

Blinken's trip hasn't interrupted slide toward war

His cabinet heavy on Middle Eastern and European expertise, Biden abandoned US-China institutionalized dialogue

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But where's the China expertise? President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris take a group photo with the Cabinet members on Tuesday, July 20, 2021, on the South Portico of the White House. Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz

Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trip to Beijing is a ripple on the tide of President Joe Biden's decisions not to promote dialogue or expert understanding. It has not interrupted the slide toward war.

Under Presidents George W Bush, Barack Obama and, partly, Donald Trump, the two countries had institutionalized large-scale communications, especially through the strategic economic dialogue (Bush), strategic and economic dialogue (Obama), and comprehensive economic dialogue (Trump). Dozens of senior officials regularly met.

Those dialogues could not resolve the great issues like Taiwan or intellectual property, but officials came to understand each other and render differences manageable.

When Donald Trump became President, Xi Jinping was determined to keep communications open and relations constructive. Chinese scholars say the lavish welcome was historically exceptional.

As with other relationships, Trump responded initially with: "President Xi is a brilliant man. If you went all over Hollywood to look for somebody to play the role of President Xi, you couldn't find it.

There's nobody like that. The look, the brain, the whole thing.” Likewise, at Davos in 2020: “Our relationship with China has now probably never, ever been better.... He's for China, I'm for the US but, other than that, we love each other.”

But Trump's mood changed, the dialogue lapsed, and Biden chose to permanently abandon institutionalized dialogue. Blinken's trip marginally walks back that decision and marginally walks back the coldness Blinken deliberately instilled at his initial meeting with the Chinese in Anchorage.

US Presidents traditionally ensure the presence of some cabinet-level officials with expertise and experience on the most vital national security issue: No Cold War President would have been without the top-level expertise brought to the task by Kissinger, Brzezinski, Scowcroft and others.

On this joint episode of the China in the World podcast and the U.S.-China Nexus podcast, Eleanor Albert interviews Paul Haenle and two of his former National Security Council (NSC) colleagues, Dennis Wilder and Faryar Shirzad, about US policy toward China during the George W Bush administration.

George W Bush was a foreign policy failure in many respects but, guided by Hank Paulsen at Treasury and brilliant CIA China expert Dennis Wilder at NSC, he balanced his strong support for Taiwan's security with strong support for the 1970s peace agreements and ended up admired by both Taipei and Beijing.

Obama ended the tradition of having cabinet-level China expertise. Trump followed suit. Biden has been exceptionally striking in declaring that China is America's ultimate foreign policy threat but hiring no top-level expertise on China. His secretary of state, national security adviser and CIA director spent their careers on the Middle East and Europe; his secretary of defense on the Middle East.

Even Biden's ambassador to China is a career Middle East and Europe official. His National Security Council Asia czar has no direct experience with China and became famous for demanding disengagement based on the false assertion that US engagement with China presumed engagement would democratize China.

Some of these officials, like CIA Director William J Burns, are outstanding and have deployed their European expertise to resist Russian aggression. But, regarding China, imagine the CEO of a giant food company announcing that cereals constitute the greatest opportunity and the greatest competitive threat, then announcing that the heads of the Wheaties division, the Cheerios division, the oatmeal division and all others would be hamburger experts.

Below the leadership level, it's worse. Intelligence and Defense Department officials say that it has become so difficult for anyone with China expertise and experience to get security clearance that the US has partially blinded itself. Scholars and business executives who bridge the two countries are frightened and vast numbers are considering departure to China. Some visiting Chinese professors, including the two most pro-American international relations scholars and one invited personally by Jimmy Carter, have been treated very badly at US Immigration.

In short, Biden has continued and worsened the Trump disjunction between strategic imperatives and leadership skills, the Trump contempt for expertise and the Trump (late, partial, possibly temporary) dismissal of institutionalized dialogue. No weekend trip can ameliorate these fundamental realities.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) shakes hands with China's President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Monday. Photo: Leah Milis / Pool / Al Jazeera

Magnifying the consequences is a vital difference between Trump and Biden. Trump always sought the deal (albeit a misconceived deal): The trade war was about trade disparities and if Beijing took specific actions the trade war would proportionately ease. Biden proffers no deal, just escalating sanctions.

Given the overwhelming evidence that steel and aluminum tariffs hurt the US more than China, raise prices and cost many tens of thousands of US jobs, most economists assumed that the President whose slogan is "a foreign policy for the middle class" would lift them. But, no, US

Trade Representative Katherine Tai says they are necessary to maintain “leverage” over China. There is of course no leverage from policies that damage America more than China.

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Lacking expertise, Washington frequently seems clueless about how the world views its China policies. For instance, Blinken and Biden often broadcast versions of Biden’s June 9 statement that China’s Belt and Road Initiative is a “debt and confiscation program.” Trump’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [characterized Belt & Road similarly](#).

Developing world leaders, who frequently contrast China’s development offers with Washington’s lectures or its omnipresent Special Forces teams, know that is false. Every China specialist knows the study of 1100 Chinese loans that found there was not a single instance of China using debt problems to seize collateral.

Does the US President have no idea what he is talking about or is he systematically spreading disinformation? Either way, developing countries dismiss much of US policy. For instance, many give credence to the argument that the problem in both Europe and Asia is US efforts to encircle and destabilize its adversaries. Hence, all of Latin America, Africa and the Middle East align with China regarding US sanctions on Russia.

The big problem is Taiwan. Henry Kissinger warns that we are sliding toward war over Taiwan. The Biden administration has totally repudiated the peace compromise so successfully negotiated by Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Washington promised to abstain from official relations or an alliance with Taiwan. But President Biden has promised four times to defend Taiwan; that is an alliance.



Former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger attend the Nobel Peace Prize Forum in Oslo, Norway December 11, 2016. Photo: NTB Scanpix / Terje Bendiksby

Speaker Pelosi was emphatic that her August trip to Taipei was an “official” trip; immediately after her meeting with President Tsai, the presidential spokeswoman went on island-wide TV and proclaimed, “We are a sovereign and independent country.”

Responding to lesser provocations, George W Bush, his secretary of state, and his deputy secretary of state, no panda-hugging liberals, distanced the US and warned Taipei to stop. Instead, Secretary Blinken continues to welcome such official relations and tell the Chinese not to “overreact.”

The angry popular reaction inside China to Xi’s failure to respond decisively to such US initiatives is the one risk that could topple Xi Jinping from power. That concern is the one thing that could trigger him to launch a direct attack on Taiwan.

Biden has no senior advisor who understands such things. Blinken and Sullivan act on how they believe theoretically China should react, not on knowledge of actual Chinese politics.

If war comes, it will not be the limited conflict of US war games. China will hit Okinawa immediately or lose. The US will hit mainland Chinese bases immediately or lose. China will respond against the US.

The common denominator of Trump’s MAGA policies, Biden’s MAGA-plus policies, and [Representative Mike Gallagher](#)’s ultra-MAGA policies is a repudiation of the promises and norms the US accepted when Nixon, Carter, Mao and Deng compromised to eliminate what had been a terrible risk of conflict over Taiwan.

The cover for that repudiation is an endless repetition of the assertion that China is planning an invasion of Taiwan, an assertion for which the US intelligence community says there is no evidence.

In fact, Washington’s hard left and the hard right always despised compromise. The pragmatic center has evaporated for domestic reasons and the self-righteous ideologues rule Congress. No weekend trip, no fog of diplomatic niceties will arrest the resultant reversion to the pre-1972 risk of war.

(China took an equally dangerous turn, also for domestic reasons. Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Canadian hostages, economic war on Australia, and much else are serious issues. But this article is about the US; previous US administrations handled middle-sized issues without sliding toward war.)

Biden was elected by the pragmatic center, but he has no China team, no China policy, no strategic vision. He should be wary of taking even a small risk that history will remember him for the first inadvertent world war of choice. Weekend trips for marginal changes of tone do not address the problem.

William H. Overholt, a senior research fellow at Harvard, wrote the first book (1993) to argue that China would become a superpower; a 2018 book saying that China was headed into an era of financial and political stress, and a 2023 article saying that on current trajectory China will become the slowest growing major economy.