

US-China ties most fraught in decades, say speakers at panel discussion

State of affairs compelled ex-Aussie PM Kevin Rudd to write book on it

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The current state of United States-China ties is the most strained it has been in years, and both sides need to relook the competition between them to avoid serious miscalculations that could send the world down a dangerous path.

This was a key takeaway from a discussion yesterday with former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, who called for nations to highlight the high stakes of the relationship in their conversations with the two superpowers.

Mr Rudd, who was prime minister from 2007 to 2010 and again in 2013, is a fluent Mandarin speaker who graduated from the Australian National University with majors in Chinese language and history.

He said he had never been as worried about the state of relations between the two giants in the 40 years since he began studying China. "I've seen a lot of these things over the years. But they have all occurred within a certain bandwidth, within a certain spectrum. Structurally, we now seem to be headed in a radically different direction," he said.

It was for this reason that Mr Rudd, who now heads the think-tank Asia Society, felt compelled to write the book *The Avoidable War*, which he discussed at the event organised by the East Asia Institute, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and the law faculty at the National University of Singapore.

Speaking to more than 200 academics, students and diplomats, Mr Rudd said he had felt an urgency to deal with the topic head-on, as the situation was getting "increasingly urgent".

US-China ties have reached a new boiling point over the last few weeks following developments such as US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan earlier this month. On Monday, China's military carried out more exercises near Taiwan, following a separate visit by a group of US lawmakers.

Mr Rudd likened the current state of the relationship between the two powers as two men at work soldering with welding equipment

without proper protection gear in a workshop, where wiring was exposed and with water everywhere.

"What could possibly go wrong? That's the problem we have with this relationship at the moment. There is no insulation, political or diplomatic, to reduce the risks of crisis, escalation, conflict and war. That's what we've got at the moment. I call that unmanaged strategic competition," he said.

Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, one of two panellists at the event, described the situation in the Taiwan Strait as a case of "kabuki on steroids", referring to the form of traditional Japanese theatre.



(From top) Former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee and International Institute for Strategic Studies executive director for Asia James Crabtree. PHOTOS: NUS, ST FILE, JAMES CRABTREE

"We've been entering difficult times, and now we are in dangerous times. It's not just that the US-China relationship seems to be deteriorating with no bottom in sight, I think the Taiwan Strait has become a red hot area again."

While the issue of Taiwan is not new, all the players have changed, she said.

China has now built itself as a major economic and political power, and the US is now more forward-leaning and allows higher levels of its officials to go to Taiwan. Taiwan is not the same too, and today, a large proportion of Taiwanese want independence, she said.

The road ahead will be very tough, noted Professor Chan, who said that while she is not sure what the leaders of China and the US can agree on, it would be good if both sides could manage their strategic competition by talking more to each other.

Similarly, fellow panellist James Crabtree, executive director for Asia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said that the situation between China and the US has never been this unstable.

There had been contact between the top leaders of both countries, albeit virtual, in the recent past, but the events of the last few weeks have "put (them) to one side".

All three parties – the US, China and Taiwan – are also undermining the status quo with their actions, despite claiming to want to maintain the current state of affairs, he said.

Taiwan is doing so with its public

sentiment shifting towards independence, he noted. At the same time, the US leaders and political system seem to be changing their views on China and Taiwan, while China has been "lobbing missiles".

"So at all three levels, there's a lot of instability, and the Chinese can see that, particularly in the United States. Even if President Joe Biden does not want to change things, another future president very well might."

At the discussion, Mr Rudd was asked by NUS law dean Simon Chesterman on the role small and medium countries like Singapore and Australia can play in mediating the relationship between the US and China.

Mr Rudd said there is room for friends of both the US and China to "say to both capitals there is a global interest and a regional interest at stake for you to manage your relationship more effectively".

In his book, he makes the case for a "guard rail" framework, which needs to be set up around red-line issues to better manage the US-China relationship.

But this might not be the only way to mend the ties between the two giants, he said.

"Whether it's that or something else to say, here is an idea for the way we should do it," he said. "Because to simply assume that the rest of us have to be price takers for the rolling structural deterioration of this relationship across the board, I think is wrong for all of us."

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