



***US POLICY TOWARD CHINA: THREE
DO'S AND A DON'T***

BY RALPH A. COSSA

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Is war between the United States and China inevitable? This was the central question asked of panelists at the opening session of this year's [Asia-Pacific Roundtable](#) in Kuala Lumpur. My answer was "No, it is not inevitable, but it is no longer unimaginable or as unlikely as it was a few short years ago, and the trends are going in the wrong direction."

In the United States, there is growing bipartisan consensus on the need to be tougher on China and the upcoming presidential election season will make it difficult, if not impossible, for President Biden to appear soft in the face of Chinese provocation.

Chinese assertiveness toward Taiwan and most recently toward the Philippines, a formal US treaty ally, increases the prospects of an accidental (or deliberate) act spiraling out of control. Taiwan presidential election politics, and Beijing's perceptions of its implications, add uncertainty.

As the People's Liberation Army (PLA) improves its capabilities to the point that it believes it is capable of taking Taiwan by force—I don't think the PLA is there yet but more important is the PLA's, or more accurately, Xi Jinping's assessment of where they are—the possibility of PRC military action against Taiwan grows. So, tensions are unlikely to subside or the prospects of direct conflict will remain.

Let me stress that I don't believe either side is looking for a fight. I have described US China policy as involving four "C's," which I have further described

as "three do's and a don't." The three do's are *cooperate* whenever possible, *compete* where appropriate, and *confront* when necessary. The fourth C, the don't, is to avoid direct *conflict* until or unless it is thrust upon us.

The three C's have been the essential elements of US China policy for decades. What's changed has been the degree of emphasis behind each. Over a decade ago, the Obama administration, at least initially, stressed cooperation; it offered an outstretched hand to those who would unclench their fist. Today, the emphasis is on competition and confrontation. I can sum up the reason for the change in two words, and they are NOT Donald Trump.

President Trump pursued some policies, and adopted some approaches, that made matters worse, or at least more difficult. But, while Trump's bedside manner may have been harsh, his diagnosis and prescription were correct: China has been gaming the system and has failed to honor its World Trade Organization commitments. What was (and remains) missing can be summed up in a single word: reciprocity.

Meanwhile, my two-word description explaining the US change in emphasis is "Xi Jinping."

President Obama started with the right policy, but for the wrong China. His policy fit a China still governed by Deng Xiaoping Thought. China has abandoned Deng Xiaoping Thought. "Hide your strength and bide your time" has been replaced by "Wolf Warriors," who remind China's neighbors that China is a big country and they're not. Collective leadership and term/age limits to prevent another Mao have been replaced by the new Mao, who has *de facto* made himself "emperor for life." State-owned enterprises have been revitalized rather than phased out. It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it subscribes to Xi Jinping Thought. To get rich is no longer glorious; it now results in a target being painted on your back. And "one country, two systems," along with the legally binding international treaty that was supposed to ensure basic freedoms of the people of Hong Kong, is now null and void, a "scrap of paper," as described by Beijing.

The odds of the people of Taiwan accepting such a formulation are now somewhat less than zero. Meanwhile, Taiwan Strait centerline agreements, aimed at preventing accidental conflict, have been rendered moot, given near-daily PLA Air Force violations, not to mention missile and drone overflights of Taiwan-held territory.

PRC colleagues see things differently, of course. From Beijing's perspective, Washington is the source of all problems. While I could easily draw up a list of what Washington should do better or differently, Chinese colleagues find themselves unable, or at least unwilling, to identify Chinese actions that are problematic. To do so would imply criticism of Xi Jinping, which would not be career-enhancing. It's difficult to find solutions if you cannot recognize that Chinese actions are a major part of the problem.

One case in point: China created man-made islands on top of disputed low-tide elevation reefs in the South China Sea and then illegally, by almost everyone's interpretation of international law, declared 12-mile limits around them and warned ships and aircraft to stay away. The United States (among others), intent on "flying and sailing anywhere allowed by international law," refuses to comply. My Chinese colleagues tell me that US freedom-of-navigation operations are the source of the problem, even though the root cause is Chinese territorial claims related to these illegal islands, which have been heavily fortified despite President Xi looking President Obama in the eye and telling him they would not be militarized.

Conference organizers asked if cooperation on common interests could survive further bifurcation. Washington hopes so, hence the visit to Beijing of John Kerry, the US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, and Janet Yellen, the US Secretary of the Treasury, to talk about the broader economic relationship. Still, despite a mutual desire for peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing refuses to take firm measures against Pyongyang as it repeatedly violates legally binding United Nations Security Council resolutions. And, despite its professed commitment to non-interference, respect for sovereignty, and no-first-use or threatened use of nuclear weapons, Beijing refuses to condemn

Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" (which everyone else calls an invasion and act of war), while continuing to profess a "no limits" relationship. Beijing also continues to reject military-to-military talks, essential to guard against accidental conflict, as well as US proposals for strategic nuclear discussions. Bifurcation seems well underway, despite Washington's willingness, even eagerness, to talk.

The final question was "how can regional states navigate around these tensions?" The answer is "very carefully."

Countries will do what's in their perceived national interests. But they should ask themselves, if they fail to condemn the blatant Russian violation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty, what signal are they sending to other potential violators? Maps from the time of Peter the Great show Ukraine as part of the Russian Empire. All Central Asia, the so-called "Stans," likewise were controlled by the Czars. Are they next? Meanwhile, how different are Russian claims of sovereignty over Ukraine—not a "real country" according to Putin—from Chinese claims about nine dotted lines and the South China Sea? Speaking of which, how many more decades will it take to develop a South China Sea Code of Conduct? Which countries are supporting ASEAN efforts to return democracy to Myanmar as opposed to empowering and arming the junta? If China follows Moscow's example and tries to take Taiwan by force, what happens next? (Check the Pacific Forum [website](#) for an answer to the "[If Taiwan Falls](#)" question.)

The central question that should be asked today is, what's more threatening to regional security over the long run, Washington's "Cold War Mentality" (as Beijing defines US attempts to revitalize and strengthen its defensive alliances and partnerships) or Beijing's "Middle Kingdom Mentality," as exemplified by its Wolf Warrior diplomacy, economic coercion, and occasional diplomatic hostage-taking? Neighbors should keep this question in mind as they figure out how to navigate these troubled waters.

For more from this author, visit his recent chapter of [Comparative Connections](#).

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