

Is war between China and the United States still inconceivable?

It's a dangerous moment in history as the two powers are entangled in a struggle for dominance

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For *The Straits Times*

On Tuesday, former World Bank president Robert Zoellick caused a stir when he said relations between Washington and Beijing were in a "free fall" and may escalate into a military confrontation with serious implications.

"The relationship right now is in free fall. It's quite dangerous," he said at an event sponsored by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, adding: "People need to be aware that miscalculations can happen, and issues with Taiwan and others can move to a danger zone."

Is his assessment right? Will the US and China go to war?

As reflected by Mr Zoellick, a former White House, State and Treasury senior official, and then Harvard University senior fellow, the international community is concerned by the worsening relationship between the two most important countries in the world.

The experts used to say war between China and the US was inconceivable. But some experts are now saying it is conceivable. To understand what has gone so badly wrong with this relationship, we need to look back at history.

THREE HISTORICAL PHASES

The relationship between the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) can be divided into three historical phases.

The first phase was between 1949 and 1972. In the Chinese Civil War, the US supported the Kuomintang (KMT) against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). When the KMT was defeated, the US helped the government and armed forces of the Republic of China (KMT) to relocate from the mainland to Taiwan. The US also helped to defend Taiwan.

During this period, the PRC and the US saw each other as enemies. The lowest point in their relationship was during the Korean War. The US supported South Korea and the PRC supported North Korea. This was the one and only occasion on which the armed forces of the two countries clashed. The fighting ended in a stalemate and ceasefire.

During this 23-year period, each side tried to demoralise the other. There were no trade or diplomatic relations between them.

Phase two was from 1972 to 2016. In 1972, then US President Richard Nixon shocked the world by going to Beijing to talk to Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai.

Why did the US do a 180-degree turn in its China policy? Nixon's objective was to forge an alliance with China against the Soviet Union.



US Navy aircraft carrier USS Nimitz being refuelled in the South China Sea last month. The US considers Chinese claims to the waters enclosed by the nine-dash line in a Chinese map to be illegal, while China asserts that its claims are consistent with international law. As the US Navy conducts its so-called freedom of navigation operations in the waters, there is a danger that the two countries' navies may clash and things could spiral out of control. PHOTO: REUTERS

The two erstwhile enemies joined forces to fight a common enemy. There is a saying that my enemy's enemy is my friend. For both the US and China, the No. 1 enemy was the Soviet Union. This was a marriage of convenience. The two countries might have been sleeping in the same bed but they had different dreams.

Apart from opposing the Soviet Union, the policy of the US was to bring China out of isolation. The agenda was to socialise China and integrate it into the international community, including joining the World Trade Organisation. The American hope was that China would eventually become a responsible stakeholder. The American expectation was that China would be subordinate to the US and not challenge US hegemony.

The Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, was a black swan. No one could have expected that the CCP could produce a leader who would have the courage and power to put an end to the inefficient centrally planned economy. For a communist, this was nothing less than killing one of the ideology's most sacred cows.

Deng's decision, in 1978, to embark on reform and open the

Chinese economy to the world, would change the fortune of China. The progress which China has made in the past 40 years is historically unprecedented. It has transformed China, from a poor, backward and weak country into a strong, modern and rich country. No American, in 1972 or 1978, could have imagined that China would become the world's second-largest economy and is

The one hot spot that could provoke an armed conflict between China and the US is Taiwan. If the People's Liberation Army were to attempt to "recover" Taiwan by force, this could lead to the involvement of US armed forces. If the leaders of Taiwan were to seek de jure independence and if Washington were to support such a move, this could lead to a war between the two great powers.

projected to overtake the US and become the world's largest economy.

During the 44 years from Nixon's visit to 2016, the relationship between the two countries was fundamentally stable and peaceful. The two countries cooperated when their interests converged and competed when they diverged. When difficulties arose, they were able to deal with them, through give and take, without disrupting the whole relationship. However, trouble was brewing.

We are now in the third phase of relations, which began in 2016.

Things have changed: The original reason for the alliance between the US and China had disappeared with the end of the Cold War. Their common enemy, the Soviet Union, was gone.

Their bilateral relationship has evolved, from one between a rich, powerful country and a poor, weak country to one between two approximate equals.

They are not yet equal, economically or militarily. The US' per capita income is six times higher than that of China. US military power is without peer. China is not yet a superpower.

However, as China's power increases and the gap between

them narrows, the Chinese would naturally be more assertive and less willing to play the role of a subordinate. Since the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, China has discarded Deng's advice to keep a low profile and to hide its strength. Many Chinese feel very proud of their country's achievements. They feel that their dream of a rich China with a strong military has come true. They want China to play a leading role in the world.

China has shown its global ambitions by launching the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative, both opposed by the US, which saw them as building blocks for Pax Sinica to replace Pax Americana.

US BILL OF COMPLAINTS

It is clear the US has become disenchanted with China, seeing it as a competitor and challenger instead of friend and partner.

Why is this so?

The American bill of complaints against China is long and varied. It includes disaffection over trade relations, economic concerns, accusations of theft of technology, suspicion of cybercrime, intellectual property rights, ideology, human rights, religious freedom, the South China Sea,