



Lessons learned from trying to thaw icy relations between rivals U.S and China



U.S. Ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns. Pedro Pardo / AFP via Getty Images file

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Outgoing ambassador assesses state of U.S.-China relations

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By Janis Mackey Frayer and Jennifer Jett

BEIJING — As he prepares to leave Beijing, the U.S. envoy to China feels relations between the two rival powers are the most stable they’ve been in recent years. But there’s no guarantee they will stay that way.

It “remains a very challenging, often very contentious and in a long-term way deeply competitive relationship,” Ambassador Nicholas Burns told NBC News in an interview this week. “And you can’t get around that. We’re rivals for global power. Still, the world’s two biggest economies have learned that “we’ve got to talk to each other,” Burns said, adding that “there are times when we have to work with China because it’s in the American national interest.”

China is increasingly challenging the U.S.-led international order that has been in place since the end of World War II, working to various degrees with Russia, Iran and North Korea.

The two countries have profound differences on issues such as trade, technology, the status of Taiwan and human rights, and blame each other for cyberattacks and the deadly U.S. fentanyl crisis.

China’s been unduly provocative in the Taiwan Strait with its military maneuvers,” Burns said, adding that Beijing “has made a major mistake and continues with that mistake in helping Russia to prosecute its illegal and barbaric war against Ukraine.”

Beijing denies that it is aiding the Russian war machine or carrying out cyberattacks on the U.S. that Burns said are “on a scale of lethality that is unprecedented.”