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Opinion **Geopolitics**

US and China are entering a trap of their own making

The costs of miscalculation by either side would be lethal, and the risks are only growing

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President Xi Jinping meets troops stationed in Xinjiang. US criticism of China's actions in the region have escalated tensions between the two countries © Li Gang/Xinhua/AP

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

When two trains are heading for collision, the switch operator puts them on different tracks. Alas, in geopolitics it is up to the drivers to take evasive action. In the case of the US and China, each questions the other's ability to drive trains. History offers us little hope that looming trainwrecks will organically resolve themselves.

When it comes to Joe Biden and Xi Jinping — the two world leaders who most need to meet face to face but have not done so since Biden took office — evasive action is notable by its absence, particularly on Taiwan. Biden has suggested the two countries resume some kind of strategic dialogue. Any routine exchange of views, even shouting matches, would be better than today's escalation. But [China](#) is uninterested. The US must first cease what China's ambassador to Washington calls its “disinformation, misinformation [and] lies” about Beijing's internal affairs — notably over Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Who can break this impasse? According to Graham Allison's so-called “Thucydides trap”, a rising hegemon usually clashes with the existing one on its way down. The major exception was Britain's handover to the US, which, even then, only narrowly avoided war on several occasions. But the past offers no guidance as to how to avoid conflict between two declining giants, which is arguably a better description of both China and the [US](#) today.

America's relative decline is well understood, not least because of its [fissile political divisions](#). China, though, is still widely seen as on schedule to dominate the world by 2049 — the anniversary of the Chinese revolution, which Xi has set as the target. But what if Xi — and the global consensus on China's rise — is already out of date? The chances that China will resume the high growth rates of the first two decades of this century are already falling, chiefly because of its ageing profile.

On top of China's likely "middle income trap", Xi has added Zero Covid, which is crippling economic growth with no obvious epidemiological upside. Since the country's vaccines are only partially effective, its increasingly frustrated people can see no end to the lockdowns. In addition to lower Chinese growth expectations, we can thus now add a new concern: questions over the rationality of its leadership. I have yet to meet a China observer who thinks zero-Covid is a smart policy.

This is where Taiwan comes in. Xi has made it clear that he wants to resolve the island's status on his watch, which means bringing it under China's control within the next few years. Since Xi wants nothing to distract from the crowning of his third term as leader at the party conference in October, that means 2023 is likely to be the year of peak danger. Biden can have little confidence that Vladimir Putin's difficulties in Ukraine will deter China from action against Taiwan. Indeed, Putin's military travails may even accelerate Xi's timetable since the US is drawing lessons from Ukraine to supply Taiwan with better defensive capabilities.

Moreover, Xi will be aware of America's political timetable. He might see it as less risky to move on Taiwan during Biden's watch than wait for, say, a President Mike Pompeo, Ron DeSantis or Tom Cotton. Biden's rhetoric and actions are not always aligned. The president has repeatedly shredded America's so-called strategic ambiguity by stating that the US would come to Taiwan's defence, only to have his remarks "clarified" by White House staff. But Biden's actions on Ukraine suggest a deep reserve about risking military confrontation with Russia. That same caution would likely apply in practice to China.

What is glaringly absent is any initiative either from Xi or Biden to alter the narrative. In his much-awaited speech on China in May, Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state, said China was the only country in the world with both the ["intent" and the "capability"](#) to alter the international order. Many countries would add America to that list. The US follows the rules it created only when it suits its purposes. Either way, America has made its bleak China diagnosis very clear. US diplomacy is thus focused on moving closer to Beijing's neighbours rather than pushing for a dialogue.

This is a dangerous course. Even if Blinken is right about China’s intentions, that makes diplomacy more important, not less so. The cost of miscalculation would be lethal — and the [risks are only growing](#). Biden’s zoom call with Xi on Thursday may be helpful but will be no substitute for routine US-China dialogue. As Kevin Rudd, Australia’s former prime minister puts it, the US and China are like “two neighbors welding away in a backyard workshop without rubber-soled shoes on, sparks flying everywhere . . . uninsulated cables running across a wet concrete floor. What could possibly go wrong?”

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