

U.S.-China Relations: From Bad to Worse

The most significant diplomatic event in the month of March was a rapid, seemingly irreversible deterioration of relations between the United States and China. Its signs were on display at [the first high-level meeting between the two sides](#) since President Joseph Biden took office on Jan. 20. Held in Anchorage, Alaska on March 18, it ended very badly indeed.

The encounter was unprecedented in the annals of great power diplomacy. Speaking first—with cameras present for what was supposed to be purely opening formalities—Secretary of State Antony Blinken [announced the U.S. would “discuss our deep concerns with actions by China](#), including in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, cyber attacks on the United States, [and] economic coercion of our allies.” Blinken also criticized China for its lack of transparency on the origin of the COVID-19 virus and went on to say that “each of these actions threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability” which the U.S. intends to uphold.

A lengthy and angry response came from Yang Jiechi, the leading architect of China’s foreign policy, who since 2013 has served as director of the [Central Foreign Affairs Commission](#) Office of the Chinese Communist Party, joining the [CCP Politburo](#) in 2017. He upbraided the United States in a lengthy rebuke, in the course of which he charged the U.S. with hypocrisy on human rights, criticized America’s foreign interventions, and [accused](#) his counterparts of possessing a “cold war mentality.”

“The United States does not represent international public opinion and neither does the western world,” [Yang said, adding](#). “United States does not have the qualification to say that it wants to speak to China from a position of

strength.”

This was a strong retort coming from a veteran diplomat who was close to the Bush family when he served as China’s ambassador in Washington (2001-2005), and who was reputedly an avid supporter of closer relations between Beijing and Washington at that time. Yang was later China’s foreign minister (2007-2013), but his current position is far more important. Therefore, it was remarkable for him to exclaim, “You aren’t nearly as good as we thought you were!” He even used [a Chinese idiomatic phrase](#) which literally means “we don’t eat that,” but which is more akin to “we will not put up with such bull.”

Yang’s annoyance was aggravated by the U.S. announcing [sanctions against 24 Chinese officials](#) for their activities in Hong Kong just a day before talks opened. This was seen in Beijing not merely as a gesture of bad faith but as a studied insult. Yang’s response nevertheless seems to have caught Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan by surprise. This is puzzling since the opening tirade went against all conventions of diplomatic protocol. It may have been calculated to throw the Chinese on the defensive. The execution was amateurish, however, and the improvised response from the U.S. side was indicative of poor planning.

Some commentators have subsequently suggested that [it was good for the U.S. and China to “finally get real with each other.”](#) It was high time for Washington to adopt an assertive approach in its relations with Beijing, the argument goes, in order to get down to the serious business of diplomatic give and take.

What such pundits fail to appreciate is that the fundamentals have changed. The Chinese leadership has evaluated the new foreign policy team in Washington carefully in recent weeks. It perceives it as far more dangerous and unpredictable than its predecessors, despite Biden’s assurances that [“diplomacy](#)

[is back.](#)”

Donald Trump’s demands in his dealings with the Chinese were often awkwardly presented and clumsily pursued, but they were fundamentally transactional. [His China policies had two distinct tracks:](#) those he devised personally, and those advocated by officials with expertise on China. Trump wanted, above all, a better deal for the U.S. in its economic relations with China and he [consistently prioritized](#) trade negotiations over sanctions. On balance, he was instinctively loath to treat the Chinese as implacable ideological foes who are intrinsically opposed to the global order which America must defend as a matter of highest national interest.

By contrast, when Blinken’s Department of State [accuses China of committing “genocide and crimes against humanity”](#) against Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in northwestern China, the Chinese do not see such hyperbole as mere rhetoric in pursuit of routine political objectives. They see (1) a deliberate attempt to delegitimize the political leadership of the People’s Republic by accusing it of the most heinous crimes imaginable; and (2) an equally alarming attempt to internationalize issues—such as the politics of Hong Kong and what China deems a fight against jihadism in Xinjiang—which China sees as eminently and exclusively domestic.

This is extremely serious: China is ready to go to war rather than risk a regime change or territorial fragmentation. We are witnessing a radical, startling departure from Trump’s China policy. It has prompted [Henry Kissinger to warn](#) that unless the U.S. and China come to an understanding on international affairs, they risk [“catastrophic”](#) conflict that will not benefit either nation. Addressing a Chatham House webinar on March 25, Kissinger (97) said that such competition risks unforeseen escalation. Beijing is not “determined to achieve a world domination,” the veteran diplomat went on, but rather “they’re trying to develop the maximum capability of which their society is able.”

Kissinger's diagnosis is entirely correct, but the neoconservative-neoliberal axis which is back in charge in Washington perceives any attempt by a foreign power to develop its "maximum capability" as an intolerable affront to its own objective of global hegemony. It is destabilizing indeed for Biden's team to try and challenge Beijing from a position of strength, at a time when China's robust economic and social recovery from the pandemic-induced slowdown stands in stark contrast to the grim picture America presents on all fronts global and domestic.

Particularly poignant was Kissinger's warning that America now, for the first time, must decide "whether it is possible to deal with a country of comparable magnitude—and maybe in some respects marginally ahead—from a position that first analyzes the balance that exists." This made me wonder if Dr. Kissinger reads *Chronicles*; for it was [here only seven weeks ago](#), that I bewailed "the refusal of Biden's foreign policy team to accept that the U.S. will have to live with China as an equal, and eventually perhaps stronger superpower."

It appears that realist minds think alike.

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