

Dialogue and de-escalation



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OPINION

Increased diplomatic engagement between the US and China has helped to bring down the temperature in their fraught relationship, but it has not yielded any agreement on the key issues that divide them and drive tensions in their intense strategic competition — Taiwan, war in Ukraine, trade, technology curbs, and military postures, especially in the South China Sea.

The visit of the US secretary of state to Beijing in late April was part of the effort to improve communication and contain tensions between the two countries. Antony Blinken's trip took place against a mixed background of escalating tensions but also modest advances in cooperation and communication in certain areas.

This resulted from the meeting last November between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in San Francisco. Their first face-to-face meeting in over a year produced a tentative thaw in frosty ties. It led to the restoration of high-level military-to-military contacts, suspended by Beijing in 2020, and an agreement on counter-narcotics cooperation.

Last April, the two leaders also spoke on the phone. The increased dialogue was reflected in the conversation between the defence ministers and US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen's visit to China last April. The first talks on artificial intelligence between the two countries are due to take place in the coming weeks.

But just hours before Blinken's arrival in Beijing, the US Congress approved billions of dollars of assistance for Taiwan to counter China in the so-called Indo-Pacific region. This was part of a \$61bn aid package that included funding for Ukraine and Israel. It also involved the requirement for TikTok's Chinese parent company to sell its stake in the social media platform or face a ban in America. In this election year, US officials have threatened higher tariffs on Chinese imports, with Biden calling for tripling tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminium — clearly as part of his re-election campaign.

Not surprisingly, Blinken was told at the outset of his trip that the US had to choose between cooperation and confrontation. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said during the talks that while dialogue and cooperation had



China's President Xi Jinping (R) speaks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (L) during their meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on April 26, 2024.

● REUTERS

increased in "various fields", "negative factors" in the relationship are "still rising and accumulating". He warned against any transgression of China's red lines. A Chinese foreign ministry statement said Wang also criticised Washington for taking "an endless stream of measures to suppress China's economy, trade, science, and technology", aimed at containment of China.

However, he acknowledged "the China-US relationship is beginning to stabilise" and called for progress in areas where the two countries agreed. This was echoed by Blinken, who said the US "seeks to deepen cooperation where our interests align" while reaffirming

the US commitment to "maintaining and strengthening lines of communication to advance that agenda and deal responsibly with differences to avoid any miscalculations".

Both the US and China want to avoid a collision course even as their strategic competition intensifies.

The high point of Blinken's visit was of course the meeting with President Xi. That the Chinese president received him indicated Beijing's desire to calm tensions with Washington. Warning against "vicious competition", President Xi told Blinken that the US and China should be partners and not rivals — who "help each other succeed and not harm each other".

China, he said, wants to see a "confident, open, and prosperous United States" but expected the US to see China's development in a positive light. According to a statement issued by the Chinese foreign ministry, Xi also told Blinken that both sides "should honour words with actions rather than say one thing and do another". He called for "mutual coexistence" and emphasised the need to follow through on what was agreed between him and President Biden in San Francisco to improve bilateral relations.

The readout from the American side was that Blinken conveyed US concerns on a number of issues, especially China's military assistance to Russia in the Ukraine war. Speaking to the media before the meeting, he said Russia "would struggle to sustain its assault on Ukraine without China's support", pointing out that Beijing supplied machine tools and several dual-use items critical for Russia's defence industry. This posed a threat not just to Ukraine but also to Europe and was a red line for Washington. He said after the meeting the US will wait to see how China addresses this concern, warning that sanctions could be imposed if Beijing did not respond. This injected a jarring note into the otherwise positive atmospherics of Blinken's trip. The Chinese reaction was predictably sharp. A foreign ministry spokesman rejected "groundless" US accusations as an effort to shift blame, while Wang made it clear that "China is neither the creator of the Ukraine crisis nor a party to it". But days later, Washington went ahead and sanctioned several Chinese companies for supplying Russia with components

for military use.

Nevertheless, Blinken's visit reflected an effort by both sides to stabilise the relationship and limit the turbulence and volatility that have come to characterise Sino-US ties. But beyond this effort to ease tensions, which is important, there was no evidence of any narrowing of differences between the two sides on core issues. Moreover, the run-up to the US presidential election in November is likely to see a significant amount of China-bashing, given the political consensus and popular sentiment in America that advocates a tougher posture towards Beijing. Both Biden and Donald Trump can be expected to vie with each other in striking a more aggressive stance on China.

Taiwan will continue to be a dangerous flashpoint in the US-China confrontation, especially as the region surrounding it is bristling with heightened military activity. The military build-up and a series of recent incidents in the South China Sea also present obvious risks. The resumption of high-level military contacts between China and the US will be important to enable the two countries to reduce the risk of any inadvertent or accidental conflict.

Even if the recent US-China diplomatic engagement has not produced any breakthroughs on contentious issues, it indicates that neither side wants unmanaged tensions to push the two countries onto a collision course, which would have unpredictable consequences for them as well as the rest of the world.

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China doesn't need to invade to achieve Taiwanese unification

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OPINION

The US faces the most challenging international security environment since the end of World War II.

The war in Ukraine rages even as the war continues and threatens to expand in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China continues to harass and intimidate its neighbors, and Washington is more acutely aware of the threat of a Chinese attack against Taiwan.

More attention to Taiwan's security is welcome, but the current public discourse remains too focused on the threat of a Chinese invasion of the island. Beijing still has other options to force unification short of invasion, including an escalation of its ongoing hybrid warfare campaign against Taiwan. US policy is not well-designed to deter or defeat such a strategy.

China is more likely to pursue a "short-of-war coercion campaign," as we call it, centered on political and economic warfare accompanied by limited kinetic action than an invasion of Taiwan for three main reasons:

First, annexing Taiwan by means short of war significantly limits possible damage to other Chinese grand strategic objectives. The People's Republic of China's long-term strategic goals are to continue to build up what it calls its comprehensive national power and become the world's leading power. It then aims to decisively reshape international politics and place itself at the center. Although Chinese leader Xi Jinping clearly believes that unifying Taiwan with the mainland is a key component of this grand strategy, he may be loath to risk China's march to geopolitical dominance by starting a full-scale and likely global war.

Second, a short-of-war strategy centered on political warfare and limited kinetic action could be successful. Taiwan's most recent elections highlighted deep domestic political divisions, coinciding with a rise in skepticism of America's support. These sentiments are further reinforced by the fact that Taiwan remains internationally isolated. Taiwan's status is sui generis in international affairs: it is a fully func-

tioning nation-state not recognized by the international powers. This creates an opening for China's manipulation of Taiwan's understandable fears of abandonment.

Third, strategies short of war are consistent with Chinese strategic thinking and previous behavior. A number of Chinese warfighting concepts reference the utility of fighting wars using means beyond traditional applications of kinetic force. These concepts have been employed regularly in Chinese "gray zone operations" in the South and East China Seas and Taiwan Strait. Given their general success, China will likely intensify their employment in a campaign to annex Taiwan.

Our new report demonstrates that Beijing can realistically accomplish such a strategy. By adopting the mindset of Chinese strategic planners, we devised a plausible short-of-war coercion campaign that would let China establish political control over Taiwan without an invasion or overt military blockade. The campaign we modeled ran for four years, from the inauguration of a new Taiwanese president through his first term. During this period, China would break the US-Taiwan relationship, degrade the Taiwanese government's ability to govern, and significantly un-



Chinese and Taiwanese flags are seen on a street in Kinmen, Taiwan.

● TYRONE SIU/REUTERS

dermine the Taiwanese will to resist and US desire to aid Taiwan.

We found that four years of constant Chinese air and naval incursions, a quasi-blockade, political warfare and manipulation, extensive cyber and physical sabotage of Taiwan's critical infrastructure, and deadly force on offshore islands would generate "cognitive overload" within the Taiwanese government and a sense of chaos throughout Taiwan's populace.

During the course of such a campaign, the US would be inundated with Chi-

nese information warfare and become convinced that Taiwan is not "worth" going to war over, especially following new economic deals with China. Those who are skeptical of China's ability to paralyze US responses have not been paying attention to Russia's political warfare against the US since 2015, which almost led to a rupture with NATO over Ukraine. In particular, if China's campaign to inflict pain does not trigger any of the indicators and warnings of the invasion the US is preparing for, the US might well stay out of

a Chinese coercive campaign.

In our notional campaign, after Taiwan is thrown into chaos and seemingly abandoned by its strongest ally, China then seizes the opportunity to offer "peace," promising to halt the coercion campaign and guarantee a level of autonomy in exchange for cooperation following guidelines dictated by Beijing.

The Taiwanese government, despite having no desire to become part of China, chooses to end its people's suffering, agreeing to a plan that would eventually lead to the unification China desires.

The scenario outlined in our report does not represent our assessment of what we think will necessarily happen. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that a short-of-war coercion scenario is realistic and highly dangerous.

Beijing has many ways to successfully gain control of Taiwan, including intensifying its ongoing "gray zone" operations. China may seek to exploit Taiwanese vulnerabilities, primarily Taiwan's international isolation and lack of alliance relations, in a coordinated short-of-war coercion campaign that inflicts massive pain on Taiwanese society and prevents US intervention.

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