



## The Mitchell Forum

# The Eagle and the Dragon: An Opening Salvo in the Ideological Clash of the Ages

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### Introduction

During the Alaska Summit in March 2021, the United States and China attempted to engage in formal dialog in an effort to ease rising temperatures between the powers. Instead, they spiked to historic highs, and we have not recovered.

To the keen scholar, historian, strategist, and statesman, this inflection point is likely to be remembered as an opening salvo in an escalating ideological battle between The Great Eagle and The Great Dragon. And, while The Great Bear is in the background, there is no guarantee he will stay put.

Reminiscent of a deeply bitter domestic political campaign, both the United States and China indicted each other's international and domestic motives while jostling to control a rapidly evolving global narrative. Importantly, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rhetoric appeared to deliberately escalate already deep tensions. Why?

There are three likely motives:

1. The CCP desires to cement its moral leadership while defusing America's;
2. The CCP desires to signal to the United States and the world that it has no intention of backing down from a direct and sustained challenge to America's global leadership; and
3. The CCP is attempting to prime and inoculate the world for one or more major geopolitical maneuvers.

Let's briefly examine each of the CCP's possible motives.

## **The CCP desires to cement its moral leadership while defusing America's\_\_\_\_\_**

For the CCP, the carefully crafted charges lodged during the summit were more than a mere rhetorical tussle between freshman rival and senior incumbent. Certainly, the United States has made its share of policy missteps over the years, but for a government that has had more than its own share of problematic history—from its policies that led to widespread starvation and poverty to reactionary political movements such as the Cultural Revolution that demonized the educated—it seems conveniently forgetful of the CCP to lodge a series of unqualified and unfettered indictments against the U.S. government. At a gut level, it feels vaguely familiar to a once Imperial Japan before Pearl Harbor.

In this instance, China's choice of words were crafted to damage the standing of the United States and the integrity of the global system it has shaped. This is a system founded on Westphalian principals and democracy, built upon a moral base of laws and human rights. It has held the United States government together for nearly 300 years and seen it through multiple wars, expansion, and internal dissent.

But according to China's Yang Jiechi, former director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office and the highest-ranking diplomat under General Secretary Xi Jinping, "Many people within the United States actually have little confidence in the democracy of the United States, and they have various views regarding the government of the United States."<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not Chinese rhetoric continues to deepen the differences between the United States and China, the outcome of this war of words concerns nothing less than the fundamental preservation of the present global order. The CCP has no intention of leaving the existing fabric intact.

The CCP desires a new world order, and it will do all in its power to ensure that its version of a distinctly Chinese Communist system has the dominant role.<sup>2</sup> At the most basic level, the CCP's posture puts China and the United States on a collision course, and the CCP knows it. In fact, that's the purpose of it.

This posture is often difficult to reconcile since China's affluence, from a market and economic standpoint, arose in part from the success of democratic ideas—private ownership, freedom, and liberty. The CCP fast discovered a deep risk in what others suggested might happen—over time, the Chinese people could moderate and warm to Western ideas. Deep down, many of the people of China thirst for the Western ideal of freedom.

So, while some rightfully hold that the West's attempt to peacefully uplift China was doomed, one could make an improved argument by saying that you cannot water the tree when the roots are dry.

In the case of China, the dearth of moisture was the CCP imposing its leadership. As the West watered and sowed seeds of liberty in Chinese society through markets and global media, the regime felt its grip slipping away. The CCP is now attempting to tighten its centralized control and craft a necessary external belligerent.

This was predictable: a purist communist system requires an "outside evil" to sustain internal fear and fury to motivate patriotic activities. In this model, most nationalist Communist activities must concern the survival of the regime. This is, after all, patriotic.

In some cases, a state of prolonged war must be nurtured and maintained. North Korea is a well-considered example.

As pure form Communists such as President Xi brings the CCP into conformity with the totalitarian canon,

we see America, the once warm friend and trading partner, recast as a dangerous villain.

Again, the CCP requires an external threat to maintain control, and to maintain control, the CCP must appear to hold the moral high ground—always.

If there is no external evil, there can be no internal control. Why? Because at its foundation, Communism asserts moral superiority over all previous forms of government—all forms.

### **The CCP desires to signal to the United States and the world that it has no intention of backing away from a direct and sustained challenge to America's global leadership** \_\_\_\_\_

A trained negotiator and statesman can spot early the hallmarks of dialog that will be productive. There are observable “tells.”

For example, when a party desires to preserve an ongoing relationship or progress toward reconciliation, certain phrases and words are used to allow off-ramps, save face, promote cooperation, or maneuver toward de-escalation. Gifted negotiators understand how to use words with precision to meet the desired effect.

Examples of this conciliatory tone can be seen throughout the many rounds of U.S.-Russian nuclear treaty negotiations that took place during the 1980s. There was a U.S.-Russian rivalry, to be sure, but also a spirit of cooperation, good will, and shared goals. This was not part of China's posture during the dialogue. China's stance and philosophy can be summed up by the following rule: “We live, you die.” Whereas most modern Western negotiators aim for win-win solutions to resolve differences diplomatically, it appears China has instead invested heavily into the zero-sum game of “diplomacy,” despite its rhetoric otherwise.

Make no mistake, this is dangerous path for two superpowers to walk. The CCP is counting on a grossly distracted United States to allow the CCP to grow its way into reshaping the world order. And with every Chinese move we turn a blind eye toward, we are allowing the CCP to lay the patient foundation upon which the new world order will rest.

The question for the United States and our allies is simple: Will our commitment to protecting and preserving Western ideals equal the CCP in their determination to overmatch and then overcome the West? This question should dominate the thoughts of our statesmen and military leaders until the U.S. government forms a cohesive and vigorously competitive strategy that includes:

1. Ramping up all major engines of economic power to reinvigorate the global economy;
2. Training and preparing our joint militaries for a major conflict with China and its satellites;
3. Articulating and demonstrating a posture of global leadership that leaves no doubt about our determination to ensure democracy continues to govern the current world order; and
4. Continuing to offer open arms and dialog to the CCP while maintaining a firm resolve to embrace friends that are friends indeed.

China must either open to freedom or be a small global influencer. The time of foolish hand wringing about whether or not western democracy is in another Cold War is past. If you have any reservation about this fact, read China's further indictments of the United States:

*We do not believe in invading through the use of force, or to topple other regimes through various means, or to massacre the people of other countries, because all of those would only cause turmoil and instability in this world. And at the end of the day, all of those would not serve the United States well. So we believe that it is important for the United States to change its own image and to stop advancing its own democracy in the rest of the world.*<sup>3</sup>

This was an admonition to the United States and a clear exhibit of the extent the CCP will now go to disparage the United States and our allies. This narrative is interesting because it is multifaceted. It contains a demand, a truth, a lie, and a warning.

- **The Demand:** The CCP is demanding the United States stop advancing democracy (the heart of the present global order).
- **The Truth:** The CCP states it does not invade through the use of force. China does prefer to win without fighting, but it nonetheless annexed much of the South China Sea, Tibet, and Hong Kong by force, and seems to be preparing to do the same in Taiwan.
- **The Lie:** The CCP claims it does not massacre others. When a nation is willing enough to persecute and massacre those within its own borders, notably as in the ongoing Uighur genocide, this argument does not hold water.
- **The Warning:** The CCP warns the United States to stop intervening in human rights issues and stabilizing unstable nations.

## **The CCP is attempting to prime the world for its next major move** \_\_\_\_\_

The final point to make in this analysis is to convey that all of this narrative is a carefully woven tapestry. The CCP is almost assuredly going to make a play for Taiwan. When they do, the Party wants the world to know that they will be *justified*. The Party must diffuse and inoculate against global reactions now.

Again, this justification begins by digging at the moral leadership of the United States. According to Yang Jiechi, “The fact is that there are many problems within the United States regarding human rights, which is admitted by the U.S. itself as well... And the challenges facing the United States in human rights are deep-seated.”<sup>4</sup>

On its face of course, this is a direct challenge to America’s leadership in the global order, as evidenced in Yang Jiechi’s other direct statements: “China is firmly opposed to U.S. interference in China’s internal affairs. We have expressed our staunch opposition to such interference, and we will take firm actions in response.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, it could be said this is a preamble of grievances and justifications, similar to those long ago set forth in the Declaration of Independence.

At the Alaska summit, China unequivocally and without reservation attempted to castigate America for advancing freedom. This appears to be preparation for wider conquest.

In military vernacular, this period and these activities are called “shaping operations,” in which the advance work, both overt and covert, sets the scene advantageously ahead of physical actions. In this case, the play is familiar. Russia was successful with this strategy in the recent annexation of Crimea.

By claiming that Crimea’s minority Russian population was overwhelmingly in

favor of a new Russian-backed government and wanted to unify with Russia, the pre-established false narrative provided grounds for a plausibly *justified* invasion and subsequent annexation, followed by a legal ratification under Russian law.

China's narrative and persistence in messaging about its ownership of Taiwan is aimed toward an eventual forced unification, whether legal, gray, or kinetic.

Based on this, the United States and its allies must adjust its posture. There can be no mistake about the ability of the allies to enforce global order and international law.

However, to eliminate doubt in the mind of the CCP, the United States and its allies must fortify their respective positions of leadership as outlined above. Without a demonstration of leadership, and even unpredictability, the CCP will grow into a dominant global influencer in all spheres of power.

## Summary

History will likely bear out that during the Alaska summit, China made its debut in the ring of a once-tacit international power

struggle. This point must not be lost in the wider international noise.

The once gangly unprofessional fighter is now in the ring with an undefeated champion of freedom and democracy; they are sizing it up and looking to score a knockout.

Citizens and allies, you have now seen a marker planted on the road to a clash of titans. America and China have felt the thunder of the first movements in a new war—a battle of colossal, opposed ideologies—freedom versus centralized control; humanity versus inhumanity.

As we continue to focus inwardly on bitter rivalries and deep wounds, the global democratic system is being challenged. We have signaled our weakness, and the challenger is in the ring scoring points. According to this bold challenger, the United States should roll over and forfeit.

Will we live today as though we are not being challenged? Or will we, as during the Cold War, rise above those vying to kill Lady Liberty? We must decide—or the decision will be decided for us.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Fred Hiatt, "[Opinion: China might be right about America. But what are its leaders so afraid of?](#)" *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2021.
- 2 Nadège Rolland, "[China's Vision for a New World Order: Implications for the United States.](#)" brief, *China's Vision for a New Regional and Global Order*, National Bureau of Asian Research, October 2, 2020.

- 3 "[Secretary Antony J. Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Director Yang And State Councilor Wang At the Top of Their Meeting.](#)" transcribed remarks from Alaska Summit, March 18, 2021.
- 4 [Ibid.](#)
- 5 [Ibid.](#)

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**David J. Stuckenberg**, Ph.D. Co-Founder and Chairman of the Board at the American Leadership & Policy Foundation. David is considered an authority on asymmetric and gray zone warfare, water and power infrastructure, and sustainability; in this capacity he has advised organizations across the globe including UN, NATO, U.S. Congress, UK Parliament, National Security Council, U.S. State Department, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and others. David earned a doctorate in international security and strategy at King's College London and holds a Master's in political management from The George Washington University. He is also veteran USAF pilot and combat aviator.

