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How can the United States and China cooperate on resolving the Middle East conflict?

By ZHU Zhiquan

There may be a silver lining in the current Israel-Hamas conflict. The conflict, though tragic, provides a potential opportunity for US-China cooperation in the Middle East. The United States can use its exceptional influence on Israel to press for restraint and de-escalation, and China can take advantage of its friendly relations with both Palestine and Israel to call for a ceasefire. Ultimately, the United States and China will need to work together to help address the fundamental problems in the Middle East and seriously implement the “two-state solution”.

The outbreak of war between Hamas and Israel is another wake-up call for Washington hawks who adamantly believe that China is an existential threat to the United States. The United States faces many clear challenges including climate change, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the recurring Israel-Palestine conflict. Rather than viewing China as an enemy, the US government could seek China’s cooperation in addressing such real problems.

There is no doubt that China’s rise challenges America’s global dominance and the international order that the West set up after World War II. China’s assertive foreign policy and tight domestic control are concerns for the United States. However, there is no evidence to suggest that China intends [to replace the United States](#) as the global power or to remake the international order based on its own rules.

China has initiated several global programmes, such as the [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank](#) and the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) within the broad context of the current international system supported by many developing countries. China has extended an invitation to the United

States to be part of these programmes to promote [global development](#) but was flatly [rejected by Washington](#).

Politicians in Washington should call it as it is instead of pumping up the China threat. In a divided US government where politicians agree on very few things, it has become an accepted norm that a politician can easily score points by scapegoating China and inflating the China threat. Hawks are engaged in a competition to be tougher on China as a way to distract attention from their incompetence to address pressing problems Americans face such as gun violence, ethnic tensions, poor health care and dilapidated infrastructure.

The military-industrial complex is probably taking great pleasure in growing conflicts around the world, from Ukraine to Gaza. It needs a powerful enemy to justify a colossal military budget, and China fits the description.

Hyping the China threat and developing policies to counter China are unlikely to succeed. [Blocking China's growth by restricting computer chips exports](#) to China has failed, as evidenced by Huawei's recent surprising unveiling of [Mate 60](#). Arming Taiwan without reassuring Beijing that Washington will not upgrade relations with Taipei would not work either. In fact, the more weapons Washington sells to Taiwan, the more likely Beijing will use force to achieve unification for fear of losing Taiwan permanently.

However, some US politicians and policymakers do not seem to understand that pushing China too hard by encircling China militarily and forming stronger semi-official ties with Taiwan greatly raise the likelihood of military conflict between the United States and China. Treating China as an enemy will become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and creating a revengeful China serves no one's best interest.

In China, hardliners believe that their country is powerful enough now to confront the United States in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. They tend to forget that China is still a large developing country and has a long way to go to realise the "Chinese Dream". The priority continues to be domestic development and the main purpose of Chinese foreign policy is to create a conducive external environment. Seeking cooperation with the United States is vital even if the US government is less willing to cooperate now.

Communication and diplomacy remain far better options than what hawks and hardliners are pursuing. China is a challenge, not a threat, to the United States. The United States and its allies need to develop a realistic, viable and rational policy to deal with China. The fatalistic assessment of US-China relations must be replaced by a pragmatic approach that focuses on areas of common interests. As President Xi remarked, there are a thousand reasons to improve the US-China relationship, but not one reason to ruin it.

President Barack Obama was right when he declared himself America's [first Pacific president](#) as he kickstarted "pivot" or "rebalance" towards Asia – shifting more attention to the Asia Pacific from fixation on combating terror after 9/11.

The most dynamic region in the world, the Asia Pacific definitely warrants more US policy attention. However, subsequent Trump and Biden administrations doubled down their efforts to counter China as the core of the so-called [Indo-Pacific strategy](#).

With the Russia-Ukraine war ongoing, the Middle East remaining explosive and a divided US Congress barely functioning, it takes some wild imagination to argue that China is the biggest threat to Americans. Clearly, it is time to reboot America's China policy.

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It is encouraging that the Biden administration has recently modified its China approach, moving from decoupling with China to [de-risking](#) from China. High-level exchanges that were disrupted by [Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit](#) and the [Chinese balloon incident](#) have gradually resumed. Notably, a bipartisan congressional group led by [Senator Chuck Schumer](#) recently concluded a productive trip to China, the first congressional visit to China in over four years.

The latest war in Gaza not only serves as a reminder to Americans that China is not an existential threat to America or world peace, but also offers a potential opportunity for Washington and Beijing to work together on common global challenges, including the conflict in the Middle East. They can start with urging both Israelis and Palestinians to enact a ceasefire immediately and to prevent the Gaza crisis from spiralling into a catastrophe for the region and beyond.

Note: This essay was adapted from an op-ed the author published with The Hill: <https://thehill.com/opinion/congress-blog/4273530-middle-east-conflict-poses-another-opportunity-for-us-and-china-cooperation/>.

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