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Sino-American Relations: Breaking The Gordian Knot



Alexander the Great cuts the Gordian Knot by Jean-Simon Berthélemy (1743–1811) – Public Domain

President Joe Biden's national security team has failed to address a major challenge, which is breaking the gordian knot that has paralyzed Sino-American relations. It's time to take a page from Soviet-American relations in the 1970s and 1980s, which demonstrated that an institutionalized dialogue on arms control could produce a detente relationship that would pay political and economic dividends. Presumably, China would not be interested

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in an arms control dialogue at this time in view of its strategic inferiority, but the possibility of a substantive exchange on space is certainly possible, which could open the door to talks on the climate challenge and even disarmament.

The chicken hawks in the mainstream media are demanding further challenges to China's sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific. Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan was bad enough, but now there are calls for regular congressional visits to the island. The leading hawk in the *New York Times*' aviary, Bret Stephens, argues that delegation visits should become "so routine that Beijing forgets to protest." Other pundits favor the transfer of "easily dispersed, easily hidden asymmetric weapons" such as Javelin anti-tank missiles, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, and anti-ship missiles that have been successful in Ukraine against mediocre Russian forces.

There are regular items in the *New York Times* regarding U.S. concerns over the cooperative arrangements between China and the Solomon Islands, which has suspended visits by U.S. and other foreign military vessels. In recent months, the United States has sent military and diplomatic officials—including Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman—to the Solomon Islands to ensure that the U.S. Navy could continue to project power in the Asian-Pacific region. This is a classic example of "thinking in the past" in view of the intense battles fought in Guadalcanal, the country's main island, exactly 80 years ago. U.S. preoccupation with the Solomons in 2022 seems bizarre.

Of course, U.S. officials will use any excuse to stress the need for sharp increases in military spending, ignoring the fact that the United States spends as much on its military and intelligence community as the rest of the world combined. Stephens and others favor "frequent transits of U.S. Navy ships through the Taiwan Strait and an expansion of "secretive joint training exercises" between U.S. and Taiwanese special operations forces. Their view is that only huge increases in U.S. defense spending and force deployments can preserve the peace and prosperity of East Asia. The possibility of an unwanted confrontation or collision is totally absent from these arguments.

Unfortunately, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has a longstanding prohibition on bilateral cooperation with China or any Chinese-owned entity, but this ostrich-like policy must end. In the same year that the United States proclaimed "containment" of China, Congress passed the Wolf Amendment that prohibits NASA from using federal funds to engage in direct, bilateral cooperation with China. The father of containment of China, Kurt Campbell, is currently the NSC's director for Asian affairs. Meanwhile, the Congress remains opposed to cooperation with China.

China is a space superpower; it has completed successful missions to the moon and Mars and will soon launch a solar probe. China's strategic partnership with Russia includes space ventures, including the announcement of a partnership to build an International Lunar Research Station tended by human crews. Because of their invasion of Ukraine, the Russians may not have the essential parts and the financial resources to continue as an active contributor. This could provide an opportunity for U.S. involvement, but there have been no diplomatic initiatives from Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

According to Bennett Seidenstein, a former NASA "Teacher/Ambassador," the combination of America and Chinese orbital platforms would enhance research opportunities in space and provide needed savings for both Washington and Beijing. Each rocket of NASA's Space Launch System costs over \$1 billion dollars, and the rockets are not reusable. Seidenstein believes that the deployment of American and Chinese platforms would provide more accurate measurements in the study of the earth as well as in the atmosphere and climate change. Seidenstein notes that Sino-American cooperation in space would be vital in any rescue mission involving manned vehicles.

Progress in the field of space exploration could open the door to a variety of economic and security exchanges in the international system. Any cooperative venture could lead to a greater scientific and cultural exchange that would reduce the chances for friction and conflict. Soviet-American disarmament negotiations had an ameliorative impact that led to the charm offensive between Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev.

The United States and China could do more to pave the way for greater scientific exchange. The United States could develop a more cooperative attitude toward China's Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank and consider a reduction in the onerous tariffs that have been placed on Chinese imports. U.S. ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea would give the United States more credibility on a variety of commercial interests in the East Asian and Pacific region.

The United States and China could easily tone down their propaganda attacks. The United States should certainly do so because its strategic position is unassailable in East Asia, with military superiority in various domains. China lacks strategic allies and global power projection. The United States has important relations with Australia, Japan, India, South Korea, and various Southeast Asian states, a grouping which is beginning to resemble an anti-China partnership. China is making no effort to project power into regions outside its neighborhood; the United States has hundreds of facilities and bases the world over.

President Biden needs to end the militarized approach to Asia, and initiate a bilateral dialogue.

China must recognize the need for rules of the road in space as well as the world's oceans. China has 9,000 coastline miles and eight of the ten busiest ports in the world; it is dependent on unhampered trade. The South China Sea is an obvious zone for global cooperation. It holds an estimated 12 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas . The seabed floor contains precious metals such as manganese and cobalt used in making electric car batteries, smartphones, and electronics equipment.

Instead of addressing Cold War relations with both China and Russia, Biden is pursuing policies that are driving Moscow and Beijing closer together. This must end! President Barack Obama's so-called "pivot" from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific in 2011 has been a total failure as our commitments in the Middle East have not substantially changed and our position in East Asia remains strategically complicated.

At the risk of over-simplification, it is possible that an institutionalized dialogue on space could lead to discussion on arms control and disarmament as well as the climate crisis. As Winston Churchill argued, "jaw-jaw is better than war-war."

Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and a professor of government at Johns Hopkins University. A former CIA analyst, Goodman is the author of [Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA](#) and [National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism](#), and [A Whistleblower at the CIA](#). His most recent books are "American Carnage: The Wars of Donald Trump" (Opus Publishing, 2019) and "Containing the National Security State" (Opus Publishing, 2021). Goodman is the national security columnist for counterpunch.org.

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