[**Cooperation or conflict?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1623997/cooperation-or-conflict)

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HENRY Kissinger [warns](https://www.dawn.com/news/1621393) that the turbulent relationship between the US and China carries the seeds of war. President Joe Biden describes ties between the two as “extreme competition”, not conflict. The latest US intelligence report casts China as America’s top national security threat. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken says there are three aspects of the relationship with China — adversarial, competitive and cooperative. Top Chinese officials caution Washington against engaging in a new cold war, and stress that both countries have more to gain by cooperation. American officials shrug off the cold war analogy and claim they are not seeking to contain China. Many Western analysts see a fierce contest rather than a cold war between the economic and tech superpowers.

How should these varying characterisations be viewed? What do they hold for the future of the world’s most consequential relationship? How are other countries responding to this stand-off? Will these global powers be able to achieve a reset or will their confrontation become a lasting feature of the international landscape?

The world’s most critical relationship, between US and China, is likely to remain on an unstable course.

The general expectation that Sino-US relations would be less fraught in the post-Trump era has not materialised. In substance, maybe less in tone, the Biden administration’s approach marks a continuity with Trump’s policy. Early indication of this came from the first diplomatic engagement between them in March. This is worth recalling for its insight into the stance of the two countries. Harsh exchanges followed in the Anchorage meeting when Blinken rai­sed his country’s “deep concerns” over China’s act­ions in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang”, its cyber-attacks and “economic coercion” toward US allies.

**Read:** [*Kissinger recognises Pakistan’s role in establishing China-US ties*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1613819)

To Blinken’s remarks, China’s top diplomat res­po­nded bluntly saying the US could no longer speak to China from a position of strength and that it could hardly lecture others given its treatment of Native Americans and when it faces race problems at home and waning public confidence in its democracy. As for Blinken’s claim that he was speaking for the int­e­rnational community Yang Jiechi said the US didn’t represent world opinion and neither did the West.

Despite these tough messages Chinese diplomats insisted that the new global situation warranted a cooperative relationship between the two countries. They cited President Xi Jinping’s vision of relations: “No conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and win-win.” This did not elicit a positive response from the US side.

Off to a bumpy start, relations did not transition into a ‘reset’ mode in subsequent months. Far from normalising they continued to be tense. While Chi­na’s interest lies in defusing tensions and establishing peaceful relations to enable them to manage differences, the US has continued to stoke tensions by its aggressive stance. In fact, the only difference bet­ween the Trump approach and Biden’s is that the latter is trying to round up allies and countries to join it to counter China. For example, the US used the recent G7 meeting to mobilise a joint front aga­inst China. The G7 communiqué criticised China on human rights, policy in Hong Kong and supported Taiwan’s participation in WHO. Another example is the so-called Quad (Australia, India, Japan and US) Washington is lining up to confront China.

Why is the Biden administration adopting this stance? For several reasons. First, it is reflecting the anti-China mood and bipartisan consensus in America that sees China as an adversary whose rising power needs to be balanced. Trump’s demonisation of China as a manipulative economic power that engaged in unfair trade practices became a national narrative and set the context for the Biden administration’s approach. Moreover, the Republican Party’s constant attacks on Biden for being ‘soft’ on China also shaped a more hawkish position than his administration may otherwise have adopted.

But because American companies see China as an attractive economic opportunity, continue doing lucrative business there and banks are keen to expand, US officials are obliged to acknowledge the ‘cooperative’ aspect of relations. But in fusing this with an adversarial dimension Washington seems to adopt an incoherent or schizophrenic approach that is contributing to turbulent relations with China.

US actions to counter China are also a classic response of an established superpower to the rise of a new global power challenging its predominance. This has been a common phenomenon throughout history when power dynamics have shifted fundamentally. The fear of an economic and technological rival and its growing global reach has created insecurities being reflected today in US behaviour.

Yet there are limits to how far Washington can escalate tensions. As Andrew Bacevich, president of the Quincy Institute, has written, “Today, China produces almost everything that American consumers hanker to buy, which we do using money agreeably loaned by Chinese banks. In Washington, denouncing Beijing’s authoritarianism may make for a good applause line. Yet the reality is that our two nations are mutually dependent.”

Limits are also imposed by the unenthusiastic response from countries Washington is wooing for its anti-China alliance. Even close European allies, with economic equities in ties with China, are reluctant to be drawn into such a coalition. Biden told the Munich conference in April that US and its allies faced “long-term strategic competition” with China and needed to stand up to its “economic abuses and coercion”. But Europe, much less the rest of the world, doesn’t see it the same way. German Chancellor Angela Merkel says so openly, Japan is reluctant to sanction China and other Asian countries are even less willing to join any contain-China coalition. Whether this reality urges the US towards a conciliatory policy is to be seen.

Beijing has shown much forbearance in the face of aggressive US conduct but a more confident China has also pushed back against what it perceives as US bullying and intimidation. Growing nationalist sentiment in the country means that Beijing will continue to act assertively even as it seeks a calmer, cooperative relationship with the US. As President Xi declared recently in the Boao forum, any economic decoupling between the two global powers would be to the world’s detriment.

While predictions of a conflict between the two countries are clearly overdrawn the world’s most critical bilateral relationship is likely to remain on an unstable course for at least the near term.

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