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## *The Danger of Worsening Relations With Both Russia and China*



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Q: “Are you willing to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan if it comes to that?” (CBS News)

A: “Yes.” (President Joe Biden, May 23, 2022)

Q: “ You are?” (CBS)

A: “That’s the commitment we made.” (President Biden)

Once again, an unplanned and impromptu remark from President Biden has generated controversy, although this represents his third (incorrect) reference to a commitment to defend Taiwan. Each time, Biden’s national security team has tried to walk back the

president's remarks, but the fact of the matter is that the United States is pursuing a policy of confrontation and containment with China. There has been no attempt to pursue a diplomatic solution to our differences with China or to give Chinese leader Xi Jinping reason to believe that Sino-American relations could be improved through pursuit of a serious diplomatic dialogue.

It wasn't difficult to assess China in the past because Beijing has had to deal with a hostile Soviet presence along a long international border since WWII, which required extensive military deployments and resources. This is no longer the case. While Biden was in Japan last week, Russia and China conducted a major exercise in the Pacific, flying strategic bombers over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea. The joint exercise demonstrates the success that Beijing and Moscow are having in coordinating military policy against the interests of the United States.

The United States was particularly fortunate that, despite its full-scale warfare against North Vietnam in the 1960s, the Sino-Soviet dispute provided the Johnson and Nixon administration with a free hand in Southeast Asia. The dispute led to a bloody confrontation along the Amur and Ussuri rivers in 1969. The Johnson administration was slow to understand the nature and intensity of the Sino-Soviet dispute, but the Nixon administration moved adroitly to ensure that Washington would have better relations with both Beijing and Moscow than the two leading communist powers had with each other.

The triangular diplomacy of President Richard Nixon and national security adviser Henry Kissinger paid major dividends, including the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with the Soviet Union as well as improved bilateral relations with China that led to full-scale diplomatic recognition in the administration of Jimmy Carter. The Watergate crisis, the Nixon resignation, the inexperience of Gerald Ford, and the hubris of Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski kept the United States from exploiting the initial successes of the strategic triangle between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China.

The United States was similarly fortunate regarding its bilateral relations with both the Soviet Union and China as a result of leadership changes in Moscow and Beijing. In 1979, China radically changed course under Deng Xiaoping, who pursued economic reform and a non-ideological foreign policy. Deng wanted China to "hide its strength, and bide its time." In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev emerged as the Soviet leader, and he was determined to pursue economic reform (perestroika) and greater scrutiny of previous Kremlin policy (glasnost). He wanted an improved relationship with the United States,

and used arms control and disarmament to ensure a durable detente. The Chernobyl crisis in 1986 afforded an opportunity to purge the military, and to create a national security team oriented toward improved relations with the West. Now, the United States must deal with the extreme nationalism and anti-Americanism of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.

We are eighteen months into the Biden administration, and the flawed policy of Donald Trump toward China is still in place. The policy of confrontation and containment risks the ratcheting up of military and economic pressure on China. Editorial columns in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* favor this hard-line policy, calling for greater defense spending to enable a “faster modernization and rearmament of the U.S. military.” Presumably Pentagon strategists are already preparing budget requests that are oriented to a “two-front war,” which drove U.S. spending to record levels in the 1980s right up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The notion that the United States could succeed in battling both Russia and China at the same time is particularly ludicrous. Last week, an oped in the *Post* argued that “should China decide to wage war with the United States today, it would do so with modern weaponry purchased with U.S. money and often built with U.S.-designed technology.” The idea that China would “decide to wage war with the United States” is particularly obtuse. The belief that the policy of containment that worked against a weak Soviet Union will have favorable results with a strengthened China is an illusion.

Biden’s declaration to defend Taiwan if China attacked may have gone too far, but the formation of an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a thirteen-nation pact that excluded China, didn’t go far enough. The Framework is no substitute for the Trans-Pacific Partnership that was negotiated by the Obama administration and abandoned by the Trump administration. Unlike the Framework, the Partnership involved economic engagement with East Asia, India, and Australia. The Framework is not a trade deal; it doesn’t open new markets.

Biden’s decision to maintain tariffs on Chinese imports has divided his national security team, with Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen and Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo arguing that removing some of the tariffs would offset rising prices. Daleep Singh, a deputy national security adviser, has argued that the Biden administration inherited the tariffs from the Trump administration and that the tariffs “serve no strategic purpose.” Thus far, the hardliners on China, particularly National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and U.S. trade representative Katherine Tai, have convinced Biden that the tariffs provide leverage for the United States vis-a-vis China. According to Harvard Professor

Jason Furman, “tariff reduction is the single biggest tool the administration has” in fighting inflation.

Unfortunately, no one in the Biden administration seems to be making the case that the policy of decoupling the United States from ties to China and trying to take on both Russia and China will be hugely expensive in terms of resources and appropriations. Biden’s approach will require huge expenditures for both air and naval platforms, leaving inadequate resources for domestic requirements, particularly for infrastructure and the climate challenge. In his first months, Biden emphasized there would be a review of our global military presence. But he gave this task to the Pentagon, which recommended no withdrawal or reductions. Indeed, the most substantial change was to improve airfields in the Asia-Pacific regions; increase personnel in Germany; and bolster French counter-terrorism efforts in Africa.

It is unfortunate that Biden has put together a national security team that has nothing new to alter the stalemated situations that Donald Trump left behind regarding policy toward China, Iran, and North Korea. Defense spending continues to climb; new initiatives regarding arms control and disarmament are nowhere to be found; and military deployments continue to rise. Defense analysts are already arguing for an expanded military presence in the Baltic States and key East European states such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Their call is for permanent basing of U.S. units in order to institutionalize a front line force posture.

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