

Comment/ Opinion

Global intervention may be necessary to pull the US and China back from brink of disaster

The tensions between the US and China affect more than just the world's two great powers, as everyone is a stakeholder in geopolitical rivalry

If better leadership is not forthcoming, the rest of the world will have to step up and stage a badly needed great power intervention



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Illustration: Craig Stephens

On April 5, an [open letter](#) from US business executive Maurice Greenberg called on presidents Xi Jinping and Joe Biden to repair relations between China and the United States. The letter, co-signed by US foreign policy, economic experts and others, appeared in The Wall Street Journal and was widely reproduced on social media.

Such a call was timely in light of the [sharply deteriorating relations](#) between the two great powers. There is great concern over the US and China's hardening [opposing stances on Taiwan](#), [trade](#), [technology](#), [strategic alliances](#) and [spheres of influence](#), as well as a range of other important issues.

Some observers asked if Greenberg's letter should have been published in China as well, perhaps additionally signed by Chinese thought leaders. The unspoken inference appeared to be a swipe at how while these discussions were possible in the US, they would not be free to take place in China.

Such political conversation might be fairer and more open in some places than others. However, the more important question is not what China's thought leaders might have done but what the world's other nations think and want to say.

Most of the world's population lives outside the US and China. The tensions between these two affect more than just the well-being of the great powers. Everyone on this planet is a stakeholder in geopolitical rivalry.

Today's US-China tensions have disrupted trade, investment and people-to-people exchange. The upending of long-standing rules of engagement have made the global economy poorer and less stable. Greenberg and his co-signers are right to try to stage an intervention, but that intervention needs its weight magnified and its franchise extended by including not just Chinese interlocutors but the rest of the world.

Nations acquire enduring soft power through gaining trust, attractiveness and legitimacy. This cannot be achieved through the crude exercise of military strength. Instead, sustained soft power derives not directly from one's actions but is awarded by others.

Seeking trust, attractiveness and legitimacy shifts the centre of gravity of decision-making from those who would deploy power towards those who experience its consequences. The same is true for any world order that comprises spheres of influence, is based on the "consent of the governed", or ensures mutually beneficial, win-win outcomes. Whatever world order emerges, other nations are pivotal.

But it is not just right that the focal point of international politics shifts away from great powers and towards other nations. It is also what works.

Observers of international affairs sometimes turn for insight to the ancient Greek historian Thucydides. He proposed the idea that nations that are incumbent powers and those that are rising powers have a high probability of resorting to violence to advance their self-interests.

Thucydides also suggested that great powers do what they will while the rest suffer what they must. Realism still carries variants of the idea to this day. But despite this conventional wisdom, history is full of examples of the opposite – great powers being flexible and willing to give way when other nations exert their agency.

Consider three examples. The largest world grouping after the United Nations is the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Established in 1961, the movement was a follow-up to the Bandung Conference, which emerged in response to great powers putting together policies for Asia without consulting Asian nations themselves.



Leaders of members of the Non-Aligned Movement gather for a photo at their summit in Baku, Azerbaijan, on October 25, 2019. Photo: Handout via DPA

Asian nations at that time were concerned about US-China tensions and seeking platforms for improved relations with the large nations around them. The NAM, which encompasses 55 per cent of the world's population and two-thirds of UN membership, might not have the global presence it once did but has still achieved significant success in shifting the global consensus on disarmament, anti-racism and opposition to apartheid in South Africa.

In the same vein, the organisers behind the Ottawa Treaty managed to get 164 states to accede to banning anti-personnel mines by 2022. Significant among those not signing the treaty were China, Russia and the US. In that year, however, Biden overturned the policies of the Trump administration and committed to destroying existing US landmines, even though it has not signed the treaty.

Finally, a less happy example from Thucydides' own time. Athens and Sparta did clash in [the Peloponnesian War](#), resulting in an Athenian defeat. Shortly afterwards, however, and in reaction to unbenevolent Spartan hegemony, Thebes, Corinth and Argos waged a military uprising against their former ally Sparta in the Corinthian War. The uprising crushed Spartan dominance, leaving the once-victorious hegemon isolated and permanently weakened.

The world does not have to undergo modern-day equivalents to these wars. If the great powers are unable to see through their disagreements, it is up to other nations to stage an intervention to pull them back from disaster.



Mao Zedong (left) welcomes US president Richard Nixon at his home in Beijing on February 22, 1972. Nixon urged China to join the United States in a "long march together" on different roads to world peace. Photo: AFP

This is not to discount the importance of great power leadership. Richard Nixon's [1972 trip to China](#) transformed international relations for the better. The trip had unlikely beginnings as Nixon was solidly anti-communist while China had killed millions of its people in [the Cultural Revolution](#) and sought to [export revolution](#) across Southeast Asia. Despite this distance between them, Nixon still reached out to Mao Zedong in an act of extraordinary political bravery and leadership.

The China of the 1970s was a dangerous place promoting internal turmoil and external threats of revolution; today, it does none of those things.

Compared to 50 years ago, with reality so much better than it was then, the greatest tragedy would unfold if both great powers do not reverse their direction of heightening rivalry.

More than ever, we could use more leadership like that of Nixon and Mao. If that is not forthcoming, the rest of the world will have to step up and stage a badly needed great power intervention.

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