**Shift in stance**

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After almost a year and a half in power, the Biden Administration has finally divulged the basic contours of its strategic intent towards China.

On May 26, while addressing a session organized by the Asia Society at the campus of George Washington University, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken gave a rather comprehensive exposure to the current thinking in the White House on China. ‘Same old stuff with a more reconciliatory tone’ is how it can be summarized in one sentence.

Certainly, it was an abridged collection of the key talking points from all the previous administrations. However, quite conspicuously, Mr Blinken spent a lot of time elaborating the strategy for domestic technological revival – an indirect indication that the Biden Administration has a similar approach as Donald Trump to counter the ever-increasing Chinese technological leadership by strengthening the American domestic technological infrastructure.

Blinken’s tone, not surprisingly, missed the caustic and sarcastic elements that were always an integral part of the Trump administration’s trademark statements pertaining to Beijing. Blinken has made it categorically clear that the US does not want any kind of new cold war or a direct war-like conflict with China. “We don’t seek to block China from its role as a major power, nor to stop China – or any other country, for that matter – from growing their economy or advancing the interests of their people.”

At the same time, he reiterated the much-touted American policy to resort to the use of force to snub all attempts from a “revisionist” China to redefine the post-World War II liberal international order. “China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so. Beijing’s vision would move us away from the universal values that have sustained so much of the world’s progress over the past 75 years,”: Blinken bluntly warning China as well as reassuring US allies that Washington is in no mood to compromise on the existing liberal international order. “We’ll continue to oppose Beijing’s aggressive and unlawful activities in the South and East China Seas.”

But Blinken did not mention any tangible plan on how Washington was planning to counter the growing Chinese influence in the global arena. It appears that the Biden Administration is still unclear about a concrete counter-strategy to push back China’s influence, squeeze China’s dominance and suppress China’s development space. Interestingly, Blinken mentioned a long list of the oft-repeated complaints against China in his speech; technology pilfering, corporate malpractices like espionage, illicit technology transfer, supply chain problems and unequal market access etc.

Contrary to President Biden‘s statement in Tokyo last month where he pledged to intervene militarily in case Taiwan is attacked by mainland China, Blinken did not use any coercive language while mentioning Taiwan and its role in the complicated Sino-US relations. He emphatically reiterated the continued adherence to the ‘One China Policy’.

A cursory appraisal of Blinken’s policy speech on China indicates that the Biden Administration has learnt some lessons from the failure of the Trump administration’s belligerent stance on Beijing. The Trump administration tried many aggressive steps – including a trade war, geopolitical imposition, diplomatic intimidation, technological embargo and other indirect bullying moves – to corner the Xi regime, but all these measures proved to be inadequate to achieve Washington’s desired strategic objectives.

Blinken also referred to familiar American rhetoric about internal “repressive” socio-political inside China – but in a rather soft tone. In a balancing act, while discussing a long list of ragged complaints, Blinken was quite generous in talking about the potential territories of mutual cooperation with China including public health issues, climate-related strategy, nuclear nonproliferation and arms control, global expansion of narcotics networks, growing food insecurity, and global macroeconomic coordination. In a conciliatory tenor, he pledged that “as we invest, align, and compete – we’ll work together with Beijing where our interests come together,”

Nonetheless, the much-hyped speech by Anthony Blinken has exposed two fundamental realities about the Biden Administration’s approach towards China. One, President Biden does not want to repeat the mistakes made by Trump by unnecessarily bullying Beijing. There is a realization in the White House that arm-twisting has proven to be too counter-productive in the last five years and has ended up inversely harming American interests. The Biden Administration is indirectly admitting that it cannot change China and its system in the near future.

And two, the Americans have yet not been able to chalk out a tangible strategy on how to pre-empt the growing influence of Beijing in global politics at large. And this is perhaps the bigger problem with the policymakers in Washington. Some experts are suggesting the usage of “system pressure” as the only viable option for the Americans at the moment to contain the Xi regime from metastasizing its cultural, economic, political and ideological seeds across the globe.

The Biden Administration is likely to buy into this idea of system pressure as a workable tactic to mollify Beijing. ‘Invest, align and compete’ is the new mantra of the Biden Administration to realign its strategy towards China. But a lot still depends upon the execution part, particularly the response of the chronic US allies which can be detrimental in shaping this new phase of very complicated Sino-US relations.

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