

# Offline: Why we must make peace with China



The Chinese Government's decision to float a surveillance balloon over US territory was a surprising violation of American sovereignty. China has issued a statement of regret, describing the incursion as an "accident". The immediate impact was an abrupt postponement of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Beijing to reset diplomatic relations. Whether provocation or mistake, the longer-term result will be a further erosion of trust between the West and China. This moment of confusion comes at a difficult time. Last month, US General Mike Minihan predicted outright war between America and China in 2025, after distracting presidential elections in Taiwan and the US in 2024. Faith in China's leadership suffered considerable damage after the government's recent decision to lift all COVID-19 restrictions and allow SARS-CoV-2 to spread unchecked among at-risk and largely unvaccinated populations. Chinese estimates of COVID-19 mortality have commanded little confidence. There are still wider fears.

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Vladimir Putin has described Xi Jinping as his "dear friend". Long-accepted liberties in Hong Kong continue to be curbed. The "lab leak" theory of COVID-19 persists because of China's reluctance to allow a full and independent investigation by WHO scientists. The world faces a combustible political predicament. In the UK, university research collaborations with Chinese institutions are being targeted by politicians and media in an unattractive wave of Sinophobia. Japan has approved its largest military expansion since 1945. Meanwhile, China's political stability is far from assured. The country's demographic crisis has started—population has peaked and is now projected to halve by 2100, posing unsustainable challenges for a brittle economy. Taking all of these forces together, the temptation for Western leaders may be to turn away from China. Even to isolate a country it senses it cannot trust. This deepening diplomatic *froideur* is influencing cooperative programmes in health. Incentives are withering. Criticism is intensifying. But reducing the circumference for collaboration with China would be a profound self-inflicted wound, one that we in the medical community must resist at all costs.

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As Scott Moore argues in *China's Next Act* (2022), health, environment, and science have become substantially more important areas of diplomatic concern in recent years. If we are to manage the common dangers we face, "we must all think differently" about how countries work together—"in a future shaped by climate change, pandemics, and technology, all countries ultimately need China to succeed—and vice versa". Moore calls for a "reframing" of China's relationship with the world. For the reality is that "China is essential to avoiding...planetary catastrophes". Competition—economic, geopolitical, and ideological—will continue, but must not crowd out cooperation. The great test for the international community will be to judge when to compete and when to cooperate: "Preventing the next pandemic means confronting and correcting old prejudices while better integrating China into the global health landscape." Political disagreement need not preclude scientific cooperation. Last week, WHO's zero draft of a pandemic prevention treaty was published. The motivation for this legal instrument was "the catastrophic failure of the international community in showing solidarity and equity" during the pandemic. The zero draft raises hard questions and includes many contestable proposals. How should intellectual property rights be managed in a global emergency? How should a pathogen access and benefit-sharing system operate? How can universal health coverage be accelerated as a route to resilient health systems? How should countries be held accountable for their pandemic preparedness responsibilities? How can the treaty be enforced? What is the role of WHO? The idea of a climate-like COP is offered as a governance mechanism. Delivering a global agreement on pandemic preparedness and response would be challenging even in the best of circumstances. And today's fractured and hostile world certainly does not present the best of circumstances. Now is not the time to diplomatically disengage from nations with whom we have political disagreements. As Moore notes, "China plays an especially important role in global public health and pandemic prevention". Despite China's mysterious balloons, it is time for the global health community and their institutions to lean in.

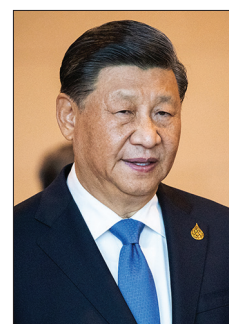
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