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Opinion **US-China relations**

Two insecure superpowers stumble towards collision over Taiwan

Just as Russia has cited Nato enlargement to justify its Ukraine invasion, China may see US support for Taipei as a tipping point

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US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's meeting with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen in Taipei has inflamed relations with China © Taiwan Presidential Office/AFP/Getty

Stephen Roach YESTERDAY

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Geostrategic accidents rarely happen out of thin air: look no further than the first world war. Nancy Pelosi's unfortunate stopover in Taiwan, which follows years of mounting Sino-US tensions, should be viewed in that vein. It remains to be seen whether this will become one of history's tragic tipping points.

That is certainly the risk. There has been an ominous escalation of conflict between the US and China since 2017 — a trade war, a tech war, and the early stages of a new cold war — that bodes ill. But this conflict would not have occurred without a confluence of false narratives that both nations have embraced with respect to the other.

Among many examples, two stand out: America blames China for a massive trade deficit, even though it ran trade deficits with 106 nations in 2021 due to a self-inflicted shortfall of domestic saving. China's fears of US containment are viewed as an existential threat to its aspirations of prosperity, deflecting focus away from an urgent consumer-led transformation of its economy. Two vulnerable nations are blaming the other for their own shortcomings. Amplified by censorship (China) and information distortion (America) and exacerbated by the viral spread of social

networks, this blame game has become the high-octane fuel of conflict escalation.

With Chinese test missiles now flying, the spark of [Taiwan](#) tensions could ignite this fuel quickly. The US denies antagonistic motives, arguing that innocent visits of legislators have long been the norm. This is patently absurd. As second in line to the US presidency and hardly an inconsequential member of Congress, Pelosi was explicit in offering support for a free and independent Taiwan. This is a direct affront to the “One China” principles of reunification stipulated in the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué. China, now faced with innumerable problems of its own making — an unworkable zero-Covid policy, property deleveraging, demographic pressures, as well as Xi Jinping’s bid for reappointment at the upcoming 20th Party Congress — sees any threat to Taiwan reunification as particularly intolerable at this moment.

The parallels with Vladimir Putin’s “rationale” for going to war in Ukraine are especially worrisome. Just as Putin has justified unconscionable acts of aggression by his paranoia over Nato enlargement, Xi could well view US support for Taiwan as the tipping point in his own fears of western containment of China. Autocrats are most dangerous when cornered. Are we guilty of squeezing Xi just as [many have argued](#) we did Putin? Unfathomable carnage in Ukraine is a warning we should all heed before provoking a great power clash with China over Taiwan.

There is a way out. It starts with the recognition that the current approach to managing the US-China relationship — arguably the most important bilateral relationship in the world — has been an abject failure. The best both nations could come up with in recent years was the so-called “[Phase I](#)” trade deal, which failed miserably to reduce the overall US trade deficit, and left an inflation-prone America incurring the increased costs of tariffs on its largest importer. The two presidents, Biden and Xi, talk on the phone every once in a while, but the conversations are scripted bluster that accomplish next to nothing.

A seriously conflicted Sino-American relationship is in desperate need of an updated architecture of engagement. In my upcoming book I propose a new US-China secretariat as a permanent institution that addresses all aspects of the relationship — from economics and trade to cyber security and health, to climate change and human rights. Staffed equally by professionals from both countries and located in a neutral jurisdiction, this secretariat could nurture a constant exchange of views, encourage the joint development of policy white papers, and provide a mechanism for dispute resolution. There is no guarantee this approach would work, but it certainly beats past efforts.

[Henry Kissinger recently warned](#) of America's unfortunate penchant for seeking "endless confrontations" with China, hinting that behind bipartisan China-bashing is the mistaken belief that Beijing's system will eventually implode or morph into a democracy. America's failure to accept the permanence of China is at the core of its anxieties over a rising rival. Similarly, China's fixation on rejuvenation — a legacy of its "century of humiliation" at the hands of foreigners — explains its fears of US containment. Two insecure superpowers are stumbling towards dangerous collision. The spectacle of Pelosi's mission to Taiwan brings that disastrous possibility into sharper focus.

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