

China Ignores US Entreaties of Mediation

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There is an old proverb that when misfortunes come, they come in battalions. Coming on top of [reports of American soldiers](#) going down like nine-pins on a drone strike against the super secret CIA station for intelligence and covert operations on the Syrian-Jordanian border, 'nyet' is the word from Beijing to the Biden administration's entreaties seeking intervention with Tehran to rein in the Houthis of Yemen, against the foreboding backdrop of the Axis of Resistance expanding its operations against American and Israeli interests.

President Biden deputed his National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to handle this highly delicate mission with Beijing, instead of the US's top diplomat Antony Blinken. Sullivan is uniquely placed to switch roles between the US' domestic and foreign policies. He is a trusted hatchet man of the president and is actively involved in Biden's re-election campaign.

Sullivan stayed overnight in Thailand On Friday/Saturday to launch his charm offensive vis-a-vis Foreign Minister Wang Yi. But he came away with no sign that China is willing to use its influence with Tehran.

Later, an unattributable [media briefing by a senior NSC official](#) via teleconference was hastily arranged by the White House to cover Sullivan's back side. It brought home that reading the Chinese tea leaves is an art in itself. As the NSC official put it,

"Beijing says they are raising this with the Iranians ... but we're certainly going to wait before we comment further on how effectively we think they're actually raising it."

Sullivan seems to have hit a brick wall. This is curious because the Biden Administration should have learnt from previous experience with Beijing in trying to prod China to convince close ally North Korea to scale back its nuclear weapons programme or roll back its "no limits" friendship with Russia over Ukraine.

Actually, South Korea's military said on Sunday that North Korea fired several cruise missiles, extending a streak in weapons tests that are worsening tensions with the US and reflecting Pyongyang's efforts to expand its arsenal of weapons designed to overwhelm remote US targets in the Pacific, including Guam!

Evidently, the Biden administration failed to comprehend that Beijing was under no obligation to use its influence on Pyongyang for serving American interests. It is sheer naïveté to expect Beijing to fall for selective engagement on issues that aim to buy time for the president to give his best shot in the upcoming November elections.

What does China get in return? The question doesn't occur to the Biden Administration. The assumption in DC is that China is on an ego trip and begging for selective engagement with the No 1 military and economic power on the planet. On the contrary, China too has some legitimate demands to make — such as, for instance, the US not inciting Taiwan surreptitiously to travel on the path of independence, or allowing China a level playing field for setting new technology standards at the global level as an innovative country.

Interestingly, compared to the taciturn [readout by the White House](#) on the Sullivan-Wang Yi meeting in Thailand, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a candid full-bodied statement on Saturday to set the record straight and pre-empt the spin doctors in the Biden White House from scripting some false narrative. The relevant excerpts from the Chinese statement titled [Wang Yi held a meeting with Sullivan, assistant to the President of the United States for National Security Affairs](#) are reproduced below:

(Unofficial translation)

“The two sides conducted frank, substantive and fruitful strategic communications around the implementation of the consensus of the San Francisco meeting between the heads of state of the two countries and the proper handling of important and sensitive issues in Sino-US relations.

“Wang Yi said that this year marks the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States. The two sides should take this as an opportunity to summarise their experiences and learn lessons, treat each other equally rather than condescendingly, seek common ground while preserving differences rather than highlighting differences, effectively respect rather than harm each other's core interests, and work together to mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation to build a correct way for China and the United States to get along.

“Wang Yi emphasised that the Taiwan issue is China's internal affairs, and Taiwan's regional elections cannot change the basic fact that Taiwan is a part of China. The biggest risk to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is “Taiwan independence”, and the biggest challenge to Sino-US relations is also “Taiwan independence”. The United States must abide by the one-China principle and the three joint communiqués between China and the United States, implement the commitment not to support “Taiwan independence” into actions, and support China's peaceful reunification.

“ Wang Yi pointed out that all countries have national security concerns, but they must be justified and reasonable. They cannot engage in pan-politicisation and pan-security, let alone curb and suppress the development of other countries. The two sides agreed to further discuss the boundary between national security and economic activities...

“The two sides also discussed international and regional issues such as the Middle East, Ukraine, the Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea.”

The Chinese readout did not even make any specific mention of the Houthis or Tehran! Instead, it underscored the perceived threat of Taiwan independence as “the biggest challenge to China—US relations.” And, furthermore, it reiterated Beijing’s concerns that the US is using export restrictions “to contain and suppress the development of other countries” and said that the two countries will discuss “the boundary between national security and economic activities” in future meetings.

What do we make out of this? Simply put, China’s reluctance to use its diplomatic and economic heft to support US moves to address the Red Sea disruptions by reining in the Axis of Resistance (or restrain North Korea’s behaviour) underscores the limitations of the Biden administration’s diplomatic outreach efforts or charm offensive to win over Beijing and get it committed to a selective engagement over Washington’s priorities on flash points that might otherwise become raging controversies in electoral politics till November.

By the way, the Chinese readout also acknowledged that there are areas where Beijing is indeed interested in an engagement with the US at this transformative point in time — viz., the joint implementation of the so-called “San Francisco Vision,” which translates as:

- regular contacts between the two presidents so as to “give strategic guidance to bilateral relations”;
- promotion of bilateral exchanges;
- making good use of the current strategic communication channels and a series of dialogue and consultation mechanisms” in various fields ranging from diplomacy, mil-to-mil ties, economy, finance, commerce, climate change, etc.;
- continuing the discussion over the “guiding principles” of Sino-US relations;
- cooperation in drug control;
- Artificial intelligence intergovernmental dialogue mechanism; and,
- cultural exchanges.

How come the US and its western allies get it all horribly wrong? For an answer, the final word must go to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov who [said in New York while on a brief visit](#) to the UN hqs last weekend:

“They believe that for 500 years they have ruled the world as they wish, living at the expense of others, and they think this should continue. This logic completely ignores the objective reality, in particular the fact that the vast majority of former colonies have gained independence, become aware of their national interests, want to strengthen their national, cultural and religious identity and are growing so fast that they have left the West behind – at least the BRICS members are.”

The bottom line is, Beijing will not fall for US attempts to create misperceptions in China’s relations with Iran or North Korea. China has no intentions to help the US to pull its chestnuts out of the fire in West Asia or the Far East. The international environment is rather fraught and Beijing has set its compass to be on the right side of history.

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Featured image: Wang Yi, Member of Politbureau of Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and director of Central Foreign Affairs Office (3rd from left) met with Jake Sullivan, assistant to US President for National Security (3rd from Right), Bangkok, Jan. 26-27, 2024

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