

Prospects & Perspectives



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After Anchorage:

Whither the Sino-American Relationship?

By *J. Michael Cole*



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Rather than display the kind of flexibility that the Chinese undoubtedly had expected from their American counterparts, Blinken and Sullivan held firm on China's destabilizing behavior and threatening posture toward the South China Sea, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong, among other issues. For their part, Wang and Yang were uncharacteristically (for this kind of setting) smug, mixing implacability with victimhood and moral equivalence. While it is true that this was not the first time that Chinese officials had reserved undiplomatic treatment for U.S. officials at major events (several such incidents marked China's exchanges with Obama administration officials), the chilly meeting in Anchorage was especially acrimonious. Moreover, it took place in the opening weeks of the Biden administration, when the two sides were expected to be exploring ways to launch a "reset" in their relationship after four years under president Trump.

Unbridgeable Gap

Earlier telephone conversations between Biden and Xi Jinping, as well as between Blinken and Wang, had already demonstrated that getting the relationship back on track would be a task fraught with challenges, largely due to fundamental ideological differences. The summit in Anchorage dispelled any illusion that a quick fix was possible. It also underscored the reality that engagement, a cornerstone of Sino-American relations since the 1970s, is no longer effective.

Underlying Wang and Yang's performance was a sense that China and the U.S. are at least equals as superpowers, and that the U.S. is on an inevitable downward trajectory in terms of its power and influence. Beijing may have expected early concessions from the U.S., which suggests that it may have misread current attitudes within the establishment in Washington, D.C. If concessions are not forthcoming, however, China will not back down. With or without U.S. "goodwill," Beijing is now bent on getting what it wants within its region. Concessionary gestures by the U.S.,



however welcome, are merely temporary gains in a longer strategy that is unwavering in its determination.

The U.S.' Strategic Choices

The ball, therefore, is in the U.S. court. It can choose to admit defeat and retreat from the region, which would save it much trouble with China. On the other hand, it can double down and challenge the Chinese, a decision that inevitably has a major military component. Retreat would have tremendously destabilizing effects on a region that, for eight decades, has benefited from U.S. engagement and security guarantees. Various U.S. allies, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, and Australia, to name a few, would have to re-evaluate their security posture and make the necessary adjustments — in Japan's case, this likely would entail rapid re-militarization and possibly a nuclear weapon program. That would be especially true if U.S. retrenchment meant China taking over a now abandoned Taiwan.

However, cognizant that the vacuum left behind by a U.S. pullback from the Asia-Pacific Region would be filled by an expansionary China — the logic being that, within an unstable environment, China would need ever more territory to secure its new acquisitions — there would come a point where China, having broken through the first and second island chains, would be in a position to directly threaten U.S. territory in the Pacific, as well the Continental U.S. itself. Therefore, it is in Washington's best interest to arrest such Chinese progress before it is too late. It is such considerations that currently create the incentives for the U.S. to stick to its commitments within the region. Moreover, with China having attained superpower status, the Biden administration realizes it has a moral obligation to recommit to a world order that is based on rule of law and human rights, a system that the Chinese model threatens to overturn.

Thus, if Washington chooses the second option and stands firm in the Indo-Pacific Region, the likelihood of protracted conflict — a new “cold war” or ideological contest — would be much higher. That is the much more difficult path, and one that could result in military clashes in the not too distant future. Nevertheless, it is also the only option to slow down Chinese expansionism and to keep alive the hope that smaller, more vulnerable democracies within the region will continue to prosper without being subsumed into and inevitably affected by a hierarchical system ruled by an authoritarian hegemon.



Limits to the U.S.' ability to project and sustain its power overseas, combined with heavy military investments by China, an ostensible willingness to translate such investments into action, and Beijing's geographical advantage, signify that the U.S. can no longer go it alone. In fact, various tabletop exercises have demonstrated that the U.S.' ability to prevail in a Taiwan Strait contingency, for example, is no longer a certainty. Thus, it will be necessary for the U.S. to build upon an already existing alliance, to empower its partners, and to share responsibilities with a group of countries that have never been asked to do so before — at least not to the extent that is now needed if China's more troubling ambitions are to be checked. In this, the U.S. has a major advantage over China, which, for all its "strategic partnerships," does not have, and will not have for the foreseeable future, an alliance system at its disposal. The U.S. and its allies must therefore make optimal use of this force multiplier before it is too late.

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