

# Project Syndicate

## Mob Diplomacy

Feb 24, 2023 | MARK LEONARD

MUNICH – Is sound, forward-looking foreign policy still possible? Talking to the statesmen, diplomats, intelligence operatives, and scholars gathered at the Munich Security Conference last week, I had my doubts.

Consider US-China relations. It was only a month ago that China's vice premier, Liu He, gave a conciliatory speech that some observers saw as part of a charm offensive aimed at the West. After that, many hoped that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's previously planned trip to China this month would reduce tensions further, building on Liu's own recent meeting with Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen, as well as Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden's tête-à-tête in Bali in November.

It is precisely because they are leaning into a souped-up competition that both sides seemed eager to put a ceiling on their rivalry, recognizing that more frequent contact is needed to guard against misunderstandings or accidental escalations. But then came the great Chinese balloon chase, which ended any notions of détente. As the large dirigible drifted across the United States, the Biden administration tried to hold its nerve; but public opinion soon exerted itself on national-security decision-making.

On television, Twitter, and other media channels, Biden's critics interpreted his restraint as weakness. Soon enough, Blinken's trip to Beijing was postponed. The US military downed the balloon a week after it appeared, then went on to destroy three more unidentified objects in US airspace – all of which were later deemed most likely to have been “benign.” In response, Chinese defense officials reportedly refused to take calls from their US counterparts.

The US was not acting on intelligence of an imminent threat. There are thousands of balloons in the air on any given day, and the US intelligence community agreed that the offending object posed no physical threat. But the Biden administration felt the need to appear strong in the eyes of the American public, and now the US-China relationship is on even shakier ground than it was before.

The downing of the balloon evokes George Orwell's poignant description of shooting an elephant in Burma in the 1920s. The young Orwell is handed a rifle and told to hunt down a rogue elephant, only to find that the animal is actually quite harmless. Nonetheless, he feels compelled to shoot it in order to appear decisive before the locals. “My whole life, every white man's life in the East,” he later reflected, “was one long struggle not to be laughed at.”

Open, honest dialogue between the world's two superpowers has never been more necessary. But the need always to signal strength makes diplomacy exceedingly difficult. This is certainly true in a media environment driven by Twitter and instant news alerts, which merely fuel further escalation. And while Xi may be sheltered from critical media and domestic opposition, he, too, faces growing pressure never to give an inch.

High-profile Chinese academics such as Jin Canrong are sounding increasingly nationalistic – demanding, for example, that US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy's plane be forced down if he attempts to

follow through on a planned visit to Taiwan.

When Wang Yi addressed the foreign-policy grandees assembled in Munich, he did not mince words. America's response to the balloon was "unbelievable, almost hysterical," constituting an "excessive use of force, clearly [violating] ... international law." A hastily arranged meeting between Blinken and Wang on the sidelines of the conference produced only more mutual recrimination.

To understand today's geopolitical ructions, one must look beyond major powers and top strategists. Instead, public opinion now seems to be in the driver's seat. And it's a global phenomenon. As people in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa come online, they are making themselves heard, and forcing their governments to incorporate their views into foreign-policy decisions.

Crucially, most people across the Global South see the world very differently than those in the West do. New polling by the European Council on Foreign Relations finds that while Europeans and Americans are converging on a more hawkish approach toward Russia, and want Ukraine to recover all its territory, people in China, India, Turkey, and (of course) Russia want the war to end as soon as possible, even if it means a Ukrainian defeat.

An even bigger gulf is emerging over the shape of the global order. Europeans and Americans are anticipating the emergence of a bipolar world divided between China and the West, where many other countries will function as "swing states," as during the Cold War. But others – including many in China – see the world heading toward fragmentation, with multiple powers vying for influence. The question, then, is not which rival bloc to choose but how to work pragmatically with everyone to protect one's own interests. Rather than playing a tune written by others, most countries want to be able to sing their own song.

Wang seemed to understand this in his speech at Munich – more than US Vice President Kamala Harris. She and other American speakers tried to rally the rest of the world behind the idea of democracy, while also calling for tribunals to prosecute Russian war crimes. But as welcome as this rhetoric is in Eastern Europe, it risks further alienating many others around the world. Not only do those countries see a double standard at work; they also bridle at the idea that they should be forced to choose a side in a conflict they didn't cause.

By contrast, Wang argued that all countries should be able to choose their own paths – even shrewdly expressing support for "European strategic autonomy." And when he called for a peace plan for Ukraine, he was speaking not so much to the national leaders and diplomats in the Bayerischer Hof Conference Hall as to the rest of the world. He must surely know that a ceasefire that entrenches Russian territorial gains would be unthinkable for Kyiv and is therefore not a serious proposition, but his goal is to appear reasonable and accuse Ukraine and its Western backers of escalation. Nowadays, all countries – even dictatorships – are playing to the crowd, and real diplomacy has been pushed to the margins.

## MARK LEONARD

Mark Leonard, Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, is the author of *The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict* (Bantam Press, 2021).

<https://prosyn.org/AkPYFGt>

## Support Project Syndicate

[Subscribe](#)   [Upgrade](#)   [Donate](#)

## Get our weekly newsletter

[Sign up](#)

Make your inbox smarter.

Select Newsletters

[Content](#)

[PS Quarterly](#)

[Sections](#)

[Topics](#)

[Archive](#)

[Columnists](#)

[Videos](#)

[Podcasts](#)

[Subscriber Exclusive](#)

[OnPoint](#)

[Longer Reads](#)

[Insider Interviews](#)

[Say More](#)

[Big Picture](#)

[Global Bookmark](#)

[Rewards](#)

[Project Syndicate](#)

[About Us](#)

[Contact](#)

[Careers](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Submission policy](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Member Publications](#)

[Network](#)

[Syndication](#)

[PS Magazines](#)

[PS Events](#)

[Institutions](#)

---

© Project Syndicate - 2024 [Privacy Policy](#) [Terms & Conditions](#) [Cookie Policy](#)