

Terry Su

With Xi's G20 no-show, China is quietly pushing back against the US

- With its penchant for tactical pushback, Beijing is surely sending a message with the no-show
- Beneath the conciliatory tone of recent visits by US officials, China is letting it be known it will not take US containment lying down



<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3233489/xis-g20-no-show-china-quietly-pushing-back-against-us>

Chinese President [Xi Jinping is to skip](#) the G20 meeting in New Delhi this weekend; Premier Li Qiang, his No 2, is going instead. This is quite a symbolic gesture in the context of US-China relations, especially considering that a positive new normal seems to be taking shape with a series of interactions spearheaded by US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken's visit](#) to Beijing in June.

US President Joe Biden said he was “disappointed” that Xi would not attend the G20 meeting, adding however that “I am going to get to see him”.

Practically speaking, following visits by Blinken, [Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen](#) and [climate ambassador John Kerry](#) over recent months, US Commerce Secretary [Gina Raimondo's China tour](#) last month had been more consequential to bilateral relations.

In particular, Washington's [removal](#) of 27 Chinese companies from a tech export control blacklist ahead of Raimondo's arrival in Beijing was a rare sign of good faith, in view of the Biden administration's preference for dealing with Beijing from a position of strength.

During the commerce secretary's visit, [groups were set up](#) to jointly work on concrete measures to resolve commercial issues and explain each side's export controls to the other; as hollow as this might sound, it shows both sides' determination to engage.

It helped that the Chinese side [showed signs of readiness](#) to take delivery of Boeing 737 Max jets again.

In Shanghai, Raimondo urged American businesses to keep investing in China, although she also said she had warned Beijing that some US companies were finding the country "uninvestable", given tighter controls and lack of information about rule changes.

In a commentary following Raimondo's visit, Xinhua News Agency called on the two nations to "bridge the chasm" dividing them and "broaden the road of bilateral relations". Citing Xi's two recent replies to letters from Americans, the headline read: "Let the 'source of strength' of Sino-US relations continue to surge".

Why then is Xi not going to India, thus shunning an opportunity to catch up with Biden? The two leaders have not met in person since the previous [G20 summit in Bali](#), Indonesia in November last year; as recently as June, Biden said he expected to meet Xi soon.

To understand this turn of events, one needs to see it through the lens of China's strategic forbearance and penchant for tactical pushback. Consider how in late May and early June, a Chinese fighter jet and a Chinese warship had close encounters with the US military over the [South China Sea](#) and in the [Taiwan Strait](#) respectively, as Washington [pressed Beijing for military dialogues](#) without giving in to Chinese demands in any substantive way.

In the case of Raimondo's China visit, while the Chinese made reciprocal gestures and presented a hopeful face about bilateral progress down the road, they must have been frustrated, deep in their hearts, that the Americans refused to budge on the issue where the Chinese would have been most eager to see concessions: chip sanctions. Raimondo has been blunt about her refusal in this regard. Recounting her discussions with Chinese officials in interviews in the US over the weekend, she said that the US is "never going to sell our most powerful chips" to China.

Thus, it would not have been a coincidence that Huawei announced a new smartphone, the [Mate 60 Pro](#), which is believed to be 5G-enabled, while Raimondo was visiting China.

Beijing was effectively pushing back by showing the world the Chinese are capable of manufacturing their own advanced 7-nanometer processor to power a smartphone. And this comes despite, in the words of The Washington Post, "onerous US export controls intended to prevent China from making this technical jump".

Did this compare to the “J-20 moment” in 2011, when the Chinese conducted a test flight of a new stealth fighter jet, the J-20, as then US defence secretary Robert Gates visited Beijing? Probably not. But it did serve to remind the Americans that ideas that contravene Washington’s logic are not necessarily untenable.

On the news that China’s top leader is not going to New Delhi this week, what I have covered so far should form a solid base for understanding Beijing’s move. The Chinese leadership refuses to go with the flow of Washington’s ideological narrative, and is seeking to extract more concessions from the US.

Xi is likely to keep Biden waiting until the next window of opportunity – say, the [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit](#) in San Francisco in November.

Also, by skipping the G20 meeting this time, the Chinese leader seems to be standing by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has said he will [send Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov](#) to New Delhi on his behalf.

This gesture of solidarity is no small thing at a time the Biden administration seems determined to remain tough on China while showing no letup on Russia, as if the US is waiting for the game to miraculously end in its favour, like when the former Soviet Union suddenly collapsed in the early 1990s.

Back then, US president George H.W. Bush hailed the event with the claim that the US had “won the Cold War” with the Soviet Union, which his predecessor Ronald Reagan had famously called an “evil empire”. About a month ago, Biden referred to the Chinese government as [“bad folks”](#) who tend to do bad things.

If only psychic powers worked.

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