**Trips for cooperation**

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In the midst of deteriorating relations and bitter friction, a flurry of high-profile American officials’ visits to China has been significant. This is a bold attempt to revive cooperation optimistically towards a workable relationship. How far these efforts will be successful in the wake of new Biden’s doctrine to restore American leadership and maintain a balance of power is a test of time.

The visit of Secretary of State Antony Blinken to China was the highest-level official trip in the last five years since Biden became president – followed by Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and US Special Envoy on Climate Change John Kerry. These visits have become extremely pronounced particularly in the wake of simmering tensions.

Blinken went to Beijing in June to talk about cooperation at a time when the relationship is strained by trade disputes, diplomatic and military tensions. He emphasized the importance of diplomacy and reducing the risk of misperception – an obvious reference to the past misadventure of the US shooting a Chinese spy balloon, and the escalating rift over Taiwan.

The significance of his visit was three-fold. First, it aimed to rekindle frosty ties and create a favourable atmosphere for a potential Xi-Biden meeting in November, when the US intends to host APEC leaders in San Francisco so that both leaders can enter with mutual confidence. There is a desire to return to the spirit of Bali (November 2022) whenBiden and Jinping talked of managing competition ‘responsibly’. This unfortunately proved to be short-lived.

Second, this meeting was important for the audience in the EU, where China’s support for Russia in the Ukraine war is straining relations. China would welcome this opportunity to impress and ensure that the EU does not follow too closely behind the restrictive US policies on China.

Third, it strengthened the political narrative of the US that Biden is successful in managing relations with China while not compromising on its influence in the Indo-Pacific. All eyes are on the future to see whether the thaw in tensions will sustain.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen’s four-day trip to China earlier this month was also aimed at building bridges. She expressed her resolve to foster a “resilient and productive channel of communication”. Dispelling the misconception of decoupling of economies, she negated the US-China relationship to be viewed in terms of ‘great power conflict’.

The spirit of reconciliation is quite obvious in the background of serious allegations of unfair economic practices and strict export control by the US over the sale of crucial semiconductor technology to China. It doesn’t want China to have an edge in AI and military technologies that could allow it to be used against the US in a future conflict. How responsibly the two countries manage the economic rivalry in light of the fresh resolve is yet to be seen.

John Kerry was the third official this year to visit China – a week back – to reestablish a stable relationship for climate negotiation even though there is no major disagreement in the sphere and both countries have a history of boosting global climate negotiations, including the Paris climate accord in 2015 when governments agreed to limit the industrial era rise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees C.

However a series of broader tensions affected the ongoing climate talks, including Trump-era tariffs on Chinese goods and solar panels and Biden’s export sanctions and blocking of imports from Xinjiang over concerns about forced labour. After former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit last year to Taiwan – a democratically governed island that China claims as part of its territory – Beijing announced it would halt talks on climate change. Kerry’s visit tried to revive climate cooperation in a tense backdrop.

These visits are in stark contrast to the era of the Trump administration when there were no personal visits and most conversation happened on social media. These visits are a way for the US to reinforce that Biden’s policy is not a continuation of Trumps’ hostile policy towards China.

At such a crucial crossroads, former American secretary of state and national security advisor Henry Kissinger’s visit to Beijing this month was no less symbolic. In a conversation with ‘The Economist’ before his visit, he reiterated that China and the US are on “path to confrontation” because “both sides have convinced themselves that the other represents a strategic danger.” Alarmed by the possibility of a war-like situation – as both possess nuclear weapons and flexing muscles over Taiwan – he came to China to reinforce that lost spirit of diplomacy, move the US-China relationship in a positive direction and prevent conflict.

China and the US are competing for technological supremacy and economic dominance. Beijing believes that the US will keep it down at all cost. Washington is adamant that China desires to replace the US as the world’s leading power.

The natural response to rising China’s ambition and the American euphoria of supremacy is to manage the competition responsibly and avoid confrontation. Another is to establish a permanent and uninterrupted dialogue and frequent exchanges between the two. The last step is to revive the spirit of global rules based on trade, climate, and AI. A revived global order would be the best defence against this toxic power rivalry.

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