

As US and China slug it out, will Europe and Russia be left out in the cold?

- The recent easing of Sino-US tensions may help Washington consolidate its grip on allies as it seeks to carve out a bipolar world order
- But, unlike in the Cold War, lesser powers in Europe and Russia are determined to remain at the table, not on the menu

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

As 2022 draws to a close, there is an easing of US-China rivalry as the incumbent and emerging superpowers, a stalemate in Russia's war in Ukraine, and recalculations being performed in the capitals of lesser powers between Washington and Beijing.

The latest example is Saudi Arabia, which while remaining one of America's two cornerstone allies in the Middle East since the Cold War, recently received Chinese

President Xi Jinping and signed with his delegation a slew of big business and investment agreements, but failed to announce the much-touted yuan-for-oil deals.

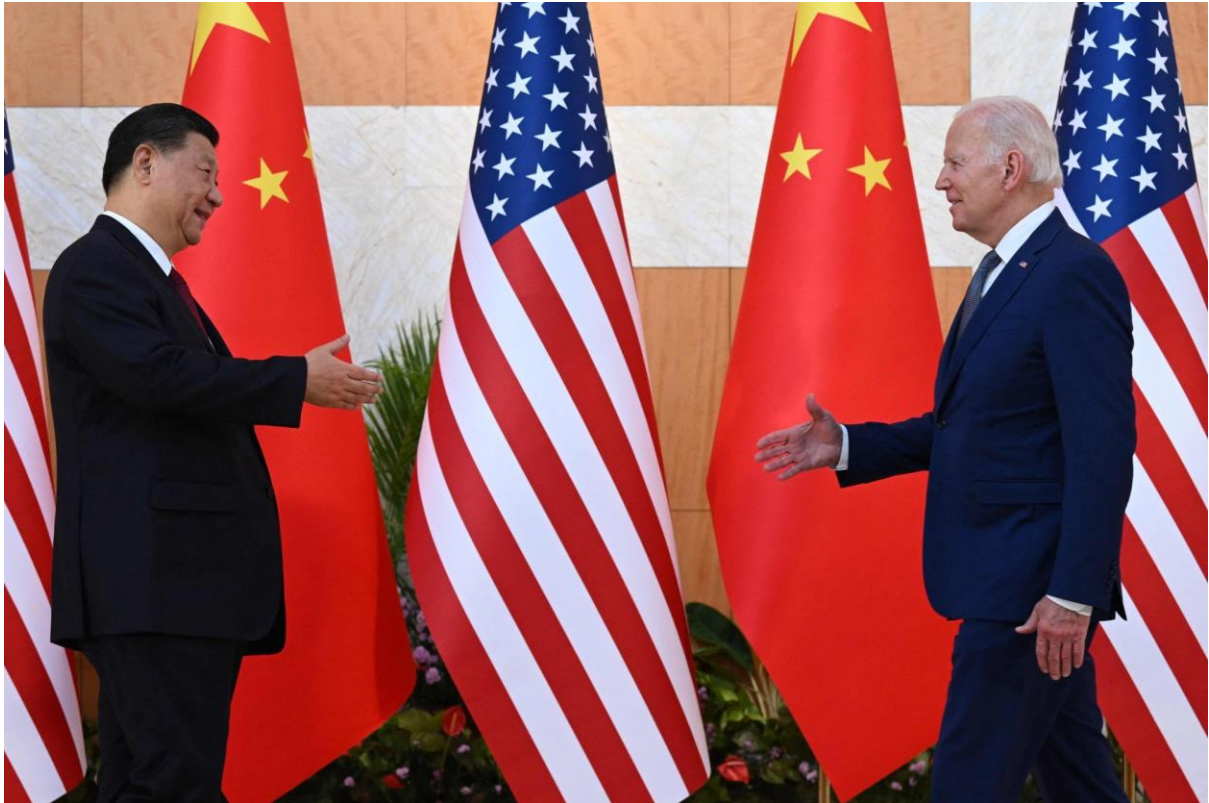
Against this background, we heard Kurt Campbell, the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific coordinator, claim that, in the US-China contest, a lesson had been taught and China's behaviour of having "taken on and challenged many countries simultaneously" has "backfired".

"All of that suggests to me that the last thing the Chinese need right now is an openly hostile relationship with the United States," Campbell said. "They want a degree of predictability and stability, and we seek that as well."

In quoting Campbell, it's possible to see just how universal America's power and influence is in setting the pace of global geopolitics: following its stern foreign policy postulations, it adopts a conciliatory tone and the world is expected to follow suit, including its nominated chief adversary.

Formulation of the latest American foreign policy strategy was officially completed when the national security and national defence strategies were released in October. Introducing the defence strategy, Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin called China America's "pacing challenge" and Russia an "immediate and sharp threat". Echoing Secretary of State Antony Blinken's words in May, Austin said China remained the one adversary with "both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the power to do so".

Following that was Washington's willingness in Bali last month to effect a respite in tensions with Beijing. This was welcomed, naturally, as China has all along maintained that Sino-US relations should not be defined by competition.



China's President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden prepare to shake hands as they meet on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Nusa Dua, on the Indonesian resort island of Bali, on November 14. Photo: AFP

We know that the US-Soviet Cold War rivalry shaped a bipolar world by curtailing, in a variety of senses, the independent status of European powers, which for 400 years had dominated global affairs. And we should recall that, in the latter part of the Cold War, Washington orchestrated a detente with Moscow and a rapprochement with Beijing in the same period, two decades later witnessing the downfall of the former Soviet Union.

The US may well be attempting to do the same with regard to China: looking to achieve some sort of moratorium of tensions with the deemed chief adversary to consolidate its grip on the lesser powers on its side.

But there are two critical differences between then and now. First, America is no longer able to provide economically for its junior partners. Instead, it seems to find it necessary to take advantage of them, in its tendency to hollow out Europe's manufacturing capabilities; and, in the case of Taiwan, where the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, the world's top chip maker, is shifting its high-end facilities and expertise to America.

Second, Russia today is not what China was back then; the former morphed into an "immediate and sharp threat" for America on February 24 when President Vladimir Putin declared that he had been forced to send Russian troops into Ukraine in his "special operation".

Hence the frustration of Europe, or at least the older part of the European Union, whose economic prosperity has, for the post-Cold-War years, owed much to cheap and reliable energy from Russia, and whose aspiration for a unified Europe “from Atlantic to the Urals” has never died.

But the lingering momentum of America’s privilege and its sheer power to underwrite its demands leave its core allies in Europe and East Asia powerless to resist Washington’s insistence that they toe the line. This is despite, for one, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz arguing in Foreign Affairs magazine recently that America and its allies must “avoid the temptation to once again divide the world into blocs” and that “China’s rise does not warrant isolating Beijing or curbing cooperation”.

Recently, however, in a dramatic development, Angela Merkel, Scholz’s predecessor, claimed in a media interview that the 2015 Minsk agreement – which sought to end the war in Donbas – was an attempt to “give Ukraine time”, instead of genuinely seeking a peaceful solution to the dispute between Moscow and Kyiv.



Germany’s then chancellor Angela Merkel and France’s former president Francois Hollande attend a press conference after a summit aimed at ending 10 months of fighting in Ukraine, in Minsk on February 12, 2015. Russia agreed to withdraw heavy weapons from Ukraine’s front lines and begin a ceasefire three days later. Photo: AFP

In response to Merkel’s revelation, Putin made his disbelief and disappointment known publicly, and took it as evidence that Russia was right to launch military action against Ukraine in the face of a treacherous America and its allies.

To me, this looks almost like collaboration between the iconic former leader of Germany and the Russian strongman, as they might see Ukraine as the last opportunity for Europeans to avoid being marginalised by the Sino-US rivalry and to recover their geopolitical independence on the world stage.

Thus viewed, the joint message they have sent out would seem thinly veiled: as Washington and Beijing slug it out, Europe and Russia are determined to remain at the table, not on the menu, despite the suffering being endured.

That message is unlikely to go unheeded in Beijing.

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