**America`s China preoccupation**

BY M A L E E H A L 0 D H I 2021-06-21

THE already fraught relationship between the US and China has plunged to another low in the wake of President Joe Biden`s first foreign trip that took him to Europe. The visit turned out to be more about containing China than other issues on the global agenda. The US president used the trip to build support among America`s Western allies to counter China.

The meeting of the Group of Seven in Cornwall, the 30-member Nato summit and even the first US-EU summit saw much of the focus on China.

During the G7 parleys the US pressed European countries to join it to censure Beijing on several counts including human rights and trade practices. Dialling up pressure on Beijing evoked a strong response from Chinese officials who accused the G7 of slandering their country`s reputation and declared that `the days when global decisions were dictated by a small group of countries are long gone`.

Even as the G7 tackled a slew of issues ranging from Covid-19 vaccines to climate change and global economic recovery it was China that seemed to dominate the agenda. This was evident from the communiqué as well as announcement of an ostensible answer to China`s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that envisages raising private capital for infrastructure projects in developing nations. Biden set the tone by framing the competition with China as a `contest` between Western democracies and autocrats and urging G7 countries to harden their position on Beijing. As a result, the communiqué assailed Beijing on human rights in Xinjiang, called for greater autonomy for Hong Kong and demanded an investigation into the origins of Covid-19 in China.

Writing in The Guardian, Rafael Behr portrayed `Biden`s mission` in Cornwall as an effort `to recruit allies for the next cold war`. Whether or not a new cold war is an apt description, Biden`s antiChina diplomacy seemed to go into overdrive. This became more obvious at the American president`s next stop in Brussels for the Nato summit, where the stance got even tougher.

The communiqué issued after Nato`s annual summit pronounced China as a security challenge anddeclared that China`s `stated ambitions and assertive behaviour` that included building a nuclear arsenal and space and cyber warfare capabilities `present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order`. Chinese officials shot back to furiously denounce the communiqué for the China threat theory and portrayed it as being the `continuation of a Cold War mentality`.

Driving this hardline US approach is its growing fear of a rival superpower`s increasing global economic, military and technological power. It reflects the political and popular consensus in the US fuelled by years of former president Trump`s actions and rhetoric that sees China as an adversary who has to be contained rather than engaged. Recently the White House`s top official for Asia asserted that the `the period that was broadly described as engagement has come to an end`. Kurt Campbell, coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs also said that US policy towards China will now be pursued within a `new set of strategic parameters` in which `the dominant paradigm is going to be competition`.

The latest act in this competition was G7`s unveiling of a US orchestrated infrastructure plan billed as a `Green` development initiative to challenge China`s BRI, the biggest and most ambitious economic enterprise of this century. The `Build Back Better for the World` initiative was however long on rhetoric and short on specifics. No details were forthcoming either about its scope or funding.

This lef t it open to question whether it would materialise at the scale envisioned. There was also a touch of irony in the fact that while the US was rolling out a global infrastructure plan the administration had failed to get its domestic infrastructure legislation approved by Congress.

The two key questions raised by Biden`s Europe trip are how far European allies will be willing to go beyond tough words and sign up to an adversarial policy with China and what is the outlook for the future course of US-China relations. With some exceptions most European allies are sceptical about a confrontational policy especially as they have key economic equities in ties with China. Last yearChina became the EU`s top trading partner surpassing the US. Germany`s top export market and biggest trading partner happens to be China, which is why Chancellor Angela Merkel once said that EU and US interests on China are `not identical`. Italy is part of BRI and is reported to have agreed with Merkel during the G7 summit that action against China should be avoided.

Other than perhaps France and Belgium, most EU countries prefer a more measured approach to China. Washington`s closest ally, UK may also be reluctant to adopt too antagonistic a policy especially as it wants to expand trade and investment with China. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was quoted as saying when he arrived for the Nato summit that `When it comes to China, I don`t think anybody wants to descend into a new cold war.

Differences between the US and its Western allies on China policy will not however constrain Washington from pursuing the path it has chosen. Turbulence in Sino-US ties will persist as competition intensifies between them.

Cooperation will nonetheless be sought in limited areas of common interest such as climate change. But volatility is inescapable when there is unmanaged competition and an explicit `adversarial` dimension in US policy.

Can the relationship be stabilised? A prudent response to this has been offered by a Chinese academic in an article in Foreign Affairs titled `New engagement consensus`. Professor Wang Dong argues that a new cold war is neither inevitable nor desirable. He proposes a new approach to engagement involving strategic reassurance among other things. China, as a rising power, would need to credibly reassure Washington that `it is neither pursuing a sphere of influence by pushing the US out of East Asia` nor aiming to replace the existing international order`. The US for its part would have to `resist pursuing a containment strategy and seeking to mobilise the US public and its allies for a new cold war`. Whether this sensible advice will be heeded remains an open question.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.