

Great Power Competition Is Escalating To Dangerous Levels: An Interview With Richard Falk



Richard Falk

Great power competition has emerged as a key priority for U.S. foreign policy under the Biden administration. In fact, we may be already at the start of a new New Cold War, according to Richard Falk, one of the world's leading scholars in the fields of global politics and international law, in the interview below. Falk has also been a leading activist since the Vietnam war, and has published more than fifty books and thousands of essays. His latest book is a political memoir titled [Public Intellectual: The Life of a Citizen Pilgrim](#) (Clarity Press, 2021). Falk is Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University, where he taught for nearly half a century, and Chair of Global Law at Queen Mary University of London.

C. J. Polychroniou: Richard, US foreign policy under the Biden administration is geared toward escalating the strategic competition with both China and Russia. Indeed, the Interim National Strategic Guidance, released in March 2021, makes it abundantly clear that the US intends to deter its adversaries from “inhibiting access to global commons, or dominating key regions” and that, moreover, this work cannot be done alone, as was the case under Trump, but will require the reinvigoration and modernization of the alliance system across the world. Does this read to you like a call for the start of a new New Cold War?

Richard Falk: Yes, I would say it is more than ‘the call’ for a New Cold War, but its start. The focus is presently much more China than Russia, because China is

seen by Washington as posing the primary threat, and besides, it regards Russia as a traditional rival while China poses novel and more fundamental challenges. Russia, while behaving in an unsavory manner, dramatized by the crude handling of the opposition figure Alexei Navalny, is seen as manageable geopolitically. Euro-American strategy is to stiffen resistance to Russian pressure being exerted along some of its borders, and as in the Cold War can be handled by refurbished versions of 'containment' and 'deterrence.'

China is another matter entirely. The most serious perceived threats are mainly associated with non-military sectors of Western, and particularly, U.S., primacy, its dominance over a dynamic productive economy, especially with respect to frontier technologies. The remarkable developmental dynamism of the Chinese economy has far outstripped anything ever achieved in the West. The United States Government under Biden seems stubbornly blindsided, seemingly determined to address these Chinese threats as if they could be effectively addressed by a combination of ideological confrontation and as with Soviet Union, containment and deterrence. So far, the Biden response is fundamentally mistaken in its approach, which is to view China as a similar adversary than was the Soviet Union. This Chinese challenge cannot be successfully met frontally. It can only be met by a diagnosis of the relative decline of the West by way of self-scrutiny, selective emulation, and a surge of creative adaptive energies. Such a response needs to be accompanied by a reformist agenda of socio-economic equity, massive infrastructure investment, the adoption of fairer wealth and income tax structures, and a commitment to a style of global leadership that identified the national interest to a greater extent with global public goods. Instead of focusing on holding China in check, the United States would do much better by learning from its successes, and adapting them to the distinctiveness of its national circumstances.

It is to be regretted that the present mode of response to China is dangerous and anachronistic for four principal reasons. Firstly, the mischaracterization of the Chinese challenge betrays a lack of self-confidence and understanding by the American Biden/Blinken foreign policy leadership. Secondly, the chosen path of confrontation risks a fateful clash in South China Seas, an area that according to the precepts of traditional geopolitics falls within the Chinese sphere of influence, and a context within which Chinese firmness is perceived as 'defensive' by Beijing while the U.S. military presence is regarded as intrusive, if not 'hegemonic.'

These perceptions are aggravated by the U.S. effort to augment its role as upholding alliance commitments in South Asia, recently reaffirmed by a clear anti-Chinese animus in the shape of the QUAD (Australia, Japan, India, and the U.S.), formally named Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which despite the euphemism intends to signify enhanced military cooperation and shared security concerns.

Thirdly, the longtime U.S. military superiority in the Pacific region may not reflect the current regional balance of forces in the East and South China Seas. Pentagon public assertions have been sounding the alarm, insisting that in the event of a military confrontation, China would likely come out on top unless the U.S. resorts to nuclear weapons. According to an article written by Admiral Charles Richard, who currently heads National Strategic Command, this assessment has been confirmed by recent Pentagon war games and conflict simulations.

Taking account of this view, Admiral Richard advises that U.S. preparations for such an armed encounter be changed from the possibility recourse to nuclear weaponry to its probability. The implicit assumption, which is scary, is that U.S. must do whatever it takes to avoid an unacceptable political outcome even if it requires crossing the nuclear threshold. It may be instructive to recall the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when Soviet moves to deploy defensive missile systems in Cuba in response to renewed U.S. intervention to impose regime change. It is instructive to recall that Cuba was accepted as independent sovereign state entitled under international law to uphold its national security as it sees fit, while Taiwan has been consistently falling within the historical limits of Chinese territorial sovereignty. The credibility of the Chinese claim was given diplomatic weight in the Shanghai point Communiqué that re-established U.S./China relations in 1972. Kissinger recalled that in the negotiations leading to a renewal of bilateral relations the greatly admired Chinese Foreign Minister, Chou En-Lai, was flexible on every issue except Taiwan. That is, China has a strong legal and historical basis for reclaiming Taiwan as an integral part of its sovereign territory considering its armed severance from China as a result of Japanese imperialism. China governed the area now known as Taiwan from 1683-1895. In 1895 it was conquered and ruled by Japan until 1945 when it was reabsorbed and became a part of the Republic of China. After 1949 when the Chinese Communists took over control of China, Taiwan was renamed Republic of China on Taiwan. From the Chinese perspective, this historical past upholds the basic contention that Taiwan

is part of China and not entitled to be treated as a separate state.

Fourthly, and maybe decisively, the international claims on the energies and resources of the United States are quite different than they were during the Old Cold War. There was no impending catastrophe resulting from climate change to worry about or decaying infrastructure desperately needing expensive repair or under-investment in social protection by government in the area of health, housing, and education.

CJP: Isn't it possible that the approach of the Biden administration to the future environment of great power competition could lead to the formation of a Russia-China military alliance, especially since alliance formation constitutes a key element of state interaction? Indeed, Vladimir Putin has already said that the prospect of such partnership is "theoretically... quite possible," so the question is this: What would be the implications for global order if a Sino-Russian military alliance were to be formed?

RF: I think we are in a period of renewed alliance diplomacy recalling the feverish attempts of the United States to surround the Soviet Union with deployed military forces, which was a way of communicating to Moscow that the Soviet Union could not expand their borders territorially without anticipating a military encounter with the United States. At first glance, alliances conceived in these traditional terms make little sense. Except in Taiwan it is unlikely that China would seek to enlarge its territorial domain by the threat use of force. In this sense, the ad hoc diplomacy of alliance formation, typified by the QUAD seems anachronistic, and could lead to warfare as one among several unintended consequences.

However, realignment as distinct from alliance frameworks does make sense in an international atmosphere in which the United States is trying to confront its international adversaries with sanctions and a variety of measures of coercive diplomacy that are intended to constrain its policy options. Many states are dependent on international supply chains for energy and food, as well as reliable trade and investment relations. Reverting to the Cold War the Soviet Union was relatively autonomous. This is much less true under present conditions in which the higher densities of interdependence are linked to acute security vulnerability to cyber attacks, and where access to drone technologies and computer knowhow make non-state actors, extremist political movements, and criminal syndicates an

increasingly troublesome part of the global political landscape. In such an emergent global setting, traditional reliance on deterrence, defense capabilities, and retaliatory action are often ineffectual, and quite often even counter-productive. The purpose of contemporary patterns of realignment is less to augment defenses against intervention and aggression than to broaden policy options for countries that need to reach beyond their borders to achieve economic viability. Another motivation is to deflect geopolitical bullying tactics intended to isolate adversaries. As China and Russia are being portrayed as the enemies of the West, their alignment with one another makes sense if thought of as a reciprocally beneficial 'security community.' Compared to past configurations of conflictual relations, current geopolitical maneuvers such as realignment are less concerned with weaponry and war and more with attaining developmental stability, intelligence sharing, and reduced vulnerability to the distinctive threats and parameters of the Cyber Age.

The logic of realignment gives to countries like China and Russia opportunities to increase their geopolitical footprint without relying on ideological affinities or coercion. Such a change in the nature of world politics is more broadly evident. For instance, important countries such as Iran and Turkey use realignment as a diplomatic tool to offset pressures and security encroachments by U.S. and Israel. In Iran's case despite radical differences in ideology and governing style it is turning to China and Russia so as to protect its national sovereignty from a range of destabilizing measures adopted by its adversaries. Whereas Turkey, while being devalued as an alliance partner in the NATO context, may be satisfying its overall needs by turning to China and Russia than by sticking to its traditional role of a junior participant in the most potent of Western alliance structures.

CJP: Certain mainstream foreign policy analysts are rehashing old arguments about the US-China competition, in particular, by claiming that this is really an ideological battle between democracy and authoritarianism. What's your own take on this matter?

RF: I think even more so than in the Cold War the ideological battleground is a smokescreen behind which lurk fears and perceived threats to the Western dominance of the world economy and of innovative military technologies. In the last half century China has already staked a strong claim to have demonstrated a superior development model ('socialism with Chinese characteristics') to that produced in the capitalist United States. This Chinese achievement is quite

clearly explained and documented by the outstanding Indian liberal economist, Deepak Nayyar, in his important study, *Asian Resurgence: Diversity in Development* (2019). Great emphasis is placed by Nayyar on the high rate of savings enabling China to finance and strategically manage targeted investment of public funds. Nayyar downplays the role of ideology and stresses these economic factors, as he analyzes the development achievements of 14 countries in Asia.

The reality of the Chinese rise makes a mockery of the triumphalist claims of Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and The Last Man* (1992), even more so in George W. Bush's covering letter to the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States in which he claims that the 20th century ended with "a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise." How dated and misplaced such language seems twenty years later!

If China now additionally manages to challenge successfully the U.S. in such vital areas of technological innovation as artificial intelligence and robotics it will undoubtedly reinforce this image of Chinese ascendancy on the 21st century world stage. It is this prospect of being relegated to the technological shadowland that had made bipartisan elites in the United States so anxious of late. In fact, even Republican stalwarts are willing to put aside their polarizing hostility to join with Democrats in mounting a diplomatic offensive against China that could become war-mongering interaction if Beijing responds in kind. Graham Allison has reminded us that historical instances where a previously ascendent power is threatened by a rising one has often resulted in disastrous warfare. Such belligerence is usually initiated by the political actor that feels displaced by the changing hierarchy of influence, wealth, and status in world order, yielding to pressure to engage the challenger while it still possesses military superiority. [See Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap* (2017)]

CJP: Nuclear weapons and climate change represent by far humanity's two greatest existential crises. Can we really be hopeful that these threats can be managed tamed within the existing international system? If not, what changes are required in current interstate relations?

RF: Of course, at this time we have become acutely aware of such global

existential threats by experiencing the ordeal of the COVID pandemic, which has revealed the conflictual state-centric manner of dealing with a situation that could have been more effectively addressed if responding by way of global solidarity. As the pandemic now appears to be subsiding in most parts of the world, we cannot be encouraged by the weakness of cooperative impulses despite the obvious self-interested benefits for all if a global commons approach had been adopted with respect to testing, treatment, and distribution of vaccines. This negative background suggests that it is a somewhat vain hope to suppose that the threats posed by nuclear weapons and climate change can be successfully managed over time. Each of these mega-threats disclose different features of an essentially dysfunctional and inequitable system of world order. World history has now entered a bio-political phase where civilizational achievements are at risk and even the survival of the human species is in doubt. Analogous dysfunctions of a different nature are evident in the internal political and economic life of most sovereign states.

The relationship to nuclear weapons has been problematic from the beginning, starting from the decision to drop atomic bombs on Japanese cities in 1945 as the war was nearing its end. The horrifying civilian consequences seared the conscience of collective human conscience almost to the extent of the Holocaust. The two realities exemplifying the atrocities of World War II are Auschwitz and Hiroshima. It is illuminating that in the first instance the behavior of the loser in the war was criminalized in the Genocide Convention while that of the winner in the second instance was legitimated although left under a dark cloud that lingers until now. The reality is that nuclear weapons are retained for possible use by nine states, including the most militarily powerful countries. The fact that the great majority of non-nuclear governments and the sentiments of most people in the world unconditionally oppose such weaponry has hardly mattered. The UN recently sponsored the Treaty of Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) that entered into force in January 2021; however, neither law nor morality can challenge the resolve of the nuclear weapons states to retain their freedom to possess, deploy, develop, and even threaten or use such weaponry of mass destruction. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the first states to develop nuclear weapons, have issued a formal statement expressing their belief in the non-proliferation regime and deterrence as a preferred model of nuclear war prevention to that associated with a norm of unconditional prohibition reinforced by phased, monitored, and verified

disarmament treaty process.

Martin Sherwin in his definitive study, *Gambling with Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2020), convincingly shows that the avoidance of nuclear war has been a consequence of dumb luck, not rational oversight or the inhibitions on use associated with deterrence. The point being that despite the magnitude of the threats posed by the existence of nuclear weapons the structures of Westphalian statism has prevailed over considerations of law, morality, common sense, and rationality. What is absent with regard to these existential global threats is a sufficient political will to transform the underlying structural features by which authority, power, and identity have been managed on a global level for last several centuries. The absence of trust among countries is given precedence, and is further reinforced by the weakness of global solidarity mechanisms, resulting on leaving this ultimate weapon in potentially irresponsible hands, the fate of the earth in Jonathan Schell's book bearing that title, published in 1982.

Climate change has dramatized a different facet of this statist structure of world order. The need for the cooperative and urgent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions has been validated by a strong consensus of scientific opinion. The effects of inaction or insufficient action are being concretely experienced in the form of global warming, ocean levels rising, extreme weather events, glacial melting, and migrations from droughts and floods. Yet effective responsive action is blocked by inequalities of circumstances and perception that generate disagreements about the allocation of responsibility and by short-termism that makes private and public sector decision makers reluctant to depress performance statistics by expensive adjustments that cut profits and development. There is a widespread recognition of the need for drastic action, but the best that the collective will of governments have been able to do is to produce the Paris Agreement in 2015, which leaves it up to the good will and responsible voluntary behavior of governments to reduce emissions, a rather wobbly foundation on which to stake the future of humanity.

The UN as now constituted cannot provide platforms for addressing global existential threats in an effective and equitable manner. The responses to the COVID pandemic offer a template for such a negative assessment. It was obvious that short-term national economic and diplomatic interests prevailed at the expense of minimizing the health hazards of virus COVID-19. Once these interests

were satisfied the richer countries felt virtuous by resorting to feel good philanthropy, which was masked as empathy for poorer countries and their populations. These societies had been left almost totally without access to the protective medical equipment, ventilators, and vaccines during the height of the health hazards.

A revealing extreme instance of the pattern was embodied in the Israeli approach which was very effective within Israel, while withholding vaccines from the approximately five million Palestinians living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This disparity ignored Israel's explicit obligation under Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention to accord protection to an occupied people in the event of an epidemic. What is disclosed beyond reasonable doubt is the structural dominance of statist and market forces combined with the weakness of existing mechanisms of global solidarity, which are preconditions for upholding global public goods. An analogous dynamic occurs within states, reflecting the class, gender, and race interests and the disproportionate burdens borne by the poor, women, and marginalized minorities.

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