

## YACOOB ABBA OMAR: What does the new Cold War mean for Africa?

The new administration of Joe Biden shows no signs of going soft on Beijing

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Chinese and US flags flutter outside the building of an American company in Beijing, China on January 21 2021. REUTERS/TINGSHU WANG

Days after his presidential inauguration, Joe Biden, who had promised to reset some of the most critical elements of US-China relations, declared that China must expect “extreme competition” from the US.

What this means has been in full display over the past couple of weeks. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, resurrected by former US president Donald Trump, met in early March. Made up of the US, Australia, Japan and India, it is a loose alliance aimed at arriving at consensus on how to deal with China in the region.

Then on March 19 in what can only be described as the “Showdown in Alaska”, secretary of state Antony Blinken and Biden’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, met Yang Jiechi, China’s top foreign policy official, and Wang Yi, its foreign minister.

Blinken used his opening remarks to launch into China’s aggression towards Taiwan, reduction in democracy in Hong Kong and human

rights violations in Xinjiang province.

Yang rebutted him, reminding the US of its history of racial tension and injustice, being the “champion” of cyberattacks, and accusing the US of a “cold war mentality”, suppressing other nations and inciting countries to attack China.

It may be confusing to hear a policy adviser being so frank, until it is recalled that Yang has headed the international division of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and has served as a CCP politburo member since 2017. He was Chinese foreign minister from 2007 to 2013.

The US delegation’s aggressive tones took even pro-US observers by surprise, suggesting that it may be playing to a domestic political agenda, with the Democratic Party not wishing to be seen as soft on China compared with Trump’s rhetoric.

Also, the party may want to be in lockstep with popular antipathy towards China as a result of Trump’s persistent labelling of Covid-19 as “the China virus”. This has seen about 3,000 attacks on people with “Asian” features since the start of the pandemic.

Fareed Zakaria wrote in his recent Washington Post column: “Welcome to the new age of bloated Pentagon budgets, all to be justified by the great Chinese threat.” He points out that China’s defence budget is about a third of that of the US, while the US budget equals that of the next top 10 budgets.

Most analysts insist that the meeting set out the attention the Biden administration would be paying to human rights generally.

In a webinar hosted by the Mapungubwe Institute, China’s ambassador to SA, Xiaodong Chen, suggested the US stance may be concerned about challenges to its hegemony and not accepting China’s sustainable development path. The latter has seen China record economic growth of 2.3% in 2020, while it is expected to hit above 6% this year.

In January this year China set out its approach in a white paper titled “China’s International Development Co-operation in the New Era”. At the heart of this is the Belt and Road Initiative, formally cementing the initiative’s position at the core of China’s development efforts. The initiative is meant to improve connectivity and co-operation on a transcontinental scale.

More than 70 countries are taking part in the initiative, together representing more than a third of the world’s GDP and two-thirds of

the world's population. Anil Sooklal, SA's Asia foreign policy supremo, points out that the Belt and Road Initiative is likely to boost world GDP by \$7.1-trillion per annum by 2040.

What does this new Cold War mean for Africa? Will we be the proverbial grass that is trampled upon when the elephants fight?

The advice of Philani Mthembu, head of the Institute of Global Dialogue, needs to be heeded: "African countries would do well to not get sucked into contemporary geopolitical fault lines. They should rather seek to ensure strategic autonomy in engaging proactively with China, the US, the EU, Russia and other external powers seeking opportunities presented by the continent."

• *Abba Omar is director of operations at the Mapungubwe Institute.*

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