

11/6/20 Geopolitics & Beyond with Ralph Cossa

Are we heading toward a Cold War with China and/or a Hot War with North Korea?

I thought I would start off by answering the two questions that were posed in the description of this talk. And the answers are yes and no. Yes, we are headed for a new Cold War with China although academics will spend the next four years debating whether or not we should call it a Cold War. But regardless of what you brand it, we're in for a prolonged period of confrontation and challenges with China. And no, we are not on the verge of a hot war with North Korea although North Korea is likely to do something in the next couple of months -- between now and inauguration day -- to remind us that they're still around. North Koreans don't mind being hated but they hate to be ignored. So in all likelihood we'll see them do something which the press will immediately brand as a "crisis" but which will just be them venting a little bit to remind us that they're still around.

I want to focus primarily on China, but I'll start with a few words on North Korea and then I'll end with a few words about the pandemic and how that's impacting our security interest and how it's impacting us here in Hawaii.

Those of you who have heard me talk before know that I always start off any discussion with North Korea, by saying "when it comes to North Korea we're all guessing." I've been guessing for over fifty years now and am still trying to figure out what the North Koreans are doing. Others have not been guessing for quite so long but we're all guessing. It's a pretty opaque society. What I can tell you with certainty is the leadership in North Korea -- either previously or today -- is not crazy. The Kim family is crazy as a fox. They have managed to play a very poor hand extremely well and managed to play the US against China, South Korea against itself, and bring the Russian's in just for fun. And that's sort of the way it's always been.

Over the last four years we've gone from pretending that we were on the brink of war -- we weren't -- to pretending that we were on the brink of denuclearization -- which we certainly weren't -- to now going back to where we were before, which is just trying to muddle through and pretend that everything is going to be okay. The Obama administration called that strategic patience. The Trump administration called it maximum pressure. In each case we were hoping that we could put enough pressure on North

Korea, economically and politically, that they would cry “uncle.” So far it hasn’t worked, and it’s not likely to work. And we all saw what happened to Kim’s uncle. So that’s probably not even a good analogy. As long as the Russians and particularly the Chinese are intent on keeping North Korea on life support, the North Koreans are not going to collapse and are not going to give in; we’re going to have to just manage the problem. But it is a problem, it’s not something where we’re on the brink of war.

I’m happy in our Q & A session to go into a lot more detail on North Korea, I could talk about it for hours. But right now I think the bigger challenge is China. It’s a challenge that is not Donald Trump’s fault. It is not Barak Obama’s fault. It is Xi Jinping’s fault, the president of China. When Obama first came in he developed a strategy of trying to reach out to China. It was the right strategy for the wrong China. It was the right strategy if Deng Xiaoping had still been alive or if “Deng Xiaoping thought” was still guiding where China was going. Unfortunately, Xi Jinping has taken China in a new direction. He has undermined almost everything that Deng stood for. Since the economic crisis of a number of years ago, I believe that Xi believes that China is on the rise and America is in decline, and that it was time to take advantage of that. Xi rejected Deng’s “hide your strength and bide your time” approach and instead adopted a “speak loudly and carry a big stick” approach which is what the Chinese have done for the last 5-6 years. It took Obama a little too long to recognize and adjust to this changed approach but he finally did. The Trump administration came in understanding the right China, i.e., understanding that China was going to be a competitor, and started out quite frankly with the right policy. It was a policy that focused on reciprocity, on leveling the playing field. Then Mike Pompeo became Secretary of State. Pompeo believes that it’s not Chinese behavior that’s the problem, it’s Chinese ideology. So for the last year or so we’ve been criticizing not just Chinese behavior, but asserting that the Chinese Communist Party is the real problem. And this essentially tells China if it wants to get along with the United States it would have to change its political system. Since the CCP’s the source of Xi’s legitimacy, they’re not very likely to do that.

Looking to the future, I don’t believe we’re not going to see any real improvement in US relations with China. I will assume for the purpose of these comments (made on November 6) that Mr. Biden has in fact won the election and will be sworn in in January. Who knows what’s going to happen between now and January. I think there could be some mischief, but let’s say where we are today is where we will be when January arrives. I think the incoming Biden administration will probably downplay the ideology

argument but will still take a strong view toward China. China policy used to be “cooperate whenever and wherever we can and confront or challenge if and when necessary.” It’s now changed to “confront and challenge whenever necessary and cooperate if and when we can.” It’s still the same two ingredients but obviously the emphasis is now more on confronting and challenging than it is on cooperation. Again, as I mentioned, I think the main reason for that has not been a change in US desires, but a change in Chinese behavior.

That’s why I think we’re in for a long struggle even if things may get back on track a little bit. We’ll have a foreign policy that’s A, a little more predictable, and B, is aimed at reinforcing (rather than disparaging) our alliances. We’re going to have to build a coalition in order to deal with China. The Trump administration has been frequently accused of being unilateralist but I think it’s very important to note that Secretary Pompeo -- even though he cancelled his trip to Asia a couple of weeks ago after COVID broke out in the White House and elsewhere -- still flew to Japan to meet with his Quad counterparts. The Quad is an informal gathering, not an alliance, among four like-minded states: the United States, Japan, Australia, and India.

In the past, both Australia and India had been very hesitant to sign up for anything that might have been seen as an attempt to confront or contain China. What the Chinese have done in the last year of course is to try to interfere politically in Australia as they tried to do in the United States. They’ve just by the way banned Australian wine in China so that tells you how serious they are about trying to put pressure on the Australians. The Australians don’t particularly appreciate that. And of course the Chinese had some military confrontations along the contested border area with India. As a result, thanks to Chinese behavior, the Indians and the Australians are much more prepared to sign up with the United States and Japan, which has known for a long time that China is the problem and they need to have help in order to confront it.

We’re even now talking about a Quad Plus, and the plus so far has been New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam. Secretary Pompeo has now started calling this a concert of democracies. That’s not a particular good term since that may disqualify Vietnam. And he’s also talked in some cases about creating an Asian NATO. And nothing will kill the opportunity for cooperation more than to call it an Asian NATO. So we haven’t gotten the terminology right, but I think we’ve gotten the policy right, which

is to try to build a coalition of countries, not specifically against China, but for the rule of law, for freedom of navigation, and for human rights. And these are all things of course that the Chinese think are aimed at them and the correct answer to China when they say that is “if the shoe fits, wear it.” Because in fact again it’s aimed at Chinese behavior, not Chinese ideology.

In the meantime, what we’ve seen in the last couple of years has been a lot of stress on our alliances. With Australia, but particularly with Japan and most importantly with South Korea. I think this will change. We’ll see things going a little bit smoother with a new administration. Again, bedside manner matters and I think that we’ll see a kinder, gentler approach to our allies. This will be the case I think with Europe and NATO as well.

I want to leave maximum time for Q & A since I’m more interested in hearing your questions so let me just say a few words about the pandemic and its impact and then we’ll open it up for Q & A.

First of all, let me say that I’ve been on the mainland for the last several months and we came back to Hawaii two days ago. A few weeks ago we signed up for the Safe Travel Hawaii program and we uploaded our itinerary and our photo and then I got up at three in the morning to get online to register for a CVS test in the one drug store in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that was giving those tests. We got tested on the 2nd, they said you could wait two to five days for a response but 46 hours later my wife and I both got our negative responses. We uploaded them and answered the questionnaire that’s on the Safe Travel Hawaii website. When we got off the plane, there were a whole bunch of table set up. We went to one of the tables and showed the guy our questionnaire barcode. He looked us up on the computer and we showed him the negative test result and he said “welcome home; have a nice evening.” And it was simple as that and as efficient as that.

Now I’ve heard of people who have come in two or three weeks ago when the program first started saying they had nightmares, but I tip my hat to the State, they have gotten it right. It was pretty painless to come home. So for those of you who were thinking about traveling or recommending people to travel, if you would just follow the procedures, which start off with signing up for Safe Travel Hawaii, I think you will find that it’s a pretty painless thing.



Now for Pacific Forum, for those of you who are members of our group, you already know that we've held a series of seven meetings earlier this year where we had spokespersons from seven different countries in the Asia-Pacific, or six plus a US spokesperson, talking about how each of their countries has dealt with COVID. First, no brainer, wear a mask. We did a walk around Diamond Head this morning and I was encouraged to see that most of the people who walked by were wearing masks. Not everyone but most. I was discouraged that only two out of about forty runners that ran past us within two feet were wearing a mask. This isn't rocket science, wear a mask if you go outside or if you go indoors anywhere. Protect me, us old guys, but protect yourself as well.

One lesson from South Korea: initially the South Koreans botched it, but they turned it around, they started contact tracing, very serious program in contact tracing, using your electronics and your phone, since everyone in Korea seems to have at least two phones at all times. And they got it under control. Taiwanese started early because they had lived through SARS and understood the challenge. Taiwan health officials were monitoring Chinese developments and knew what was going on in China even before the Chinese acknowledged it. And Taiwan has had about two hundred days where there hasn't been a locally transmitted case. Again, contact tracing, their phone talks to your phone and tells you if you've been near anyone who subsequently had the virus.

I'm not sure how we're doing here in Hawaii on contact tracing. I understand it's not that great. That's certainly somewhere where we have to put a little bit more emphasis.

Japan has kept things fairly under control. Again, if you went into Japan on a normal year during the flu season, ninety percent of the people would be wearing masks on the subway and everywhere else. They understand that if you don't want to catch (or give) something from/to someone else you wear a mask during the right season. And right now is the season to be wearing masks. Again, contact tracing is important.

We heard the same story from Singapore and New Zealand and everywhere else. As a result, I think the countries in Asia are recuperating and getting back to "normal" much faster than the United States is. Meanwhile -- and this is not a partisan statement, just a statement of fact -- the US has not handled it well and as a result this has probably hurt the US image abroad more than any other single event,

including Donald Trump's insults to various foreign leaders. Just based on the fact that in all previous crises America has led -- we've set the example that others have followed -- and we are just not doing that with COVID, and quite frankly, as an American I'm embarrassed by it. I think that we're probably still in for a long haul. I'm hoping to see that we'll find ways to open up. I know there are many friends in Japan waiting for the opportunity to start traveling to Hawaii under the same rules that I had to follow to come back from New York and New Mexico. So we're going to see how that plays itself out.

In the meantime, obviously even those countries that have done extremely well in dealing with it are talking about zero to one or two percent growth this year. But they will be back and I think we will be back and in the meantime if I haven't mentioned this, wear a mask please, particularly if you're outside, and particularly if you're walking around Diamond Head since you'll run into me on my morning walks.

Question: Please provide your insights into the situation in Hong Kong and the possible outcomes.

We just did a roundtable at Pacific Forum a week ago with Kurt Tong. Kurt was our Consul General in Hong Kong until he retired from the foreign service about a year and half ago. He was also one of the people the Chinese personally blamed for instigating all of the trouble in Hong Kong. The Chinese never look in the mirror and say "whoops, we may have cause the problem." So they have to find someone else to blame and if you can find an American to blame that's your first option in China, so Kurt was one of the ones that was to blame. I found his off-the-record comment interesting; a few of you may have been in on that program. His remarks were consistent with what he has said publicly on a number of occasions and in several articles; namely he has been somewhat critical of the US response which has been essentially to remove Hong Kong from our special trade status listing because it no longer has the autonomy that it used to enjoy. We had the right to do that, but that doesn't mean it was the right thing to do. Kurt and several others have pointed out it was probably not a great idea.

The problem really came down again to Xi Jinping's impatience. China cut a deal with the Brits when they got Hong Kong back and that was for a fifty-year period where Hong Kong would be able to essentially self-govern, everything but foreign policy. And that allowed Hong Kong to continue to have legislative freedom and a right of final adjudication in legal matters. This is written into an agreement, an agreement which was signed by both the leader of China and the leader of the UK and registered at

the UN. There is no question that China is violating that agreement. This new special measures law which essentially now says if you say something in Hong Kong that the Chinese don't like they can arrest you and perhaps even bring you to China for trial. This is completely contrary. The Chinese of course are saying well you know too bad, we're going to do what we want, we're the big kid on the block. And I think we need to find ways, the US and particularly the UK and Europe needs to find ways to hold China accountable. Right now, I know my good friend Patrick has a business in Hong Kong, Patrick I would delay going back to visit relatives and friends there for another couple of months until things settle down. Literally, you -- as an American citizen, if you went out on the street and protested Chinese behavior -- could be arrested, for particularly as an American you'd just play into their confirmation that this is all foreign instigation. So I would be very careful as an American, and I would certainly be very careful as a pro-democracy advocate in Hong Kong about how you speak at the present time. In the meantime, I think that we need to have a much more concerted multi-dimensional effort globally, not just the United States, and not just Asia, but global in putting pressure on the Chinese. Not just for Hong Kong but also for the South China Sea, also for human rights issues and everything else.

Now, again many of you who have heard me speak know that I'm in the "let's engage with China" camp. I don't think we need to be trying to "contain China," we certainly don't need to focus on trying to undermine the Chinese Communist Party. That's up to the people of China to do. If they want to do it we should find ways to help them but that shouldn't be our policy. Our policy should be to hold China accountable to those things that China has already promised to do. And one of those was to respect Hong Kong autonomy and the right of final adjudication and the right to choose its own leaders for another thirty years or so. And that to me is where the problem is.

Actually there was a second question from Patrick. And he asked -- is a China take over or assimilation of Taiwan possible in any scenario?

I think one of the biggest mistakes that we make as Americans -- and certainly in media coverage that probably sells a lot of newspapers and gets a lot of people excited -- is the assertion that somehow or other the Chinese law vis-à-vis Hong Kong is an indication that China is about to invade Taiwan, maybe next Tuesday or certainly in the next couple of months. I don't think anything could be further from the truth. First of all, the Chinese are not capable of invading Taiwan and capturing it, seizing it, and holding

it. They could drop a lot of bombs on Taiwan and create a lot of problems and destroy China's economy in the meantime, but while I don't think Xi Jinping is a genius, I don't think he's stupid either. And I don't see that happening.

The Chinese have said they have two big dates in mind. One is 2021 (the founding of the CCP) and the other is 2049 (the founding of the PRC). By 2021 they're supposed to be a rich, prosperous country. By 2049 they're supposed to essentially have righted all of the wrongs of history. So Taiwan falls into the 2049 category, not the 2021 category, at least as far as I understand Xi Jinping's own time table. Now this doesn't mean that Taiwan should declare independence tomorrow and see whether or not China would react. They'd be forced to react. But other than that China continues to play the long game with Taiwan. I don't think anyone in Beijing thinks that somehow or other public opinion in Taiwan will change and everyone will be yearning to join the Mainland. But at least as the current DPP government is doing and as the KMT prior government certainly did, they are not doing anything that would tear away the fig leaf of "one China." And that's all it is, obviously is a fig leaf. But there can be a lot of embarrassment if a fig leaf is removed. So this is something that both sides have to continue to say that they are the rightful recipient of the title "China" and just agree to disagree on the definition of one China and continue to go about their merry way.

In the meantime, I think the US needs to be more forthcoming in demonstrating our support for Taiwan. I think sending the health and human services secretary, the first Cabinet minister I think ever to visit Taiwan since the break in diplomatic relations, was the right move and sends a clear signal to China that we're serious, that we're not going to abandon Taiwan even though we're not going to encourage Taiwan to do anything foolish. And we're not going to stand idly by and allow China to do anything foolish either.

Question from Patrick, in case Xi Jinping is listening to our Zoom meeting today, please clarify that I'm not a leader in the democracy movement in Hong Kong.

Well, Patrick, the reality is Xi Jinping would expect you to deny it. But he would certainly give you a fair trial before pronouncing you guilty and putting you away for the next ten years. But I'll pass that message along since I'm sure that he's listening and he listens to me.

Question: If you could restate what kind of behavior ... this is what the quote was: The aim of the coalition was stated as a rule of law, freedom of navigation, and (blank) behavior. What kind of behavior was this?

I said our policy toward China needs to be aimed at Chinese behavior rather than Chinese ideology. So we should be promoting the rule of law, we should be promoting freedom of navigation, and we should be promoting human rights. And to the extent that Chinese behavior does not undermine those, does not choose to undermine those and other countries in particular, then I think we need to find ways of dealing with China. To the extent that Chinese aggressive behavior -- which is what we've seen here recently toward India, toward Australia politically and toward the South China Sea in both military terms and in political terms -- to the extent that that kind of aggressive behavior continues we need to take a strong stand and hold China accountable.

Question. How do you see a new prime minister Suga in Japan. His policy toward China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and USA.

Very good question. I certainly don't think that Mr. Suga is going to be around as long as Mr. Abe was. In some respect he's sort of a caretaker until the next generation of LDP leaders rises to the top. I would incidentally watch Shinjiro Koizumi, the former prime minister's son, who used to be a Pacific Forum Young Leader, our program where we try to bring the best and brightest from different countries to our meetings. I think ultimately we're going to see the next generation come in. Until then, I think Suga, for the most part, is going to perpetuate and continue the Abe policies that he helped to formulate and promote. First and foremost, that will be to maintain a strong alliance with the United States. A very highly respected colleague once said in an off-the-record meeting, I'm sorry I can't repeat his name, but he said "whoever is the prime minister of Japan his new best friend will be the president of the United States. And whoever the president of the United States is, his new best friend [or her new best friend] will be the prime minister of Japan." This is driven by our national interest and that is likely to continue.

My biggest disappointment with Japan has not been its trying to tread carefully with China because obviously they live next door to China and they are going to try to not do anything that inflames them

PACIFIC FORUM

even while standing up when they have to. It has been quite frankly an abysmal relationship between Japan and South Korea, Americas' two important allies. I'd give the lion share of the blame incidentally to the South Korean leadership, to President Moon. But it takes two to tango or in this case to tangle, and Japan has not been very good at turning the other cheek. I know that the Japanese have gotten tired of turning the other cheek and having it slapped by the South Koreans. But at some point we need to have more inspired leadership both in Seoul and in Tokyo to remind them that there are bigger problems out there in the world. Problems that the two of them share and they need to put World War II behind them and get on with the Japan of today and not the Japan of 1910 or 1945 which is long gone.

Ralph Cossa is WSD-Handa Chair at the Pacific Forum. Opinions expressed are solely his own.