

China-US Tensions: Kissinger's Surprise Trip to Beijing

By [Andrew Korybko](#)

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*To each side's credit, neither leaked the news about Kissinger's trip in advance, which suggests that they both feared that it could have been derailed had that happened. By successfully keeping this secret until after his planned talks with **Defense Minister Shangfu** finished, the Chinese and US leaderships showed one another that they sincerely wanted this informal dialogue to take place.*

Chinese-US tensions remain very serious as proven by Kissinger's surprise trip to Beijing. [Xinhua](#) disclosed details about it afterwards, reporting that this grey cardinal called on both countries to **"eliminate misunderstandings, coexist peacefully, and avoid confrontation"** during his meeting with [Defense Minister Li Shangfu](#), who's sanctioned by the US for purchasing Russian arms. 100-year-old Kissinger wouldn't have made this trip if he didn't consider the situation between them to be critical.

Their interconnected trade and tech wars continue to escalate in parallel with the US [rounding up regional allies](#) via [AUKUS+](#). That second-mentioned trend spikes the chances of an air and/or sea incident in the disputed East and South China Seas, which could spark a mutually destructive war by miscalculation. At the same time, the whole world now knows that the US' stockpiles are depleted after Biden's [candid admission](#) in early July, thus suggesting that it's become a lot weaker since February 2022.

Anti-Chinese hardliners in the US' policymaking bureaucracy might fear that Beijing could take advantage of that and their country's focus on the [NATO-Russian proxy war](#) in Ukraine to make a move against Taiwan, the scenario of which might appeal to anti-US hardliners in China's policymaking bureaucracy. This observation isn't intended to lend credence to such a sequence of events nor contradict Beijing's official approach of peacefully reunifying with Taiwan, just to describe the possible policymaking context.

Against the backdrop laid out in the last two paragraphs, Kissinger arguably felt obligated to

intervene in a private capacity in an attempt to de-escalate their tensions due to the leading role that he played in brokering their historic rapprochement half a century ago. After all, if he didn't feel very strongly about this on a personal level, he wouldn't risk his health by traveling across the Pacific to hold talks with the Chinese Defense Minister.

US **Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin** lamented the [lack of communication](#) with his counterpart earlier this summer, which most observers attribute to Beijing having enough self-respect not to indulge Washington's repeated requests until it lifts the sanctions that were imposed on its military chief. The optics of returning to "business as usual" without that happening could make some think that China has tacitly subordinated itself to becoming the US' "junior partner", hence why it's unlikely to do this.

Nevertheless, both sides would benefit from some informal dialogue, even if it's conducted via a mutually trusted mediator like Kissinger. They each have an interest in learning more about the other's intentions in order to decrease the odds of a conventional conflict by miscalculation, to which end they need to manage the perceptions of their own and their rival's hardliners. The failure to do so could lead to one or the other ascending in influence and resultantly pushing these two states towards war.

Without comparatively more clarity about what their rival aims to achieve and how they'd react in a crisis scenario, which is missing at present due to their earlier mentioned lack of communication at the highest military-to-military level, it's easier for hardliners to sway other policymakers to their side. If this doesn't soon change, then their already dangerous security dilemma might very well spiral into war by sometime later this decade, ergo the enormous importance of Kissinger's latest trip to China.

The larger context in which it took place combined with Xinhua's report about their talks enable one to reasonably speculate that he and Defense Minister Shangfu sought to convince one another that their respective leaderships truly don't desire a hot war like the other's hardliners might think is inevitable. Be that as it may, precisely because of the influence that this faction veritably exerts to some degree, it's unlikely that either would have promised to make unilateral concessions as a "goodwill gesture".

Cynics might conclude that the lack of any tangible outcome means that their talks failed to de-escalate tensions and were therefore useless, but that's premature to claim since it remains to be seen whether each's reassurance that they don't desire war will influence the other's policymaking dynamics. The whole reason why these surprise talks went ahead in the first place was because their respective leaderships wanted to manage the influence of their own and the other's hardliners.

To each side's credit, neither leaked the news about Kissinger's trip in advance, which suggests that they both feared that it could have been derailed had that happened. By successfully keeping this secret until after his planned talks with Defense Minister Shangfu finished, the Chinese and US leaderships showed one another that they sincerely wanted this informal dialogue to take place. They then agreed to inform the world afterwards in order to preempt the hardliners from spinning it in a conspiratorial way.

Since the purpose of these talks was to reassure the other that they don't desire war and get a reading of whether their rival sincerely feels the same way, it therefore follows that the insight obtained from this trip would have filtered through their respective policymaking bureaucracies after some time. This would have made it impossible to keep the trip a secret

indefinitely, hence why it was reported right after their talks ended, which also served to send an important signal to the international community.

The Chinese and US leaderships wanted the world to know that neither wants a hot conflict by miscalculation, yet they're also concerned that the present trajectory of their tensions is fueling the rise of hardliners who could make a war by miscalculation inevitable if their influence isn't counteracted. For this reason, it was agreed that Kissinger would make a secret trip to the People's Republic with the intent of initiating an informal dialogue aimed at managing their dangerous security dilemma.

It's too early to assess the success of his efforts one way or the other, with observers only being able to discern that there's mutual interest in this at the highest levels by dint of these talks taking place and not being leaked ahead of time. A [New Detente](#) probably isn't in the cards anymore after all that's happened since February's balloon incident, which is why the best that can be hoped for is that their hardliners are eventually sidelined in order to create space for pragmatists to explore realistic de-escalation scenarios.

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Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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About the author:

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connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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