

In Kissinger's shadow: how will history judge Blinken's diplomatic manoeuvring on China and Russia?

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- Kissinger opened the door to relations with China with his 1971 trip to Beijing and bagged the secretary of state job two years later
- Today, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken appears to have alienated China, while National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan seems to be keeping lines of communication open



When Henry Kissinger speaks, the world listens. The former US secretary of state's address to the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, on May 23 was no exception.

Aged 99, Kissinger remains true to the theory of the balance of power that he has long championed by appealing for Russia, now widely deemed the outright invader of its neighbour Ukraine, not to be completely isolated and for the US-China adversarial relationship to be eased.

It is important to remember that Kissinger's groundbreaking trip to China in July 1971, when he was national security adviser to then US president Richard Nixon, was followed by Nixon's official visit in February 1972, which laid the foundation for an in-all-but-name alliance between the two countries and for, many believe, the decline of the Soviet Union, Russia's predecessor.

Rapprochement with China and the subsequent detente with the Soviet Union earned Kissinger more of Nixon's confidence and enabled him to one-up then secretary of state William Rogers in their ongoing power struggles and eventually take the latter's place in 1973.

What about the current diplomatic duo of Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, now that the US deems both Beijing and Moscow as its strategic opponents?

Given that US President Joe Biden will turn 80 this year and that his vim and vigour have been questioned in some quarters of his country, the combination of Blinken and Sullivan is supposed to ensure that the US' diplomatic engine is firing on all cylinders.

Soon after Biden's inauguration in January last year, the pair got off to a quick start in meeting the two identified major challenges to the United States: China and Russia.

Blinken and Sullivan met China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Anchorage, Alaska, in March 2021, and jaws around the world dropped when the talks began with a televised finger-pointing show.

In his first official address to Nato later that month, Blinken noted that a recent poll had found that "nine in 10 Americans believe that maintaining our alliances is the most effective way to achieve our foreign policy goals". He went on to define "the common threats" faced by those alliances by referring to the "military threats" posed by China and Russia as among "the most urgent threats".

All has gone according to plan since then, it seems. Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine has been countered vigorously, although the US has refrained from direct military engagement, and Nato has been strengthened.

In the meantime, as Blinken put it in his pronouncement of Washington's comprehensive approach to China during a speech at George Washington University on May 26, the US remains "focused on the most serious long-term challenge" posed by China, which he said "is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it".

This means that, just over 50 years on from Nixon's historic trip to Beijing, the world finds itself again in a grand triangular relationship, involving the US, Russia and China.

The difference is that the US in Kissinger's day started to align itself with China against the Soviet Union, while today the US is targeting both Beijing and Moscow amid, in Biden's own words at the US Naval Academy's class of 2022 graduation ceremony on May 27, "a global struggle between autocracies and democracies".

Blinken, as the US' top diplomat, champions Biden's binary notation of diplomacy, but he has hit a snag with China and Russia, one that is increasingly acutely visible now. For one, he has apparently been downgraded in diplomacy with China; he and Yang haven't been in touch since June last year.

Yang and Sullivan held talks in Zurich, Switzerland, in October last year, setting a precedent. The two men engaged in a seven-hour-long session in Rome in mid-March this year. Their meeting preceded a video conference between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, at which Xi emphasised the importance of the issue of Taiwan and bluntly complained that Biden's captains had not carried out his directions to act in good faith.

Blinken's State Department responded in early May by changing the description of the US policy towards Taiwan on a fact-sheet on its website to effectively retract Washington's recognition of the island as part of China, a move that is seen by Beijing as a serious further provocation.

This explains why, in his call with Sullivan on May 18, Yang – implicitly taking his cue from speculation that Biden may visit Taiwan and allow it to join the US-initiated Indo-Pacific Economic Framework during his then upcoming tour of East Asia – warned: "China will be steadfast in taking actions that defend its sovereignty and security interests. We will do as we said."

When Biden was finishing his trip to Japan and two days before Blinken's speech at George Washington University on the US approach to Beijing, China and Russia jointly flew their bombers around Japan to demonstrate their solidarity and flex their military muscle.

Thus, it's not surprising Sullivan's suggestion, made a day after his conversation with Yang in May, that Biden may soon talk with Xi again, has gone unheeded in Beijing.

Kissinger squeezed himself into history books by prying open the door to China and manoeuvring to achieve a detente with the Soviet Union, paving his way to taking the top diplomatic spot from Rogers. Could Blinken lose his office to Sullivan for going too far in alienating both China and Russia? That may sound far-fetched, but time will tell.

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