

American overreach in Anchorage points to conflict with China

By **Hugh White**

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It's fantasy to think that the US can still lay down the law as it attempted to in Alaska. Avoiding a Pacific war will take hard statecraft instead.

America's new Secretary of State, [Antony Blinken](#), seemed surprised by the tough talk from his Chinese counterparts when they met in Anchorage last week. He shouldn't have been, because they were responding in an entirely predictable way to his words just moments before.

Blinken had pressed China hard on such sensitive issues as Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and asserted America's right to reprimand China on these issues as the leader and guardian of "the rules-based international order".

No Chinese official could fail to respond stridently to such statements. If Blinken didn't know this, he has a lot to learn. If he did know it, then he was [clearly happy to see this first high-level meeting between the Biden administration and the Chinese government descend into a slanging match that sounded like something out of the old Cold War.](#)

That fits everything we have heard on China from President Joe Biden and his team since the election in November. They have painted China as America's primary strategic rival and talked up their eagerness to confront and contain it. Biden himself called it "extreme competition".

He wants to show US voters that he is even tougher on Beijing than Donald Trump, and rally US allies and friends to his side. This seems to be working. Many people in America and around the world – [including here in Australia](#) – have cheered Blinken's conduct at the meeting.

But once two countries start talking to one another this way it is hard to stop, so where does the US-China relationship go from here? It is vital to the whole world – and especially to Australia – that America and China find a way to reverse the spiral of escalating rivalry and find a way to get along, not least because the current

trajectory brings an ever-higher risk of war. How do Biden and Blinken imagine that the abuse and name-calling in Anchorage last week helps?

They would say, presumably, that it helps by setting out America's non-negotiable conditions for an improvement in relations. Once these are clear to the Chinese, they seem to believe, the two countries can move forward to build a new understanding that meets those conditions. All that is required is for China to adapt to the realities as spelt out by Washington.

It would be nice if this could happen, because it would undoubtedly make the world a better place. [But it won't happen, because China will never accept these conditions, and America cannot impose them.](#) They will therefore lead, not to a new understanding between Washington and Beijing, but to an even more dangerous escalating rivalry between them.

The Biden team's vision is for the US-China relationship to return to the way it was when China acknowledged American dominance. But that was back when America's economy was many times the size of China's, and its military weight in Asia was incomparably stronger. Now the distribution of wealth and power has shifted fundamentally, and there is no going back to the way things were.

So the idea that America can convince or compel China to conform to its vision of a US-led rules-based order is a fantasy. China is determined to restore its position as a great power, equal to any and subordinate to none. Even with the backing of its Indo-Pacific allies, if that is forthcoming, America would have to commit immense effort and resources to resist it.

It would mean a new Cold War with China, just as the atmospherics in Anchorage implied. And it would be a real Cold War, just as demanding and just as dangerous as the last one. There is no evidence at all that the Biden administration, or the American people, understand the scale of the costs and risks involved, or are willing or able to shoulder them.

And even if they were, there is no reason to assume that a new Cold War will end as happily as the old one did. America might well lose this one, because China is much stronger in the ways that really matter than the Soviet Union ever was.

The reality is that if America is to remain a significant power in Asia it is going to have to do a deal with Beijing to build a new order that acknowledges the reality of Chinese power and accommodates some of its ambitions. That will be hard and unpleasant, but the alternative of escalating rivalry and the growing risk of a major war is worse.

Negotiating that new order will require real statecraft, combining toughness and resolve with a degree of flexibility and some regard for the other side's interests and positions. That is a long way from what we heard from the Biden team in Anchorage last week.

If they don't do better soon they will face a choice between the only two alternatives to negotiating a new order in Asia – [going to war with China or withdrawing from the region](#). Not good outcomes, so Washington needs to change its tone.

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