

US must grow up

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Terry Su says America needs to acknowledge the fact that it may no longer be exceptional

In its 10 months in office, the Biden administration has been generally rudderless but steadfast in its China-bashing policy, which remains a rare bipartisan rallying point in current American politics.

Lately, this administration has seemed determined to be more provocative about Taiwan, which Beijing maintains is a renegade province it will eventually recover.

The latest round of intense speculation about US-China conflict over the island started on October 21, when President Joe Biden was asked whether the United States would defend Taiwan if it was attacked by mainland forces and he told CNN: "Yes, we have a commitment to do that."

That was followed by a statement issued on October 26 by Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, saying: "We encourage all UN member states to join us in supporting Taiwan's robust, meaningful participation throughout the UN system and in the international community."

In an obviously orchestrated moment that same week, Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen, confirmed to CNN the presence of US troops on the island. Citing a threat from Beijing that was growing "every day", she said: "We have a wide range of cooperation with the US aiming at increasing our defence capability." This was tantamount to spitting in Beijing's face while holding Washington's protective hand more tightly.

However, while Beijing has been unequivocal in regarding Taiwan as among China's core interests, and people have reason to be anxious about what might come next, I do not foresee any real possibility of Beijing initiating war over Taiwan.

A lot is being said about China's current politics and top leader, but talk about Beijing's imminent attack on Taiwan is wide of the mark.

As Beijing has judged that "the East is rising and the West is declining" and is confident that time is on its side, it is not in a position to retake Taiwan – a move that would be economically and geopolitically damaging, to say the least – unless Washington and Taipei force its hand.

In this regard, it is telling that when Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Blinken on October 31, he warned the Americans not to "bring subversive damage to overall China-US ties" by mishandling the Taiwan issue.

On the same day, Blinken was asked by CNN to clarify Biden's comments on Taiwan and said: "There is no change in our policy." Still, the game of muscle-flexing and bluff is sure to continue between Beijing and Washington.

A deeper concern remains, however. Where is the current administration heading in its relationship with Beijing, given not only China's growing economic prowess and geopolitical influence but also the US' need

to sort out its domestic problems (which, in a way, is inextricably linked to its handling of the bilateral relationship)?

According to an NBC News poll, released on October 31, Biden's approval rating has fallen to 42 per cent, lower than that of any other modern first-year president except Donald Trump.

Meanwhile, Biden's US\$1.75 trillion social spending bill is struggling for support even within the Democratic camp. And the prospect of the Republicans making a forceful comeback in the 2022 midterm elections, or Trump seeking re-election in 2024, looms large on the horizon.

And it is against this backdrop that the US trade representative, Treasury secretary and special presidential envoy for climate speak of cooperation with China.

Back in January, I raised hope of a steadier US-China relationship under the Biden administration, given the appointment as Indo-Pacific tsar of Kurt Campbell, who could be expected to put the relationship on a realistic footing. But I also warned that Washington might scapegoat China as it lumbered through its daunting domestic agenda.

Unfortunately, I hit the nail on the head in the second regard. Biden's China team - acting on a belief that "we are the good guy and China is the bad guy, so we will win" - keeps doubling down on their hawkishness despite the less-than-desired resultant ramifications. One only has to look at the Afghanistan withdrawal fiasco and the "clumsy" (Biden's own admission) handling of the Aukus alliance for proof of how they have blundered.

Beneath this lurks a more fundamental unease. In his 1952 book on US foreign policy, *The Irony of American History*, Reinhold Niebuhr gave his fellow Americans penetrating advice when he warned them against their "pretensions of innocence". He associated the American exceptionalism they hold dear with what he called the "deep layer of Messianic consciousness" that underlies US foreign policy.

Niebuhr's contemporary, English novelist Graham Greene, held a similar view on American immaturity and coined a memorable expression in 1937, writing about the "the eternal adolescence of the American mind".

With the Americans' "Messianic consciousness" reinforced by their liberation of the world during the second world war, and then their accidental victory in the Cold War, Washington's elite could be forgiven for ignoring Niebuhr's warning and instead applauding Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the victory of liberal democracy and the "end of history".

Fast-forward to the present, however, and it seems American exceptionalism has run its course. The US should wake up to the fact that it may no longer be exceptional, while recognising that the evil it discerns in others might just as likely reside in itself.

Otherwise, what is to stop it from yet another "clumsy" policy misstep? On the matter of free will and its limits, Arthur Schopenhauer once said: "Man can do what he wants but he cannot want what he wants." In other words, the freedom to do what one desires should not be mistaken for the freedom to choose what one desires. Is America, so persistently innocent, capable of making this distinction and growing up?