

Living in an era of 25 percent peace probability

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On April 20, U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen portrayed U.S.-China decoupling as a “disaster” to both sides. In a speech at the Brookings Institution a week later, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that the United States aims “derisking and diversifying, not decoupling” from China. In other words, the U.S. will restrict exports of its key technology and products of semiconductors or artificial intelligence related to sensitive areas like military or security instead of cutting economic relations with China entirely. At the same time, the U.S. wants to diversify supplies of raw materials, including rare earth elements, to reduce its overreliance on China. Actually, the need for derisking had been raised by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on March 30. After accommodating the position of the European Union, the U.S. president had it officially endorsed by members of the Group of Seven Summit in Hiroshima last month.

Such change of atmosphere in the Bide administration had made many people worrying about worsened U.S.-China relations relieved to some extent. Will the bilateral ties really improve from now? Unfortunately, such a possibility is low, as suggested by what happened in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea and Singapore.

On June 3, USS Chung-Hoon, the U.S. Navy’s aegis destroyer, and HMCS Montreal, a Canadian frigate, were passing through the Taiwan Strait as part of the Freedom of Navigation Operation. At the time, a Chinese destroyer armed with ship-to-ship missiles came within 150 yards of the U.S. warship — even less than the length of the U.S. destroyer. The two vessels barely avoided a collision after the U.S. ship slowed down at the last minute. A week earlier, a Chinese fighter jet flew very close to a U.S. Air Force reconnaissance plane. Such nerve-wrecking moments often occur in and above the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

These incidents can end up with a massive armed conflict anytime if left unattended. International political scientists often compare the volatile U.S.-China ties to “sleepwalking” to warn against the growing danger. In fact, World War I which killed 8.5 million soldiers and 13 million civilians was triggered by the two bullets a young Serbian nationalist fired to assassinate Franz Ferdinand — the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne — in Sarajevo on June

28, 1914. Henry Kissinger found gruesome similarities between 1914 and 2023 given the deepening hegemony battle between the U.S. and China.

The role of politicians and diplomats is to prevent such accidents from evolving into a crisis. There were some kind of rules to avert them during the Cold War. But no such mechanisms exist between the U.S. and China today. The U.S. has been proposing to China to establish such rules to prevent such mishaps. But China refused. Instead, it demands the U.S. create such atmosphere based on mutual respect first. For instance, Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu purchased fighter aircraft from Russia in 2018, when he served as the director of the Equipment Development Department of the Central Military Commission. The U.S. administration under president Donald Trump imposed sanctions on it as it violated U.S. sanctions on Russia. China demands the Biden administration to lift the sanction, but it would not.

The U.S. also demands international laws be abided by in the South China Sea and Indo-Pacific so that U.S. allies can navigate the waters free from threats or blackmails from any countries. In reaction, the Chinese defense minister stressed at recent Shangri-La Dialogue that a certain external force approaches Chinese territory to provoke China — not to champion the freedom of navigation — for its own interest. Quoting the Chinese proverb, he warned, “If a friend comes to us, we’ll treat him with good drinks, but if a jackal or wolf comes, we’ll fight against them.”

Why does China reject the U.S.’s demand for dialogue to set rules to prevent a clash? The Economist came up with the analysis that the Chinese leaders believe that if China complies, it would end up justifying the approach of U.S. Navy and Air Force close to China’s territories on land, sea and air. The magazine pointed out that China basically regards the U.S. as a country irrelevant to the Asian theater and that U.S. military intervention will only bring about chaos.

There lies the essence of U.S.-China relations: a clash between China’s desire to expand to the rest of the world and America’s desire to keep it at bay. In the process, China wants to weaken the U.S. influence and the U.S.-led liberal international order by establishing a coalition with Russia, another revisionist and authoritarian state. In response, the U.S. is pressuring China not to cross the line, by mobilizing Japan, Australia, the Philippines, Korea, the NATO and the West Pacific countries. Such an epochal standoff for hegemony between the two superpowers can hardly be resolved with the adjustment of its economic strategy to some extent.

After looking into 16 cases of conflict between rising powers and existing powers over the past 500 years, Graham Allison, a professor at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of

Government, found that only 4 cases of them were addressed peacefully. According to his findings, we are living an era of 25 percent probability for peace.

* The view expressed herein was published on June 11 in the *JoongAng Sunday* and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies