

Terry Su

## Don't be surprised if Xi Jinping is a no-show at US Apec summit

- In light of the Russia-North Korea summit and China's chip breakthrough, it's unlikely that Beijing can be easily talked into another Biden-Xi meeting
- Moreover, given the dictates of the White House's current foreign policy, what genuine concessions could Biden make to Xi?

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3235217/dont-be-surprised-if-xi-jinping-no-show-us-apec-summit>



Last week seemed an eventful one in diplomacy: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held forth on American foreign policy in Washington on Wednesday, before US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and China's top diplomat Wang Yi held multiple rounds of meetings in Malta over the weekend.

Blinken's address, titled "The Power and Purpose of American Diplomacy in a New Era", struck me as idealistic dictates by an ideological prophet, rather than an exposition of American foreign policy by the Biden administration's chief diplomat.

The Sullivan-Wang meetings, meanwhile, were described by both sides as “candid, substantive and constructive”, just as their earlier discussions in Vienna in May and Sullivan’s meeting with Yang Jiechi, Wang’s predecessor, in Luxembourg in June last year, had been characterised.

Blinken, in his speech, declared the end of the post-Cold-War period, which he said was being succeeded by “an intensifying competition with authoritarian powers, revisionist powers”.

He then reiterated that Russia and China were respectively “the most immediate, the most acute threat to the international order” and “the most significant long-term challenge”.

What raised eyebrows is that his speech was not only rich in self-righteous rhetoric on international affairs, but also extended his Manichaeic dualistic view to a domestic context when he called for vigilance against the dangers posed “from the inside by elected leaders who exploit resentments and stoke fears; erode independent judiciaries and the media; enrich cronies; crack down on civil society and political opposition”. As I read this, former US president Donald Trump and his followers popped into my head.

Furthermore, Blinken set out a formula for what he called “diplomatic variable geometry”, which involves gathering allies round the United States and the rules-based order, and forming coalitions against “the Beijings and Moscows of the world”, so that “a growing global chorus of nations and people” will stand up to say that the US-dominated international system “is our system” and “serves our interests”.

This manifesto of sorts comes at a time when the war in Ukraine is expected to drag on, according to the Nato chief over the weekend; when Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un are promising to have each other’s backs and are joining in common cause against the US and its allies; and when China is showing credible signs of breaking through the US’ “small yard, high fence” strategy of chip sanctions, with the launch of the new Huawei 5G smartphone last month.

Still, Blinken’s proposition is fairly consistent with US President Joe Biden’s utterances. Biden recently referred to Chinese leaders as “bad folks”; last year, he called the philosophy underpinning Trump and his Republican supporters “semi-fascism”, a historically charged term, and then House minority speaker Kevin McCarthy demanded an apology from him “for slandering tens of millions of Americans as ‘fascists’.”

With Biden and Blinken’s ideological flag flying high, there is not much of a case for optimism about a further improvement in Sino-US relations. Even though the Sullivan-Wang meetings in Malta brought expectations of another top-level meeting, the risk is high that such a face-to-face between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping would be as inconsequential as their previous meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bali last November.

For his part, having presided over a substantive expansion of the Brics bloc in Johannesburg late last month, Xi skipped the G20 in New Delhi earlier this month. Wang followed suit with his own no-show for the United Nations General Assembly, and instead visited

Moscow this week, where presumably a briefing by the Russians on last week's Putin-Kim summit would have been at the top of the agenda.

In this space two weeks ago, I said that Beijing is resisting Washington's ideological narrative and seeking more concrete concessions from the US. Now, I'm inclined to think that Beijing's negotiating position has been markedly boosted by Russia's entrenched military positions in Ukraine, the growing closeness between Moscow and Pyongyang, and China's own technological breakthrough.

It seems there is little ground for assuming Beijing will be easily talked into another top-level meeting during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in San Francisco in November, as is being widely speculated. Considering that the US might be bogged down in Europe indefinitely, it is not likely to gain the upper hand over China in Asia any time soon.

The grouping of China, Russia and Iran, long dreaded by former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, is becoming more concrete with each passing day. The latest addition of North Korea to the equation could strengthen Beijing's hand in its future dealings with Washington.

Beijing therefore is likely to hold back as Washington eagerly seeks a bilateral summit in San Francisco in November.

For his part, what kind of olive branch could Biden hold out to China? Would he invite Xi for a state visit? Would he revoke Trump-era tariffs and relax the chip sanctions against Chinese companies? Would US warships stop parading through the Taiwan Strait, or would American politicians show up less in Taipei, mindful of China's "first red line"?

All this sounds inconceivable, of course – suffice to refer back to Blinken's sermon on foreign policy last week.

So, don't be surprised if Xi skips the Apec summit in November, just as he snubbed the G20 this month. As it is, he has his work cut out for him.

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