

Associate Paper

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Bells are Tolling for a New Cold War

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Key Points

- The marshalling of new alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, like the Quad and AUKUS, has rung the bell for the commencement of a New Cold War.
- It could end up being a serious threat to nuclear non-proliferation, bypassing real concerns about the risks that nuclear technology poses.
- If the United States and China fail to manage their rivalry, the world will face severe disruption.
- It is, therefore, imperative to develop a clear understanding of any such New Cold War, including of the pitfalls for the allies of both the global powers.

Summary

The US and its allies' exits from Afghanistan and the Middle East, accompanied by the marshalling of new alliances in the Indo-Pacific region like the Quad, the alignment that comprises the USA, Australia, Japan and India, which is believed to become an Asian version of NATO before long, and the latest military alliance named AUKUS, after Australia, the UK and the USA, with its pledge of transferring nuclear submarine technology to Australia, has finally rung the bell for the commencement of a New Cold War. Although efforts are being made in some quarters to keep that development's exposure to a minimum by propagating the narrative that it is unlikely to be a new Cold War between the US and China, keen observers cannot relegate the prospects of potentially catastrophic political, economic and military conflict(s) in the region to the backburner.

France's decision to recall its ambassadors from the US and Australia to protest the cancellation of the contract with Australia to manufacture French conventionally-powered submarines in Australia, besides European calls for creating a military force specifically to cater to threats to Europe or to negate the likelihood of the deployment of NATO forces without consent by the US, is indicative of Europe's changed priorities. It also indicates a greater focus on Europe's interests, rather than having to take into any strategic calculus the backlash against NATO's involvement in US-led endless wars as well as former president Donald Trump's insults that he poured over Europe.

Nevertheless, there is general consensus among experts that the rise in geopolitical tensions and the jostling for position among the great powers have created the basic conditions for a new Cold War. Of most concern, however, are the warnings by some scholars that the rivalry between the two powers could be spiralling down towards a Thucydides Trap, for which Taiwan may become the trigger for a kinetic conflict. Many Americans worry that China will prove to be a dangerous foe. There is much anxiety about China, which could lead to conflict as the situation deteriorates.

Analysis

Some Chinese experts opine that Beijing will determinedly and unswervingly stick to its chosen path to success. It will continue to expand its international influence with a view to creating a harmonious global community with a shared future. Nevertheless, the Chinese navy, the largest in the region, combined with China's access to naval facilities in it, has caused much concern among its competitors in the Indo-Pacific. Sober minds suggest that if Australia is going to shut the gate in respect to China, potentially putting at risk more than \$100 billion of exports, it will have an impact on the living standards of Australians. That is the problem when you try to wrap the totality of government under the umbrella of national security. The AUKUS announcement also mentions developing joint capabilities and information and technology sharing across the UK, US and Australia, and picks up on cyber security, artificial intelligence and quantum communications. This move could end up being a serious threat to nuclear non-proliferation, bypassing real concerns about the increasing risks nuclear technology poses.

If successful, it will hamper Beijing's capabilities to further acquire cutting-edge military technology to apply in its home-grown aircraft carriers. It is a significant step-up to counter China's growing military presence in the West Pacific; the dangers posed by the potential presence of US nuclear missiles and military bases on Australian soil and Canberra unwittingly becoming a pawn in an extremely dangerous New Cold War are all too obvious, however. Second and equally important, China also perceives the AUKUS pact as a provocation involving countries increasingly preparing for military escalation over Taiwan. Moreover, it remains ambiguous whether Japan and India will play a role or join AUKUS as the alliance develops, or if there will be more allies joining the Quad in the future. There is some scepticism regarding the latter among Indian strategists. During the first Cold War, India had a Soviet card, and even a China card. That does not exist this time around as India faces the brunt of China's power in a variety of forms, from Ladakh to the UN Security

Council. India, thus, cannot approach this Cold War as it did the last one – as if it is a prized ally that can stand aloof and make others bid for its support. There are other dangers, too. Unlike the early 1960s, China and Pakistan have now been allies for some time – “iron brothers” – with India as one of the glues that binds this alliance. In previous instances, Beijing had its own reasons for not militarily coming to Pakistan’s help, including its own military weakness and unpreparedness. But New Delhi will now have to assume, even if only for prudence, that it will face both together in any future war.

The rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 wiped out US political, economic and cultural ties to the Chinese mainland. In response to Washington’s effort to contain and isolate China, Beijing forged an alliance with Moscow and soon found itself directly fighting the United States during the Korean War. It is quite obvious now that the United States and China are entangled in a competition that might prove more enduring, more wide-ranging, and more intense than any other international rivalry in modern history, including the last Cold War. In both countries, fears have grown that the contest might escalate into open conflict. Many in Washington argue that this tougher new consensus on China has emerged in response to more assertive, even aggressive, moves on Beijing’s part. On the other hand, the Chinese official line remains that bilateral ties should be guided by the principle of ‘no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win co-operation’, as Chinese President Xi Jinping described it in his first telephone conversation with US President Joe Biden in February 2021. Nevertheless, just as American views on China have hardened in recent years, so have many Chinese officials come to take a dimmer view of the United States.

While in the United States, China’s rise is a source of nervousness, in China the country’s growing status is a source of self-assurance and nationalistic pride. Many Chinese analysts highlight the political dysfunction, socio-economic inequality, ethnic and racial divisions, and economic stagnation that plague the United States and other Western democracies. They also point out that many developing countries and former socialist countries that emulated Western models after the Cold War are not in good shape, and they note how Afghanistan and Iraq, the two places where the United States has intervened most forcefully, continue to suffer from poverty, instability and political violence. For all those reasons, many Chinese feel fully justified in meeting US pressure with confidence and even a sense of bold triumphalism.

More recently, the western Chinese region of Xinjiang has become a major source of friction. Beijing charges that violent riots there in July 2009 were planned and organised from abroad and those Uyghur activists in the US who received encouragement and support from American officials and organisations acted as a “black hand” behind the unrest. The protests in Hong Kong in 2014 and then in 2019-20 were attributed by China to the US Government and US-based non-governmental organisations, which were followed up by American sanctions against Chinese officials. Finally, no issue has bred as much Chinese distrust of the US as the status of Taiwan. In Chinese eyes, the most significant threat to China’s sovereignty has long been US interference. Beijing believes that Washington was the driving force behind the “colour revolutions” that took place in the first decade of this century in former Soviet states and that the US Government has encouraged protest movements,

including the Arab revolts of 2010-11, against authoritarian regimes around the world. The CCP's concerns about US meddling in China's internal affairs have a direct connection to the tensions between Washington and Beijing on a range of geopolitical issues, including territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the creation of anti-China economic and quasi-NATO alliances, such as the Quad, and finger-pointing over the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. China's gradually more forceful posture in these disagreements is in part a reaction to the CCP's perception that the United States is attempting to weaken the country and delegitimise the party.

While President Biden may take solace in Obama's slogan "co-operate with China where we can and compete where we must", most experts opine that to avoid open conflict, leaders in Washington and Beijing need to accept two fundamental realities. The first is that the CCP holds immense control over the Chinese people; its grip on power is unshakable. External pressures on China to change its political systems are likely to be futile and might even backfire by promoting unity and inflaming anti-Western sentiment. The second reality is that the United States will remain the most powerful actor in shaping the global order. The country's problems are obvious: racial tensions, political polarisation, socio-economic inequality and weakened alliances. Its strength, however, lies in its diversity, its culture of innovation and the resilience of its civil society; those attributes remain unchanged.

It needs no emphasis that if the United States and China fail to manage their rivalry, the world will face splitting up and disruption. Therefore, to prevent a contest from becoming a calamity, Taiwan and the US-Chinese economic competition will need to be meticulously managed by both the big powers. American veteran independent senator and former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders opines that the unprecedented global challenges that the United States faces today – climate change, pandemics, nuclear proliferation, massive economic inequality, terrorism, corruption, authoritarianism, etc. – are all shared global challenges. They cannot be solved by any one country acting alone. They require increased international co-operation, including with China. Americans, like their Chinese counterparts, must resist the temptation to try to forge national unity through hostility and fear. Developing a mutually beneficial relationship with China will not be easy. But we can do better than a new Cold War. It is hoped that voices such as that of Mr Sanders will be heeded by the hawks in the American establishment to avoid a new Cold War that may, as a consequence, result in a direct military conflict with China or in a number of military clashes among allies of both the great powers in the Asia-Pacific region. The European countries, with the wisdom of hindsight of two world wars and endless American wars thereafter, already seem more determined to stay focussed on the North Atlantic region and on mainland Europe by contesting Russian influence and selective co-operation with China as highlighted in my piece "[Impact of NATO's Strategy 2030](#)".

Pakistan has come under a lot of pressure from the US and its allies since joining the Chinese Belt-Road Initiative and its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The American-Indian strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific to contest China and the coercion of Pakistan through the Financial Action Task Force (on behalf of India), has actually proved counter-productive and has forced Pakistan to further slide towards the Chinese camp. While the US may realise too late the folly of pushing Pakistan away, as has been the

case in the past, Pakistan must also comprehend that those tectonic shifts and re-alignments are taking place as a result of the fresh global strategic contest that is giving birth to a new Cold War primarily between the US and China; America's previous Cold War rival, Russia, is standing with China now. Besides, in order for Pakistan to maintain balance in its foreign, economic, defence and domestic policies, it is imperative to develop a clear understanding of the new Cold War with its pitfalls for the allies of both the global powers. Pakistan therefore needs to tread carefully on its newly-chosen strategic path and [avoid becoming a cat's paw](#) once again. Instead, it must result in better military deterrence and sure-footed economic prosperity for the country, as suggested in "[Pak-US Relations: How to Bridge the Widening Gap](#)".

About the Author: Now retired from the military, Brigadier Saleem Qamar Butt is a Geostrategic Analyst for the Pakistan Television Network and, as a freelance writer, has been published by the Daily Times, The Nation, Business News Pakistan, South Asia Pulse (Canada), South Asia Magazine and Future Directions International.

In his military career, Brig. Butt graduated from the Command and Staff College, Camberley, UK (1993) and the Japanese Combined Arms Institution, Mt Fuji (1989). He commanded an infantry regiment along the Line of Control during an active conflict period, served as Chief of Operational Staff in a Corps headquarters operating along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders and participated in the planning and execution of medium- and large-scale anti-terror operations. He has also served as an instructor in the School of Infantry and Tactics and Directing Staff at the Command and Staff College in Quetta, and as Pakistan's Defence Attaché to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. From 2010 to 2017, he served as Deputy Director-General, Strategic Analysis for the Government of Pakistan with focus on Pakistan's relations with the USA, all other countries of the American continent, Central Asia and Afghanistan. In March 2020, he was selected as one of the four-member group advising Prime Minister Imran Khan on foreign relations with the United States.

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