

No middle way in US-China clash

Written by Joseph Bosco

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Now that China and the US are embroiled in a trade war, can they avoid a real war? That is the question that arises from recent headlines about tensions between the two.

The answer is yes. Each has the capacity to head off the escalating crisis and prevent armed conflict. All it would take is for China to stop its aggression against the US (and the West), or for the US to stop defending against China's aggression.

However, if neither of those titanic developments occurs, conflict appears inevitable. The situation no longer can be finessed, "managed," or left to the next generation to handle. It is the existential challenge for this generation.

The decisive question is this: Is the People's Republic of China more committed to its quest for regional hegemony and global dominance than the US is to the liberal world order it was pre-eminent in building and protecting?

Unlike ancient historical analogies, this is not a simple matter of a rising power challenging an established power over territory or resources or pride of place. This is ideological and existential, every bit as much as were the struggles in World War II and the Cold War. Like those global confrontations, it goes to the very identity of the contesting parties and the kind of world they each seek to create, or to preserve.

From its establishment, Communist China has been committed to the destruction or the drastic reconstruction of the global order — even after it was welcomed into what former US president Richard Nixon earnestly called "the family of nations" and encouraged to grow and prosper peacefully. Wired into its communist DNA is the philosophy of Mao Zedong (毛泽东) that: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," both domestically and internationally.

Since October 1917, the major communist regimes have sought power for its own sake, so that they can control their own people, their neighbors and as much of the rest of the world as they can reach.

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By contrast, the modern liberal West, led by the US, is devoted not to territorial expansion, but to the expansion of political freedom — the ideal that individuals and communities of individuals should be left to pursue their own aspirations, and that governments have defined and limited roles to play in the lives of their citizens.

Western democracies believe in government by the consent of the governed; Communist China imposes subjugation by fiat. The US follows the rule of law; China rules “by law.” The West aspires to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; China imposes the ubiquitous power of the party-state.

The two values systems, governing models and worldviews are inherently incompatible. China’s rulers have known that from the beginning; it is their reason for being. Western leaders have willfully ignored the stark truth for decades until the emergence of Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) forced a more jaundiced view of what is happening — not unlike the West’s blindness as Germany and Japan prepared for war and conquest in the 1930s.

Yet, the warning signs were there even before the era of former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), who was both the West’s model of a progressive Chinese reformer and the murderer of thousands of Chinese citizens who wanted political as well as economic reforms.

Deng famously cautioned his Chinese Communist Party colleagues: “Hide your capabilities, bide your time.” Western academics and officials dutifully recited the aphorism, even after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, as meaning China should be polite in its dealings with the outside world.

They failed to ask for what China was biding its time and whether it was hiding not only its capabilities, but its intentions. Those questions were never asked, but Xi now has provided the answers and they have shocked most in the world of China experts.

An end to the trade war will not end the larger US-China confrontation, the new cold war that China has been waging virtually from its creation that the administration of US President Donald Trump has joined. It is a multidimensional, across-the-board challenge that cannot be compromised. One side must prevail and one must change; both see their national identities at stake.

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In the short term, China is unlikely to yield on any of the range of non-trade issues: Taiwan, the South and East China seas, even North Korea. And it will certainly hold firm on accepting the notion of human rights only “with Chinese [communist] characteristics.” And, just as assuredly, the US will not be able to compromise on its human rights stand, which defines its own reason for being.

The US has had 243 years working on implementing its ideals. And, while China has thousands of years of history, the vested interest of the People’s Republic of China in its communist system has been less than 70 years in the making.

Beyond the values imperatives that keep the US on course, there are multiple strategic and even commercial interests that do not allow for further indulgence of China’s aggressive policies. US businesses, among the first to seize the lucrative opportunities presented by Nixon’s opening to China, now have become vocal in objecting to China’s predatory practices in intellectual property theft and other commercial areas.

On the security front, Taiwan, navigational freedoms, North Korea, cyberwarfare, support for rogue regimes and the proliferation of highly dangerous weapons have made China’s policies a clear and present danger.

The merger of national interests and US values means there is no more room for give. It is China that will have to get itself on the right side of history. If it refuses for much longer, the world is destined to see the third major conflict in the past 100 years.

As Nixon said when he launched his historic opening: China must change.

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