

US-China relations

Antony Blinken visits Beijing on a mission to mend fractured US-China ties

Secretary of state's trip is most hopeful sign since spy balloon incident dragged relations to new lows



Antony Blinken's visit to China will be the first by a US secretary of state since 2018 © Nathan Howard/Bloomberg

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington and **Joe Leahy** in Beijing 3 HOURS AGO

US secretary of state Antony Blinken has arrived in Beijing on a highly anticipated mission to reboot US-China relations, which have cratered this year after an alleged Chinese spy balloon flew over North America.

Blinken is the first secretary of state to visit China since 2018, a reflection of Beijing's strict coronavirus pandemic lockdowns, but also of how [US-China ties](#) have plummeted to their lowest level in decades.

The top US diplomat began two days of meetings with Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang and other officials on Sunday, but it was unclear if he will meet president Xi Jinping, as bilateral relations have been on a downward trajectory in recent years.

The US is concerned about China's military activity around Taiwan and its refusal to condemn Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, while Beijing accuses Washington of trying to contain its ambitions by imposing export controls on advanced technology and extending security arrangements with regional allies.

The relationship reached its nadir after the alleged Chinese spy balloon [passed over sensitive military sites](#) before the US shot it down in February.

Blinken's trip is designed to follow a meeting between President Joe Biden and his

Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Bali in November, when the leaders agreed to create a “floor” under the relationship. But the plan was derailed in February when [Blinken cancelled a visit](#) to China because of the balloon.

Over the past month, there have been signs of improvement. The Financial Times reported that [CIA director Bill Burns secretly visited](#) China in May. The same month, US national security adviser Jake Sullivan met Wang Yi, China’s top foreign policy official, in Vienna. Biden later said at the G7 in Hiroshima, Japan, that he expected an imminent “thaw” in relations.

One senior US official said that relations were now “in a place where we can move forward with the Bali agenda”.

“That’s what this trip is about,” said the official, who cautioned that [Blinken](#) was “very clear-eyed” that progress would be “hard” to achieve.

“This trip is a reconnection, not detente. It needs to stop the freefall in relations and find a basis for stability,” said Evan Medeiros, a Georgetown University China expert. “Both countries need and want the meeting to not go badly, but it’s too early to talk about success.”

Daniel Kritenbrink, the top state department official for east Asia, said that Blinken had three goals, including the need for communication channels to ensure competition “does not veer into conflict”.

Dennis Wilder, a former CIA top China expert, said the visit would end a period of “deep acrimony” but do little to tackle the “fundamental distrust”.

“The Chinese remain miffed by Secretary Blinken’s postponement of his visit earlier this year and his public warnings to Beijing at the Munich Security Conference [in February] about potential Chinese lethal aid to Russia,” he said.





Antony Blinken, left, with China's foreign minister Qin Gang ahead of a meeting in Beijing on Sunday. It remains unclear if Blinken will meet Xi Jinping © Leah Millis/Pool/AFP via Getty Images

Wilder said Xi declining to meet Blinken, who he had been scheduled to see in February, would be a “strong signal” that Beijing remained concerned by US steps to “de-risk” its economy from China’s, including restraining the latter’s advanced technology development.

One Chinese scholar said Blinken’s trip would only be judged successful if he met Xi, adding that it would amount to a “snub” to only see Qin or Wang, who are not as powerful as the secretary of state in the US.

While US officials said enough time has passed since the balloon incident to restart high-level meetings, it still hangs over the relationship.

The [FT previously reported](#) that China was reluctant to grant Blinken a visit over concerns that the FBI would release the results of an investigation into the balloon, which China claims was a weather observation vessel. In a letter citing the FT story, 19 Republican senators this week urged Biden not to succumb to Chinese efforts to “coerce the US into silence” and to release the FBI findings “immediately”.

Raja Krishnamoorthi, the top Democrat on the House China committee, said he has reviewed some material from the FBI related to the balloon, which he called “eye opening”.

“For them [China] to call it a weather balloon . . . is not a great look,” he added.

Asked on Saturday if the trip could help ease tensions, Biden said Xi did not know what the balloon was doing. “It was more embarrassing than it was intentional,” Biden said, adding that he hoped to meet Xi “over the next several months”.

Republican head of the House China committee Mike Gallagher told the FT that the president’s comments were “naive and misleading”.

“We cannot afford to mistake the Chinese Communist party’s recent violations of our sovereignty and increasing aggression as mere accident,” he said.

Some analysts said China may want a “tactical pause” in tensions to [address its ailing economy](#), which is struggling to recover from the stringent Covid controls.

US export curbs and Chinese moves to tighten anti-espionage laws and [crack down on foreign consultancies](#) have also hurt investor sentiment.

But in a warning to those hoping for a quick thaw, China’s foreign ministry on Friday gave the US a tongue-lashing, accusing Washington of claiming to continually seek “communications” while “damaging China’s interests”.

In Washington, the Biden administration also faces criticism from Republicans, including Gallagher, who has described the rapprochement efforts with Beijing as “zombie engagement”. This week, he told CNBC that approaching China with olive branches to induce engagement was an “invitation to aggression”.

But Krishnamoorthi, his Democratic counterpart, said high-level meetings could help stabilise relations and were needed to communicate clearly to Beijing how its aggressive behaviour [could “trigger escalation”](#).

“Mike might like zombie movies . . . but it’s really important that we have these talks, that we do everything we can to be clear and listen carefully at the same time and then try to find ways to discourage aggression,” he said.

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