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Alaska tirade shows China and the US are further apart than ever

Beijing pushback a sign of its growing confidence abroad

Richard McGregor

Yang Jiechi, China's top foreign policy official, addresses the U.S. delegation at the opening session of U.S.-China talks in Anchorage, Alaska, on March 18. © Reuters

Richard McGregor is a senior fellow at the Lowy Institute.

No diplomat who ever dealt with Yang Jiechi, China's top foreign policy official, would have been surprised by his opening screed at his first face-to-face meeting with his U.S. counterparts in Anchorage.

With the cameras rolling, Yang lectured the U.S. side at length about their democracy's shortcomings and China's strength. "The U.S. does not represent the world," he said, waving his finger across the table.

All of the touchstones familiar to private meetings with Yang, of a new China confident about its path and contemptuous of America and its allies, were on display. Yang's temper tantrum has been interpreted by some commentators as being all about Chinese domestic politics. Yang certainly judged his target audience, astutely, with his fury about a "condescending" U.S. instantly going viral on local social media.

If President Xi Jinping had his own personal social media account, doubtless he would have tweeted his approval as well. But it would be a mistake to see Yang's performance as mere bluster designed for home consumption.

China is increasingly confident it is gaining America's measure across the spectrum of competition, be it economic, military, technology and regional supremacy, and Yang's speech and the country's diplomacy more broadly reflects that. China has always had "wolf warrior" diplomats. The world is simply seeing more of them these days because Beijing feels safe in belligerently pushing back against its critics in public.

Yang is 70, an age when most Chinese officials have been compelled to retire, and he has now held the country's top diplomatic positions since 2007, first as foreign minister, and now as state councilor. He has been a member of the Politburo since 2017. In Anchorage, he was speaking for the top leadership of the Communist Party.

Yang's tirade seemed to be a calculated display of disrespect for his two U.S. counterparts, Antony Blinken, 58, and Jake Sullivan, 44, whom he seems to consider to be green and young. Yang's point, of course, is that the U.S. has shown disrespect for the Communist Party and the political system it presides over. He was returning the favor in spades.

U.S. delegates face their Chinese counterparts at the opening session of U.S.-China talks in Anchorage, Alaska, on March 18. At center is Secretary of State Antony Blinken and at right is national security adviser Jake Sullivan. © Reuters

In that respect, the meeting was immensely valuable, as it drove home the stark divide between the world's two superpowers, with all the profound implications that holds for the rest of the world. The two countries don't just hold incompatible views on Asia and the Indo-Pacific. As Yang made clear, they are far apart on what should be the rules of the road for the entire world.

The buzzword in Western capitals these days as they try to develop a more united approach to China is support for the "rules-based order," as ill-defined as that may be. Yang was dismissive of this, underlining, again, Beijing's contention that Washington cannot assume it is speaking for the world, or indeed anyone besides itself.

"What China and the international community follow or uphold is the United Nations-centered international system and the international order underpinned by international law, not what is advocated by a small number of countries of the so-called rules-based international order," he said.

The "small number" of countries may be developed and wealthy nations, but Beijing's strategy of outflanking them is now much more clearly out in the open. Yang made a point of saying that the 10-member Association of Southeast Asia Nations were now China's most important trading partners, followed by Japan and South Korea. For years, Yang has described Beijing's ties with Moscow as its most important diplomatic relationship.

Beijing's message is consistent in this respect, that the U.S. is just one of any number of foreign countries that China has to deal with and has no special claim on its attention. Of course, the reality is far different. Certainly, China has broadened its trade around the world to the point where it can battle widespread tariffs in the U.S. market and still see its global exports grow strongly.

But the U.S. remains a formidable and dangerous rival, and the only country with the convening power to bring multiple like-minded nations together in a united front to resist Beijing's advances. That alone explains the intensity of Yang's ire, which at the very least was clarifying in setting the terms of the bilateral relationship at the start of the Biden administration.

In this new era of superpower competition, Yang's meeting opener had another purpose: to show countries that may either be antagonistic to the U.S., like Iran, or the many others that want to sit on the fence, that they can stand up to -- and indeed -- lecture the Americans.

This may not have the effect of intimidating Washington, but it is useful as a display of power for any other country looking on, be they in the Middle East, Africa or Southeast Asia or the Pacific. Many countries that have been on the receiving end of lectures from Washington over the years may have been quietly thrilled to watch Yang at work. To which the new administration might respond: Be careful what you wish for.