

With the US-China Meeting, History Repeats Itself, Sort Of

by George Friedman - November 14, 2023

U.S. President Joe Biden will meet this week with Chinese President Xi Jinping. It's an important meeting in that both presidents are weak and thus seek to improve their standing at home and their respective countries' positions in the world.

One can't help but be reminded of a similar trip in 1972, when U.S. President Richard Nixon famously met Chinese leader Mao Zedong. By then, Mao's age and health had reduced him to a shadow of his former self, while Nixon was dealing with the Watergate scandal, which, I'm sure, he knew would eventually destroy him.

The international context is similar too. In October 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel from two directions. Israel, unprepared for the attack, was questioning how its intelligence could fail so miserably. Its opponents took to the streets to condemn its actions, while the Israel Defense Forces conducted the war indifferent to the court of public opinion. The Soviet Union played a key role in arming Egypt and Syria, particularly with surface-to-air missiles and anti-tank systems, while the U.S., already an Israeli military benefactor, rushed more arms to Israel after the onset of the attack. Arab countries placed an embargo on oil, which went a long way to sending the U.S. economy reeling.

That these events all took place in a short space of time made it seem as though the world was coming apart.

The U.S., of course, was the driver of most of these events. It was still fighting the Cold War, so it was still obsessed with the Soviet Union and the threat it posed to Europe. It knew that Moscow had become involved in a major border dispute with China, and it was, as always, looking for a way to weaken it. China had blocked Soviet forces but was aware that they might strike again. It needed a counterweight. The meeting with Nixon was about an informal and undocumented alliance between the United States and China against the Soviet Union. Neither liked each other, but practicality makes strange bedfellows. Ultimately, the meeting would open the door to Chinese exports to the U.S. and U.S. investments in China.

The circumstances surrounding the upcoming meeting between Biden and Xi, which will take place in San Francisco, are thus: China's economy is weak, and its weakness has created social tensions that Xi now has to manage. The U.S. wants China to curb some of its naval activity, of course, but I suspect they also have a common interest in curbing Russia. On paper, China is allied with Russia but has done little materially to back it up. Beijing's historic distrust of Moscow isn't so easily forgotten. The meeting will likely not mention Russia, save for a wink and nod.

At the periphery of all of this is the Arab-Israeli war, which the U.S. wishes would go away but which clings to history as an unwanted responsibility. It's the same war as in 1973 with different players and weapons, with no solution and the sounds of the highly moral demanding that someone else do something.

This article is not meant to be profound. It is meant to give us a sense of the necessity built into our lives. In geopolitics, context always matters. The past is the present and likely the future, if not in detail then in spirit.

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