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Terry Su

## Joe Biden's 'decisive decade' may include a US-China conflict that no one wants

- Washington's policy shift on China, instigated by Trump, has only grown more pronounced under Biden, who has taken pains to shore up US alliances
- With the US also threatening Beijing's red line on Taiwan, retaliation is all but inevitable

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3214175/bidens-decisive-decade-may-include-us-china-conflict-no-one-wants>



Amid all the commotion on the international scene of late, few people may have noticed that it was five years ago this week that then US president Donald Trump signed the memorandum on Chinese trade, a move widely seen as the official start of Washington's fundamental policy turn against Beijing.

The signing acquires symbolic importance due to President Joe Biden's statement last October that the US faces a "decisive decade" in what he terms a contest between democratic America and authoritarian

China. Kevin Rudd, the former Australian prime minister and new ambassador to Washington, for one, concurs.

I used to think otherwise; I figured it would take quite some time for the Sino-American rivalry to produce any tangible results.

After all, there were some 70 years between when the US caught up with the UK in terms of GDP based on purchasing power parity, in the 1870s, and the 1940s, when it effectively took over leadership of the world. When the former Soviet Union locked horns with the US after World War II, it challenged and sometimes seemed poised to topple Washington's supremacy before collapsing itself four decades later.

So it would be reasonable to assume that China – having overtaken Japan as the world's second-largest economy in dollar terms and the US in purchasing power parity terms in the early 2010s – would have to continue to labour until at least the middle of this century to arrive at “the centre of the world stage”, or, as America hopes, to become exhausted in its own twilight years.

But things seem to have been moving at an accelerated pace since Biden dislodged Trump from the White House in January 2021.

Those who follow my column here should know what I mean. Suffice to say for now that Biden's declaration of a “decisive decade” is being substantiated by his administration's relentless attempts to become ever more hawkish on China – to the extent that few people bother to raise their eyebrows these days when the possibility of a hot war between the two countries is touted in the media, at the podium or over champagne and canapés.

One could not help but be impressed with Washington's aggressive efficacy in enabling the historic reconciliation between South Korea and Japan for the purpose of leaning on Beijing. America needs them to stand united for an America-led encounter with a rising China.

America is also becoming less oblique about its intentions regarding Taiwan, which China claims to be its “first red line”. Washington now talks openly about increasing the number of American soldiers there, while scholars Dan Blumenthal and Fred Kagan from the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington-based think tank, urged the US government to “block” Taiwan's return to China whether by peaceful means, coercion or military action, in their recent essay in *The Hill*.

China is in an “enough is enough” mood. Wang Yi, China's top diplomat, last month denounced as “hysterical” what Beijing deems to be provocative American manoeuvres. Earlier this month, President Xi Jinping in a rare move singled out the US in public for its hostility towards Beijing.

Qin Gang, China's new foreign minister, said that “the world has no safety without China being safe”, which sounds ominously similar to Russian President Vladimir Putin's rhetorical question in 2018: “Why do we need a world without Russia in it?”

Qin also warned that it was “impossible” for China not to respond “when slandered or attacked”. After which, almost out of the blue, Beijing staged a diplomatic coup by mediating a peace deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia on March 10. No one should underestimate the seriousness with which this must have been viewed by Washington despite its low-key public reaction; the Middle East is after all America's near-backyard and Israel is there.

Now, Xi himself has been in Moscow this week, earlier than most observers had expected, to show China's solidarity with Putin's Russia in defiance of Washington. The announcement of his visit was met only hours later with an arrest warrant for Putin over alleged war crimes, issued by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. To say that the move was meant to ridicule Beijing is an understatement.

A simple yet terrifying logical inference from all this is that, when tension has reached such a pitch, the next level is war. History has shown how the situation in Europe – the Anglo-German relationship in particular – in 1911-1912 went from hopeful to hopeless, resulting in World War I in 1914, the first massive war remembered as a series of massacres aided by modern technology on the battlefields.

That China's moves are reactive is obvious and the Americans know it. For example, Doug Wade, head of intelligence at the US Department of Defence, said during a webinar last week that "China doesn't want to start a fight with us over Taiwan", but added that "they will if they have to".

The unsettling implication of Wade's statement, however, is that America could easily make Biden's "decisive decade" a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Thus viewed, this year could well be the nodal point of a Bidenian decade, at the end of which one might be less likely to see his ideologically charged rivalry come through than witness human destiny sealed with immeasurably more horror than that which befell Europe between 1914 and 1918.

In the Hollywood film franchise *The Terminator*, protagonist Sarah Connor carves "no fate" onto a wooden table, before going off to try to change a preordained future in which an artificial intelligence system and its cyborg army spark a nuclear holocaust. We may well be at that moment now.

**Terry Su is president of Lulu Derivation Data Ltd, a Hong Kong-based online publishing house and think tank specialising in geopolitics**