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## **Blinken's Beijing Visit: Private Conversations, Public Criticism**

*By Benjamin Ho*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Antony Blinken's first visit to Beijing last weekend may not be quite as dramatic or consequential as Henry Kissinger's secret visit in 1971. That said, having private conversations between the two sides remains essential, even if the public mood and diplomatic relationship remain fraught with tensions.*

### **COMMENTARY**

United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken [met Chinese President Xi Jinping on Monday](#), 19 June, capping a highly anticipated trip to Beijing that had generated [hopes US-China relations would improve](#).

Such hopes are understandably expected: Mr Blinken is the first US Secretary of State since 2018 and the highest-ranking member of the Biden administration to meet Mr Xi. He also met top diplomat Wang Yi and foreign minister Qin Gang during the two-day trip, which had been rescheduled amid the furore over the [alleged Chinese spy balloon](#) in February.

Mr Xi told the secretary of state that "state-to-state interactions should always be based on mutual respect and sincerity", adding that the two sides have "made progress and reached agreement on some specific issues" without elaborating.

But beyond general statements like keeping "[open channels of communication](#)" (as Mr Blinken put it) or Taiwan being the "most prominent risk" for US-China relations (according to Mr Qin), there hasn't been anything substantial emerging from the meeting.

This should not be a surprise. Diplomacy – as seasoned diplomats would attest to – involve both public and private conversations.

Given the difficult circumstances of the bilateral relationship, it would be foolhardy and imprudent for both countries to make grandstanding statements that do not cohere with the political reality.

### **Domestic Politics Drive Public Narrative**

No American policymaker can afford to look weak on China if they want popular support. A 2023 Pew Research Center survey found that a large majority of US adults have negative views on China, with about four in 10 describing China as an enemy rather than a competitor or partner.

For China, Mr Xi has painted a highly ideological narrative of the United States and the West as being out to [contain and suppress China](#). Chinese foreign policy makers have little choice but to follow such a train of thought.

In other words, American and Chinese diplomats have little choice in veering away from the dominant political storylines at home, which is exactly what all diplomats are generally required to do.

### **Private Conversations Drive the Agenda**

Few are privy to what the private conversations hold. But given more than 10 hours of talks over the two days, including a reported seven-and-a-half-hour meeting between Mr Blinken and Mr Qin, it is unlikely that they kept to general talk.

Topics such as [Taiwan](#), the Russian invasion of Ukraine, setting guardrails (especially for the US) and de-risking (instead of “decoupling”, since eschewed by US and G7 leaders) would all be on the agenda.

A breakthrough is unlikely, given the current lack of trust, but being able to “sense-make” the other in understanding how these issues are being spoken about might provide clues as to what policy steps may be possible moving forward.

In other words, a meeting – even in the absence of any clear policy outcomes – between both sides is [better than refusing to meet](#), at the risk of further misunderstandings or suspicions towards one another. As Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said when he met Mr Blinken in Washington DC on Saturday, 17 June, the trip was “essential, but not sufficient”.

More cycles of ups and downs can be expected. Both sides will have their own political calculations to make. So, anxious as the rest of the world may be when it comes to US-China relations, there should not be over excitement about the prospect of change nor exasperation if things do not move as expected.

The hope now is that Mr Blinken’s visit will pave the way for more conversation between Mr Xi and Mr Biden after the two leaders last met on the sidelines of the G20

summit in November 2022. Ultimately, staying in the conversation is still better than not.

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*Dr Benjamin Ho is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the China Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU). This commentary was first published as a [CNA Snap Insight](#) on 19 June 2023.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: [rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg) | W: [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)