



BREAKING THE US-CHINA LOGJAM

BY DANIEL R. DEPETRIS

Daniel R. DePetris (dan.deptris@defp.org) is a fellow at Defense Priorities and a syndicated foreign affairs columnist at the Chicago Tribune.

President Joe Biden has repeatedly expressed a desire to establish so-called “[guardrails](#)” around Washington’s dealings with China to ensure the world’s most important bilateral relationship doesn’t become unmanageable. Chinese President Xi Jinping, recognizing that adversarial relations with the world’s predominant power undermines his goal of revitalizing the Chinese economy after three years of COVID-era restrictions, has demonstrated [similar interest](#). Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s [two-day trip to China](#) on June 18, a replacement trip of sorts after a previous one was cancelled in February, suggests both powers could be making another slow crawl toward more predictability.

Unfortunately, “predictability” is not exactly an apt description of US-China relations these days. “Dysfunctional” is more accurate. Blinken’s recent meetings with senior Chinese officials aside, Washington and Beijing find themselves in a strange situation whereby both agree that consistent dialogue on issues of mutual concern would be productive. Yet, whenever there is the slightest hint of diplomatic momentum, some negative event takes the relationship back to square one. Previously scheduled diplomatic sessions are postponed, sharp words are exchanged, and mutual animosity is compounded to the point where normal state-to-state business is increasingly difficult to conduct.

Washington consensus drives a hardline China policy

There is a growing body of opinion in both Washington and Beijing that US-China ties are destined for long-term rivalry. If there is one major issue Republican and Democratic lawmakers find consensus on, it’s treating China as a strategic competitor and preserving Washington’s status as the predominant power in Asia. The bipartisan House Select Committee on China’s ability to quickly issue a set of recommendations indicates a trend that has accelerated since the early years of the Trump administration. Maintaining a sense of balance in the competition, in this view, is simply not good enough; the United States has to win the competition outright, even if it means using Washington’s leverage over critical technology supply chains to undermine China’s development.

China unsurprisingly regards all of this as detrimental to its own security interests, if not a provocation from a foreign power seeking to contain Chinese power in its own neighborhood. What the United States sees as benevolent passages through international waters in support of a rules-based international order, China sees as deliberate challenges to its authority or the premeditated instigation of a crisis. Whether or not US officials agree with this characterization is irrelevant; Xi and his subordinates in the Chinese Communist Party believe it all the same.

The irreconcilable policy disagreements between the United States and China are bad enough. But those disagreements are only hardened further through a series of self-inflicted wounds which make the initiation of dialogue more complicated as the politics in both countries becomes more acrimonious towards the other side.

One step forward, two steps back

The record is well-established in this regard. Sensing relations needed to be reset, Biden and Xi [held a phone call](#) in July 2022 to talk about everything from Taiwan to the war in Ukraine. While the call didn’t resolve those issues, it was an attempt by the world’s two most powerful leaders to get inter-state dynamics

on track. Yet weeks later, despite warnings from the Biden administration that such a trip would be counterproductive to the US goal of establishing a floor under the relationship, then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan and spoiled whatever understandings Biden and Xi made. China, inevitably, expressed its anger by conducting military drills around the island and [shutting off communication](#) on issues ranging from defense to public health.

Biden and Xi tried to reset relations again in November 2022 during an in-person meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia. Both men left their conversation in good spirits. Biden repeated his intention [to maintain open lines of communication](#) and high-level dialogue with China. Xi was equally magnanimous. “Xi pointed out the current state of China-US relations is not in the fundamental interests of the two countries and peoples, and is not what the international community expects,” the state-run Xinhua news agency [reported](#).

Events, however, killed the momentum yet again. Two months later, a Chinese spy balloon was discovered loitering over the continental United States, causing a hysterical reaction in Washington about the scope of the CCP’s surveillance activities. President Biden, likely in part to domestic political pressure, [ordered the balloon shot down](#) over the South Carolina coast.

Ideally, this would have been the end of the story. The Biden administration, however, chose to go a step further, [canceling Blinken’s pending trip](#) to China, meant to implement a deliverable reached by Biden and Xi during their Bali summit to expand senior-level communication between their teams. It took three months for that meeting to be re-scheduled.

US-China relations looked as if they were back on the upswing in May. US Ambassador Nicholas Burns met with China’s new foreign minister, Qin Gang, [on May 8](#) in what was the first sit-down at a high-level [since January](#). Days later, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan [engaged](#) in a two-day session in Vienna with Wang Yi, China’s top foreign policy official. CIA Director William Burns [made a previously](#)

[undisclosed trip](#) to China to impress upon Beijing “the importance of maintaining open lines of communications in intelligence channels.”

Even so, Biden’s hopeful prediction that ties with Beijing would start to “[thaw very shortly](#)” was dampened by [China’s refusal](#) to make Minister of National Defense Li Shangfu available for a meeting with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in Singapore (the two did exchange pleasantries during a dinner). What Washington got instead was lectures [about the US](#) stirring belligerence in China’s near abroad. The fact that a People’s Liberation Army-Navy warship cut in front of a US guided missile destroyer a day earlier as it was transiting the Taiwan Strait didn’t help China’s cause.

Can the cycle of hostility be arrested?

The United States and China find themselves locked in confrontation mode. If they have any intention of getting out, both powers will need to change how they do business.

First, all discussions on sensitive matters, in particular those dealing with Taiwan and the South China Sea, should be done privately, without fanfare. Negotiating in the open, whether through speeches or press conferences, doesn’t move the ball forward. Neither does using the media to cast blame on the other side for the lack of progress, which derails diplomacy before it has the slightest chance of proceeding. [Sniping](#) does neither the United States nor China any favors. If anything, it provides ammunition for policy hardliners in both countries who already believe Washington and Beijing are in a cold war.

Second, the United States and China need to stop overreacting to each other at every opportunity. Granted, sometimes retaliation is unavoidable. But retaliation isn’t appropriate in all contexts and can do more harm than good. Washington’s cancellation of Secretary Blinken’s trip to China in protest of the spy balloon incident, for instance, was the perfect example of an overblown response to an event—espionage—that has been a feature of international relations since the dawn of time. In a similar vein, Beijing’s refusal to make Defense Minister Li Shangfu, available for a

simple phone call with Defense Secretary Austin merely reinforces a belief in Washington that China isn't interested in defusing tensions.

Finally, the United States and China need to respect one another's bottom lines instead of pretending they don't exist. This has nothing to do with appeasement and everything to do with preventing a confrontation neither power wants. Whether it's a Taiwanese president being photographed with the US speaker of the House or Chinese aircraft [challenging US pilots](#) in international airspace, there are some events that just create unnecessary friction for no little conceivable gain.

The United States and China will remain competitors. But competition doesn't need to result in conflict. Both powers have no other alternative but living with one another as best they can, however frustrating it will be.

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