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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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by MELVIN GOODMAN
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Trump's Beijing Problem: Starting a New Cold War



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If Joe Biden should become the next president of the United States, there are many serious international situations that require the diplomatic tools of the Department of State and not the coercive tools of the Department of Defense. The erratic and unpredictable policies of Donald Trump over the past three years have compromised numerous political arrangements with both allies and adversaries and, in the case of Sino-American relations, have placed us on a glide path toward a “cold war” and possible confrontation between two of the largest military and economic powers in the global community.

Fifty years ago, President Richard M. Nixon and national security adviser Henry A. Kissinger crafted an opening toward China that eight American presidents used to engage Beijing. Both nations worked successfully to create the largest bilateral trade relationship in the world. Tens of thousands of American companies do business in China; Microsoft's biggest lab outside of the United States is in Beijing. Chinese students became the largest group of foreign undergraduates in the United States.

Nixon and Kissinger not only engaged Beijing, but Moscow as well, ensuring that relations between Washington and Beijing as well as between Washington and Moscow were far stronger than relations between Moscow and Beijing. In doing so, Washington gained leverage over both the Soviet Union and China, enabling the negotiation of significant arms control measures with the Kremlin, and the establishment of stable political and economic relations with China.

Trump's erratic policies have worsened our relations with both Russia and China, leading Moscow and Beijing to forge their closest bilateral relationship since the 1950s. He has walked away from disarmament agreements with Moscow. And Trump's trade war with China and the polemical accusations from both sides regarding responsibility for the current pandemic have created "cold war" atmospherics.

Instead of focusing on grounds for mutual cooperation that could address serious issues such as climate change, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation, Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo abandoned engagement and appear headed toward confrontation. In 2018, Trump labeled trade wars as "good, and easy to win." Pompeo used diplomatic occasions to gratuitously pillory China.

The presidential campaign in the United States has introduced more invective against China, leading to bipartisan agreements on record-level defense spending, and greater finger pointing on causes for the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Last year, the Committee on the Present Danger, which was formed in the 1950s to contain the Soviet Union, reappeared to focus on China. The strategy appears to be working because the Pentagon has garnered bipartisan support for its request for an additional \$20 billion for its Pacific forces over the next five years.

The focus of the current imbroglio between the United States and China has been the South China Sea, which China has proclaimed as a "part of China's 'core interest' in sovereignty. Posturing by both sides has led to threatened naval collisions. The

Pentagon's new budget request would fund more offensive weaponry in the region, including land-based Tomahawk cruise missiles that had been banned by the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The Trump administration abrogated the treaty in 2019 in order to counter a perceived growing threat from China.

The spiral of worse-case thinking regarding China and increased defense spending are reminiscent of the spiral that took place in Washington toward the Soviet Union, which led to bloated defense spending and humongous nuclear arsenals. The exorbitant threat assessments against the Soviet Union always worsened during the years of presidential elections, so it is unsurprising that the current spiral regarding China is now underway.

The cold war spiral between Washington and Moscow was broken by the nuclear fears that accompanied the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. A successful arms control and disarmament dialogue began in the aftermath of the crisis. The Trump administration has no interest in arms control, particularly with China, but in view of the possibility of a naval conflict in the South China Sea between the United States and China, this is an obvious topic for a dialogue to improve and even stabilize bilateral relations.

According to one of the country's leading Sinologists, Lyle Goldstein, a research professor at the Naval War College, leading Chinese foreign policy experts have compared the dispute in the South China Sea to the Cuban Missile Crisis. China's construction of airfields on the islands of the South China Sea as well as more aggressive air patrols in the region in the wake of the Obama administration's "pivot" to China in 2011 certainly point to the need for reliance on diplomacy to curb the current round of escalation. In the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis, diplomats from the two sides negotiated a Hot-Line arrangement and the Partial Test Ban Treaty.

In actual fact, there is ample basis for a significant strategic dialogue between the two sides because the United States and China share so many concerns in East Asia. Both Washington and Beijing want to manage the military tensions in the region so that trade and investment can develop apace. Both want to check tensions on the Korean peninsula, and both benefit from a continued division between North and South. Finally, both recognize the need for moderation in the Taiwan Straits and the possibility of reunification with Taiwan. Therefore, it should not be impossible to establish confidence building measures in the region.

It is difficult to imagine the Trump administration effectively making use of its depleted diplomatic corps or having the staying power to negotiate arrangements on difficult topics. Nevertheless, Goldstein believes there are immediate initiatives that need to be taken. First of all, the United States could invite China to take part in regional naval exercises that focus on nontraditional security issues such as counterterrorism. Since China has taken part in anti-piracy patrols around the Horn of Africa, where it has their only overseas naval facility, the Chinese navy obviously has the necessary interest and experience to do so.

The United States could easily reduce surveillance operations off the Chinese coast, where Chinese countermeasures caused a crisis in the first months of the administration of George W. Bush in 2001. Then secretary of state Colin Powell rapidly orchestrated the conflict resolution for the crisis, which pointed to the ability of both sides to avoid a cycle of escalation when skilled policymakers are called upon to do so. Finally, the United States needs to press China to clarify the precise nature of its claims to the South China Sea in order to assuage the anxieties of the littoral states in the region and perhaps prepare the way for reduced U.S. naval activity in the Pacific.

Any delays in starting a dialogue will only worsen the atmospherics between the United States and China. Accusations regarding the origin of the current pandemic; U.S. and Chinese expanded military activities in the region; and bipartisan congressional interest in addressing so-called operational shortfalls in the Pacific have created an interest in shoring up U.S. deterrence in the Pacific. Pentagon strategists and congressional forces exploited the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 to deploy greater forces in East Europe and the Baltic states, which only worsened U.S.-Russian relations. In view of the domestic demands on U.S. resources in the wake of the pandemic, the United States can't afford the geopolitical consequences of greater Sino-Russian cooperation as well as greater Sino-American rivalry in the Pacific.

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