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The US-China Security Dilemma: The Need for Constant Mitigation

Tiong Wei Jie and Li Mingjiang

SYNOPSIS

The rise in tensions between the United States and China in recent years can be explained by what is known as the security dilemma. This action–reaction process is played out in both the security and economic realms. To avoid a further downward spiral of relations, leaders from the two sides will need to make constant efforts to mitigate the conundrum through communication and engagement. Fortunately, communication channels have reopened in recent months and there seem to be genuine attempts to listen to each other. This trend could alleviate the security dilemma between them by reassuring one another of their intentions.

COMMENTARY

A “security dilemma” in international relations refers to a conundrum in which one state’s efforts to enhance its security, such as increasing its military capabilities, strengthening its alliances, or even shoring up its critical supply chains, inadvertently engender a sense of insecurity in the other. In response, the latter takes its own security-enhancing actions, leading to a downward spiral of escalating tensions and hostility even though both sides have only *defensive* intentions.

This dilemma is well played out between the United States and China and could help explain the broad rise in tensions. Many would agree that the security dilemma stems from deeply rooted structural differences between Washington and Beijing in many areas. To avoid a further downward spiral of relations, which could lead to a disastrous

military confrontation, leaders of the two countries will need to make constant efforts to mitigate the security dilemma through communication and engagement.

The Perils of Intentions Not Known

Take the United States' initiatives to strengthen and modernise its Asia-Pacific military alliances as an example. On optimising American force posture in Japan, the US Department of Defense categorically stated in January 2023 that these initiatives were meant to "[bolster deterrence in the region](#)" and for defensive purposes.

However, a few days later, responding to a media query on the same topic, the Chinese Foreign Ministry [criticised](#) the US moves as aimed at "suppressing China's development" and called on both Washington and Tokyo to step out of the "Cold-War mentality". In response to the moves, Beijing vowed to "do what is necessary" to "resolutely defend" its sovereignty and security interest.

Similarly, in May 2023, as part of the [agreement](#) between the United States and the Philippines to modernise their alliance, a new set of defence guidelines was discussed in which [Article 11](#) reaffirmed their mutual obligations to "refrain from the threat or use of force against any state" unless for reasons of "self-defence".

A few days later, the Chinese Foreign Ministry warned that the South China Sea was not a "[hunting ground](#)" for forces from outside the region. On the clause in the agreement that allows a US presence in four new military bases in the Philippines, Beijing [criticised](#) Washington for acting "selfishly" and encouraging a military build-up in the Asia-Pacific. Beijing also emphasised its commitment to refrain from targeting or harming third-party interests in the guise of defence cooperation, a thinly-veiled swipe at Washington.

Beyond words, China has been prompted by the US strengthening of its alliances into [stepping up](#) its own all-round military development. Beijing's force development, in turn, prompted the US Department of Defense to [report](#) that Beijing was planning to reshape the global power balance.

This action–reaction chain has also played out in the technology domain. In May 2019, the US Department of Commerce added Chinese technology firm Huawei and 70 affiliates to its Entity List, a list that effectively bans blacklisted companies from procuring materials from US companies without prior US government approval. The move was justified as a defensive one, [according](#) to the US secretary of commerce, who claimed it was intended "to prevent American technology from being used by foreign-owned entities which potentially undermine US national security or foreign policy interests."

In the same month, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce came up with its own "Unreliable Entity List" to blacklist foreign businesses or individuals that take "[discriminatory measures](#)" against Chinese enterprises as well as endanger China's sovereignty, security, and development interests.

The back-and-forth continued, with many more Chinese firms added to the US Entity List and China responding in like manner. In its midst, a high-profile case attracted

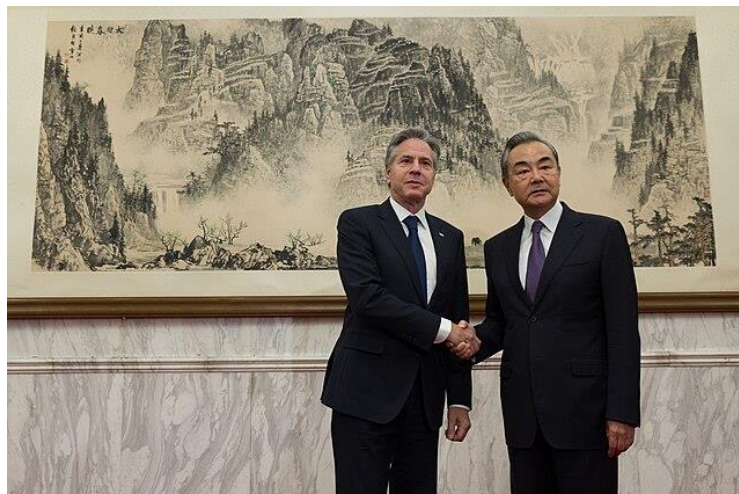
international attention when the US government moved to restrict the use of TikTok in the United States early this year. TikTok is owned by the Beijing-based parent company ByteDance.

Rightly or wrongly, perceiving Washington's actions as attempts to contain China's rise, Beijing has stepped up its drive for technological [self-sufficiency](#). It passed the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law in June 2021 and a [Foreign Relations Law](#) in 2023 to counter foreign sanctions. Despite being framed as [self-defence mechanisms](#), the "defensive" nature of these steps was doubted by many analysts, given the ambiguous wording that allows Beijing [wide latitude](#) to penalise companies. Many observers fear that these sanctions and counter-sanctions may effectively lead to the partial decoupling of US-China economic ties.

Recent Efforts to Mitigate the Downward Spiral

Fortunately, the frosty relationship between the two sides seems to have thawed in recent months and there seem to be genuine attempts to listen to each other. When US President Joe Biden signaled an imminent thaw in US-China relations during the G7 summit in May this year, many [analysts](#) viewed the news with caution despite the G7 communique assuring China that its "policy approaches are not designed to harm China" nor attempts at hindering China's economic development.

The scepticism was not unfounded; the US-China relationship had only just overcome many thorny issues, most notably the balloon incident early this year. Since then, the United States and China have taken some significant steps to lessen the mutual distrust that has characterised much of their relationship in the last few years. Antony Blinken's visit to China in June this year was the first by a US secretary of state since 2018. The post-meeting statement was positive, noting that concerns had been raised candidly and attempts made to set up dialogue channels and explore cooperation areas. Both sides also agreed to stabilise their relationship.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in China, June 2023. Blinken's visit to China was the first by a US Secretary of State since 2018 amidst frosty relations between the two countries, signalling new attempts to strengthen communications, explore areas of cooperation, and stabilise the relationship. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

In September, two working groups focused on economic and financial affairs were established to avoid unforeseen conflict. In late October, US delegates attended the Xiangshan Forum hosted by Beijing, suggesting a gradual restoration of high-level military-to-military communication channels. Several high-level bilateral consultations and engagements in high-profile issue areas such as nuclear proliferation and maritime issues were also [held](#) in October. With the downfall of Chinese defence minister Li Shangfu, who had been sanctioned by the United States, and the appointment of a new defence minister in the near future, senior-level defence consultations between the two countries seem likely to resume.

The leaders of the two sides have met on the sidelines of the APEC summit in San Francisco this week. Overall, the results of the meeting appear to be positive despite the fact that fundamental differences remain. In the near future, a lot will depend on how the officials of the two countries implement their pledged cooperation.

Conclusion

Lamentably, given the lack of trust, it is difficult for the two sides to fully appreciate each other's intentions, even if they are fundamentally benign. The security dilemma will always loom large, especially in great power rivalries where much is at stake. In the interest of avoiding open confrontation, which would have global security and economic repercussions, it is incumbent upon the two great powers to put in extra efforts to reassure one another of their intentions. Restarting existing communication channels, as well as setting up new ones, is probably the surest way of alleviating this conundrum.

TIONG Wei Jie is a PhD student at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). ***LI Mingjiang*** is Associate Professor and Provost's Chair in International Relations at RSIS.