

## COMPETITION OR ENGAGEMENT? ASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF U.S. SECRETARY BLINKEN'S VISIT TO CHINA

By

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



Given the current global landscape and its changing dynamics, U.S.-China engagement holds huge significance. The relationship between the two major powers carries significant implications for international peace, security, and economic stability. In the backdrop of increasing tensions and deterioration of relations over the past years, the need for diplomatic engagement between these two major powers became paramount as it incentivizes dialogue promotion and cooperation on key points of contention such as trade, security, climate change, and human rights. Effective diplomatic engagement between the U.S. and China can help prevent conflicts, mitigate risks, and produce outcomes that are mutually beneficial for both countries as well as the international community. In the wake of mounting tensions, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Beijing, which he concluded on 19 June 2023<sup>1</sup>, assumed high importance as it was the first visit by a top-level U.S. diplomat to China in almost half a decade.

During recent years, U.S.-China relations have witnessed palpable deterioration, touching new lows each year-- particularly illustrated by spike in tensions owing to territorial disputes in South China sea, Taiwan Strait issue, cyber espionage allegations, trade imbalances, human rights concerns, and

<sup>1</sup> Haley OTT, "Key Takeaways from Antony Blinken's Visit to China," CBS News, June 19, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/key-takeaways-antony-blinken-china-xi-jinping/>.

ideological differences.<sup>2</sup> Reinforced by broader geopolitical 'competition', the aforementioned factors created an immediate need for diplomatic efforts to address the points of contention so as to stabilize the relationship.

Initially, Secretary Blinken was supposed to visit China in February 2023, but the trip was postponed due to the "spy balloon" incident that occurred in United States. Since it prompted security concerns, the U.S. military shot down the balloon, heightening bilateral tensions.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, U.S. State Department decided to delay Secretary Blinken's visit to China, recognizing the need of addressing the security concerns before initiation of substantive diplomatic engagement.

Similar to other diplomatic endeavors, Secretary Blinken's visit to China aimed at advancing several objectives, especially the need to establish active diplomacy between the two countries, and maintenance of open channels of communication.<sup>4</sup> The visit sought to ensure better understanding of each other's positions in terms of 'flash-points', exploration of routes of cooperation on shared challenges, affirmation of 'One-China' policy, and categorical support for Taiwan's defense capabilities.<sup>5</sup> The visit not only intended to melt the ice while seeking to bring stability in bilateral relations, but also to reiterate U.S. stance on issues of critical nature such as the conflict in Ukraine.

Given the significant global implications that arise out of their relationship, stabilization of U.S.-China relations is of immense importance. As both are major powers, the nature of their relationship not only impacts their respective economic, political and security spheres, but is also fraught with far-reaching consequences for international trade, regional stability, and global governance. Diplomatic engagement and bilateral dialogue provide much-needed avenues to manage differences, and prevent misunderstandings that have the potential of escalation and turning competition into confrontation. If not managed wisely, great power competition can have grave consequences for international peace and stability conditioned by the proverbial "Thucydides Trap".

While in Beijing, Secretary Blinken had meetings with top-level Chinese officials including President Xi Jinping, Director of CC for Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, and then Foreign Minister Qin Gang. In his discussions with these officials, Secretary Blinken focused on the need to normalize and improve the

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<sup>2</sup> Blackwill, Robert D., and Philip Zelikow. "U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS DETERIORATE." *The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War*. Council on Foreign Relations, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28673.6>.

<sup>3</sup> Christina wilkie and Amanda Macias, "Blinken Tells China Its Spy Balloon Was 'irresponsible' after Canceling Beijing Trip," CNBC, February 4, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/02/03/us-secretary-of-state-blinken-postpones-high-stakes-trip-to-china-after-us-discovers-suspected-spy-balloon-.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Zurcher and Antoinette Radford, "Antony Blinken Hails 'candid' Talks on High Stakes China Trip," BBC News, June 18, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65941659>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

bilateral relationship.<sup>6</sup> The discussions with the Foreign Minister can be categorized as those with a pragmatic tone, entailing a number of understandings reached on issues such as his follow-up visit, increased people-to-people exchanges, and resumption of working groups (such as U.S.-China working group, chaired by Representative Rick Larson which was created in 2005).<sup>7</sup> However, the meeting with Wang Yi appeared more assertive in nature as he clearly pointed towards Washington's alleged transgressions, and stated that deterioration of relations had mostly occurred on account of U.S. actions. President Xi, though, had the most calming effect on the dialogue as he emphasized the important role of cooperation over competition while calling for an acknowledgment of each other's interests, and mutual respect for each other's rights.<sup>8</sup> The Chinese readouts of these meetings serve a variety of purposes: they provide a much needed, deeper insight into the opportunities and challenges while both U.S. and China seek to build a diplomatic momentum and possibly arrange a Biden-Xi summit meeting in the foreseeable future.

Among the key issues discussed in these meetings, the Taiwan Strait crisis is credited as one of the most critical due to its sensitivity and significance for both countries. The Chinese government has a categorical stance on its sovereignty over Taiwan, viewing all kinds of interventions in this case as a direct challenge to the PRC's interests.<sup>9</sup> For his part, Secretary Blinken reaffirmed U.S. adherence to "One-China" policy. He also signaled U.S. commitment to maintenance of regional stability while avoiding any actions that would escalate tensions.<sup>10</sup>

The conflict in Ukraine was also discussed during the meetings as an important subject. The Chinese side has maintained a stance of neutrality, seeking to avoid taking any sides and balance its relations with both the West and Russia. Chinese diplomats reiterated this position during these meetings. Additionally, with regard to trade disputes over advanced technologies, the discussions reflected growing economic competition between the U.S. and China. Finding its way into the talks, U.S. criticism of China regarding human rights violations was also noted. While specific details of these

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<sup>6</sup> Sheila Chiang, "Hell of a Job': Biden's Reaction and 5 Other Takeaways from Blinken's Trip to China," CNBC, June 20, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/06/20/us-china-relations-takeaways-from-blinkens-beijing-visit.html>.

<sup>7</sup> 1. "Our Mission," U.S.-China Working Group, May 29, 1970, <https://larsen.house.gov/uswcg/>.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia M. Kim, "Unpacking the Chinese Readouts of Blinken's Meetings in Beijing," Brookings, June 21, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/06/21/unpacking-the-chinese-readouts-of-blinkens-meetings-in-beijing/>.

<sup>9</sup> Haley OTT, "Key Takeaways from Antony Blinken's Visit to China," CBS News, June 19, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/key-takeaways-antony-blinken-china-xi-jinping/>.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Zurcher and Antoinette Radford, "Antony Blinken Hails 'candid' Talks on High Stakes China Trip," BBC News, June 18, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65941659>.

meetings remain undisclosed, it is evident that the discussions encompassed a wide range of issues, pointing towards the complexity of the relationship.<sup>11</sup>

After a prolonged diplomatic pause, Secretary Blinken's visit to Beijing marks a significant development in U.S.-China relations, offering outcomes and opportunities for future progress. The resumption of high-level diplomatic engagement reflects a resolve on both sides to work for stabilizing bilateral ties. From a range of contentious issues such as Taiwan, Ukraine, trade disputes, to finding agreements on people-to-people exchanges, and Blinken's invitation to the Chinese foreign minister, the discussions demonstrated readiness of both sides to engage in productive dialogue. This presents an opportunity for sustaining channels of communications, while highlighting the importance of diplomacy in managing competitive relations in order to promote cooperation. The immediate outcomes of this visit can be described as optimistic, but a closer observation is essential to gauge the longer term effect of this move towards purposeful engagement.

The visit, as important as it was for China and the United States, also entails significant implications for the regional states -- specifically Pakistan as a close partner of China and a long-standing friend of the U.S. Pakistan always has sought good relations with both the United States and China, acknowledging the importance of both. The rise of China as a major power and the ongoing competition between the U.S. and China places Pakistan in a unique position where managing good relations with both major powers becomes a delicate task. Pakistan has successfully managed the relations even during critical times and has actively engaged with both U.S. and China. Secretary Blinken's recent visit to China and its outcomes are to be seen as a positive development by Pakistan and any improvement in strained relations between Washington and Beijing offers incentives for a common friend and partner such as Pakistan. It is too early to confidently determine the outcomes of the visit but based on the details of the meetings from both sides, one thing is clear: U.S. and China seem prepared to engage in diplomatic interaction to manage their troubled relationship.

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia M. Kim, "Unpacking the Chinese Readouts of Blinken's Meetings in Beijing," Brookings, June 21, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/06/21/unpacking-the-chinese-readouts-of-blinkens-meetings-in-beijing/>.