

OPINION

US and China face growing risk of military clashes as conflict intensifies

Washington-Beijing ties threaten to get much worse before they can possibly be stabilized



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U.S.-China relations have deteriorated into open hostility. © AP

Any hope that the U.S. and China will hit "pause" in their rapidly deteriorating ties was dashed by the rare open display of mutual antipathy during Mike Pompeo's brief visit to Beijing, the shortest on record by an American secretary of state, on Oct. 8. Instead of patching up a relationship in free fall, the occasion turned into an acrimonious exchange of accusations.

Pompeo's visit occurred at an inauspicious moment. Four days before he landed in Beijing, American Vice President Mike Pence delivered a speech on China that is so harsh that it was seen as a turning point. Commenters, both in China and the West, even labeled it America's official declaration of a cold war with China.

Chinese leaders must also have been angered by the new NAFTA agreement (officially the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA) signed on Sept. 30. At Washington's insistence, it effectively gives the U.S. a veto over future free deals Canada and Mexico may want to reach with China.

The so-called "anti-dragon clause," which prevents any country with a free trade agreement with the U.S. from seeking free trade with "nonmarket economies (China) without American consent, is designed by Washington's trade hawks as a template for future negotiations with key economies (such as EU, U.K. and Japan) and as a weapon to isolate China. Chinese leaders can be forgiven for seething about this declaration of economic warfare.

Taken in their totality, the Trump administration's recent actions must have convinced President Xi Jinping that he must take off the gloves as well. Until the Pompeo visit, the Beijing had been restrained in responding to Trump's trade and geopolitical offensives. But now Chinese leaders must have felt that their softball tactics are not working, and are already intensifying the rhetoric.

Just after Pompeo's trip, Commerce Minister Zhong Shan warned against expecting China to back down. He said: "This unyielding nation suffered foreign bullying for many times in history, but never succumbed to it even in the most difficult conditions."

This geopolitical contest will likely escalate dangerously. Powerful forces on both sides are driving the world's two strongest countries toward full-fledged confrontation.

On the American side, Trump's hard-line China policy enjoys wide support from a bipartisan coalition encompassing the security establishment, trade hawks, human rights groups, and white nationalists.

Although this coalition's members are divided on other issues, on China they agree on these propositions: Washington's engagement policy with China over the last four decades has been a failure; China's rise under one-party rule constitutes a structural threat to U.S. global leadership, and America must contain China before it is too late. To be sure, there may be differences over tactics. But there should be no doubt about the thrust of the coalition's preferred policy.

Even though their actions bear most of the responsibilities for the collapse of America's engagement policy, Chinese leaders were initially caught flat-footed by the sudden shift in America's approach. Early in the Trump administration, Beijing thought he could be appeased with flattery and minor trade concessions. Even after the opening salvos of the U.S.-China trade war were fired in mid-June, Chinese leaders treated the U.S.-China trade dispute in isolation from the anti-China sentiments pervading Washington.

Today, of course, sentiment in Beijing has changed as well. The debate within the walls of Zhongnanhai (the leadership compound) is not whether China should respond to Trump's pressure with hard or soft tactics, but how hard Chinese response should be.

This tit-for-tat dynamic is bound to cause further downward spirals in U.S.-China relations. In other words, however low mutual ties have already sunk, they still have a long way to go before hitting bottom.

Based on historical experience of great power conflict and the extensive U.S.-China links, the shift in bilateral relations from cooperative conflict avoidance toward adversarial confrontation can only mean an unraveling of these ties. Links, initially woven to support America's geopolitical bet that engagement with China would help transform it into a responsible stakeholder in the international order, cannot be sustained when the wagerer -- the U.S. -- has concluded the bet has not paid off.

The free fall of U.S.-China relations is beginning with the decoupling of commercial ties. Because these ties -- trade, investment, and positions in the global supply chain -- are complex, disentangling them will be costly (although more so for China than the U.S.) and time-consuming. However, eventually markets will adjust to geopolitics, and a new equilibrium, one likely featuring a drastic reduction in U.S.-China commercial relations, will emerge.

The second stage in the free fall will most likely feature heightened security competition or even minor military skirmishes. Without the cushioning effects of commercial ties, Washington and Beijing will be far less restrained in confronting each other militarily. Incidents such as the near-collision between the U.S. destroyer Decatur and a Chinese warship on September 30 could become more frequent and dangerous. Both sides will have the incentive to undermine each other's security interests. The U.S. will likely intensify efforts to challenge Chinese control of the South China Sea through shows of force (such as high-profile freedom of navigation operations and multinational naval exercises). American diplomatic and military support for Taiwan will almost certainly increase, a step that will touch the most sensitive nerve in Beijing and elicit neuralgic reflexes. In retaliation, China will likely increase its support for North Korea and thwart Trump's attempt to denuclearize Pyongyang. Iran, another avowed foe of the U.S., may get more support from Beijing.

History tells us that a relatively stable equilibrium in the competition in security may not be reached until after a major crisis. In the case of the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 can be argued as turning point because the danger of a nuclear war forced the U.S. and the Soviet Union to abide by a set of rules to avoid mutual annihilation. As for China and the U.S., the biggest question is what it will take for their strategic conflict to test the bottom. A crisis in the Taiwan Strait? An accidental naval conflict in the South China Sea?

At this stage, tragically, the rest of the world can only watch helplessly as the two great powers slug it out against each other before they realize that they must reach a new modus vivendi or risk the complete destruction of their bilateral relations.



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