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BY MELVIN GOODMAN

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Sino-American Relations: Breaking the Gordian Knot



Alexander cuts the Gordian Knot – Public Domain

This week's meetings in San Francisco between President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping offer an unusual opportunity to calm the Cold War environment between Washington and Beijing, and to demonstrate that Biden's national security team recognizes the importance of stabilizing Washington's most important bilateral relationship. The United States and China are the two most important countries in the

global arena; they represent the two largest economies, the two largest defense establishments, and the two largest defense budgets. The global community will not be able to deal with its greatest challenge—the climate crisis—without the cooperation of the world’s two major polluters—the United States and China.

Fortunately for Biden, Xi Jinping is indicating the importance of playing a more stabilizing role in the geopolitical arena. China has moved to improve relations with Australia and has been offering debt relief to key Asian countries. Xi’s recent meetings with Henry A. Kissinger, California Governor Gavin Newsom, and Elon Musk point to Beijing’s awareness of the importance of improving relations with Washington. Biden, in turn, has sent Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, Secretary of Treasury Janet Yellen, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, and White House adviser John Kerry to Beijing for talks with their counterparts, and these officials have been well received.

The missing piece in the bilateral mosaic is the failure of Beijing thus far to agree to a resumption of military-to-military communication. This is essential. There have been too many incidents between U.S. and Chinese air and naval forces in the South China Sea and East Asia in recent months. More importantly, China has abandoned its concept of limited deterrence, which kept its strategic arsenal at fewer than 300 nuclear warheads for the past several decades, and now appears oriented to pursue strategic parity with the United States as well as with Russia for that matter. The military-industrial community is already taking advantage of movement in the strategic weaponry in both China and Russia to press for greater strategic modernization in the United States.

One of the major uncertainties in the Sino-American relationship has been the Biden administration’s failure to enunciate its vision for what it wants from China. The Obama-Biden administration made a huge mistake in 2011 when it called for a “pivot” from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region that indicated the transfer of military resources to the Pacific as the first step in the “containment” of Chinese power. Even the father of the “pivot,” the late Jeffrey Bader, acknowledged that the policy had become far too militaristic and confrontational and that the emphasis from the start should have been on “rebalancing” relations. Secretary of Treasury Yellen and Secretary of Commerce Raimondo have been using the word “rebalance” in discussing the future of bilateral relations with China.

Unfortunately, the Biden national security team has taken no steps to “rebalance” relations, which has allowed the political and punditry communities to support a Cold War

posture toward Beijing. Biden has left Donald Trump's tariffs and trade restrictions in place, and his team has included too many hardliners on China, including national security adviser Sullivan; the new deputy secretary of state Kurt Campbell; the key advisers to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and even Austin himself. The Congress can boast of very few areas of bipartisanship, but the bloated U.S. defense budget and the opposition to China articulated in the Special Committee to Investigate the Chinese Community Party have received overwhelming support. The Congress will be a major villain if it turns out that we are in an arms race with China (and Russia) in view of the Hill's rush to support placing more theatre-range weapons systems within reach of China and uploading warheads held in reserve to actual delivery vehicles.

It's long past time for the United States and China to tone down their propaganda attacks, and to set the parameters for a strategic dialogue. The United States is certainly in a position to do so because its strategic position is unassailable in East Asia, with military superiority in various domains. In the past few months, the Biden administration has shepherded an improved relationship between Japan and South Korea; strengthened military ties to Australia and the Philippines; and improved relations with India and Vietnam.

China, meanwhile, lacks strategic allies (other than Russia) and has made no effort to project power into Third World areas outside its own zone of influence. It needs to adopt more transparency in its military programs and its development of strategic weaponry, which could contribute to the opening of serious military-to-military talks. Soviet-American arms talks led to the Soviet-American detente of the 1980s. Sino-American talks on stabilizing their military activities could have a similar impact.

Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and a professor of government at Johns Hopkins University. A former CIA analyst, Goodman is the author of Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA and National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism, and A Whistleblower at the CIA. His most recent books are "American Carnage: The Wars of Donald Trump" (Opus Publishing, 2019) and "Containing the National Security State" (Opus Publishing, 2021). Goodman is the national security columnist for counterpunch.org.

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