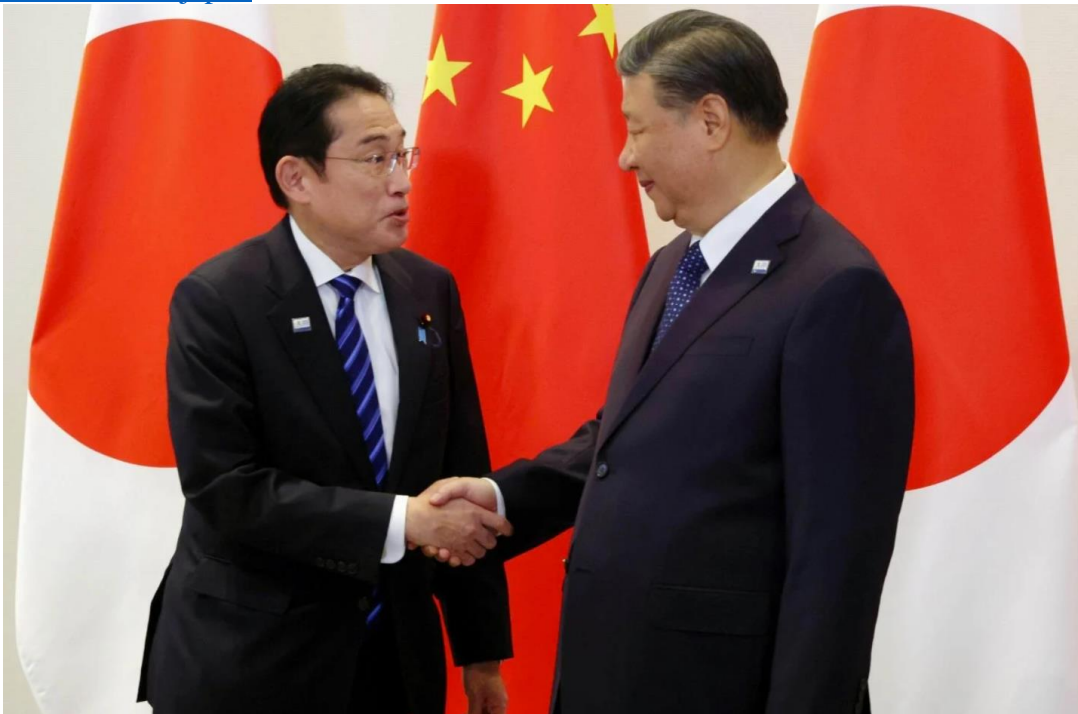


Terry Su

Why US-China ‘thaw’ after Biden-Xi summit is bad news for Japan

- The recent uptick in Sino-US relations has been welcomed around the world but, for Tokyo, the news could be frustrating
- Biden and Xi’s warm meeting means Japan must continue to wait patiently if it wants to attain its goal of becoming a ‘normal country’ again

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3242864/why-us-china-thaw-after-biden-xi-summit-bad-news-japan>



With the world looking on, US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping met in person in San Francisco on November 15, their first meeting since the two posed shaking hands for a photo in Bali, Indonesia, at last year’s Group of 20 summit.

While most would agree this did not signal a rapprochement between the two competing superpowers or even represent a thaw in the strictest sense of the word, the summit itself did manage to impress. The leaders of the two countries managed a public display of cordial interactions but refused to budge on almost all the major issues with which they are concerned.

It was quite a thing to witness the two presidents walking side by side around the Filoli Estate, with Biden answering a reporter’s question, “How did your meeting go?” with two thumbs up. One couldn’t help but be amazed by the scene in which Biden retrieved a

picture from his smartphone, showed it to Xi and asked, “Do you recognise this young man?” Xi answered, smiling, “Oh yes. This was 38 years ago.”

There was Biden’s praise of Xi’s Hongqi limousine and introduction to his own presidential Cadillac. One would almost have thought it was Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida or South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol – the leaders of Washington’s two closest allies in East Asia – who were being treated so warmly.

In the meantime, everything of substance remains as it has been between Washington and Beijing. The two sides effectively reaffirmed their agreement to disagree on all the major issues that matter. Calling off the trade war was not on the cards, for one thing.

Last week, the United States and the Philippines conducted joint air and sea patrols in the South China Sea. Around the same time, a warship from Australia navigated through the Taiwan Strait. Late last week, a US destroyer sailed near the disputed Paracel Islands. China’s military responded by accusing the US of creating risk in the South China Sea and claiming to have used its forces to “track, monitor and warn away” the US vessel.

Juxtapose this stream of developments with the touted achievements in the resumption of communications between the two countries’ military officers and cooperation on dealing with fentanyl – the latter being trumpeted with much fanfare from the US side – and one will be hard pressed to see a meaningful alignment of interests.

A moment that summed up all this oddity was Biden once again calling Xi a “dictator” in response to a reporter’s question while Xi was still in town, something to which the Chinese side almost immediately expressed its displeasure.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken came to Biden’s defence by claiming the US president “speaks for us all”, adding that “it’s clear that we will continue to say things and continue to do things that China doesn’t like, just as I assume that they will continue to do and say things that we don’t like”. This was almost exactly what Blinken said after returning from his visit to Beijing in June.

Even so, both sides have stuck by their assertions that the summit was a great success. This could be because it seems to have helped ensure that the competition and confrontation between them will not veer into conflict.

By joining hands to hold back the potential for disaster, therefore, the two leaders will hopefully let the rivalry play out peacefully, as I and others have appealed for.

However, these developments could be disappointing to other countries – Japan in particular – for some fundamental if less-discussed reasons.

Washington’s stance towards Beijing since the Trump administration has instilled within some in Tokyo a sense that the time could be right to break from the status quo and attempt to regain its full independence with the hope of becoming a “normal country” again.

If the US-China rivalry follows the assumptions of the so-called Thucydides Trap and proceeds to its logical conclusion, Japan would benefit from either result – a Chinese victory

would see US military forces leave Japanese territory, while if the US wins Tokyo would be rewarded for its allyship by regaining superiority over China.

Seen from this perspective, Biden's warm welcome for Xi and the Chinese president's enjoyment of his time in San Francisco means Japan must continue to wait patiently and deploy the kind of diplomatic finesse for which it has become known to stay in the game.

This could go some way towards explaining the visit by a delegation from Komeito – the junior partner in Japan's ruling coalition – to Beijing last week. This came after Kishida's own meeting with Xi on the sidelines of the Apec summit, at which both sides reaffirmed a “strategic relationship”.

All this could be relegated to a mere geopolitical sideshow, of course. As the foundations of the existing global order grow weaker, countries from outside the ranks of the established powers are more willing to assert themselves and their interests – witness Turkey's attempts at influence in the Middle East for example.

Japan is no ordinary lesser power playing geopolitics, though, given its role in modern history and today's world, as well as its stance on China's rise. Beijing needs to look closer at Tokyo's desire to be restored as a normal country. Like it or not, the reconstruction of Japan's political and cultural identity is at stake, and China must handle this situation delicately.

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