalemate in Europe before the 1980s, the strategic dynamics now unfolding in East Asia and the Pacific (and beyond) are ominously fluid and unpredictable. This situation sharply challenges intellectual and other capabilities of the present political and strategic

leaderships in every major power, which combines with the pandemic and climate change-related disasters to complicate things much further and limit leaderships' ability to factor in all long-term consequences of their actions. Also "New" is the much higher degree of technologisation of great power warfare or para-warfare, which dramatically increases the dynamics of rivalry. The "remnants" of economic interdependence and liberal globalisation now look weaker than all the forces against stabilisation.

The multi-forces driving the deterioration

People are more often than not inclined to hold on easy and simplistic explanations. A most prevailing one throughout history is the so-called "one cause" theory. Although the technology factor has been a very important element behind the competition between the United States and China, it is extremely difficult to assume that the historic rivalry between two such huge powers results from a single factor, however significant it is. More fundamental and continuing "power transition" dynamics matter a lot. So do domestic political and social systems, or essential ways of political-economic organisation, as well as the ideational background of such political-economic organisations and the domestic political requirements they generate. Ideological competition, differences in political and even culture traditions, major domestic vested interests of various powerful groups, are all critical factors underlying the US–China contest. And finally, ominous interactions of rival major nations, especially in an environment characterised primarily by "jungle politics" and shortage of decreasing critical resources (broadly defined), should also be considered. It is difficult or even impossible to create a strict order of importance among these five or six drivers of US–China competition. This alone explains why the present rivalry between Washington and Beijing is far from easy to deal with, let alone to solve.

China in the Ukraine crisis

Because of their respective increasingly intense rivalries with the United States, and to a somewhat lesser degree with the rest of the world, China and Russia have established by simple arithmetic of international politics a sort of para-alliance.

But the arithmetic still has a complicated element, namely up to now there is no indication that the Russians want to commit in any degree to give military support to the Chinese in a potential conflict over Taiwan, and vice versa the Chinese are unwilling to commit to assist Russia militarily over Ukraine.

The Chinese government has declared that Russia's legitimate security concerns should be paid attention to and solved. This can be read as quite pro-Russian. But such a declaration of support has been mitigated by another statement by the Chinese government, according to which all parties should remain calm and not do anything to increase tensions and aggravate the crisis. Considering Russian President Vladimir Putin's strong resolve to challenge Europe's security order, one can doubt that Beijing is willing or even able to mitigate his intentions towards Ukraine.

China will not publicly criticise in any way Russia's possible invasion of Ukraine, but will not support it either. China will oppose any Western sanctions against Russia for whatever reason, but will not do anything directly to derail them. It may be prone to undermine their impact though, at least in some areas.



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