

US-China relations

China pours cold water on bilateral meeting with US defence secretary

Stand-off is latest obstacle to top-level dialogue between Washington and Beijing



Chinese defence minister Li Shangfu was placed under sanctions by the US in 2018 in relation to imports of Russian arms when he was serving as a general © Harish Tyagi/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington 5 HOURS AGO

China has told the US there is little chance of a meeting between the countries' defence ministers at a security forum in Singapore due to a dispute over sanctions, the latest obstacle to top-level dialogue between the two powers.

US defence secretary Lloyd Austin wants to meet [Li Shangfu](#), China's new defence minister, at the Shangri-La Dialogue security forum in Singapore in June. However, arranging such a meeting is fraught with difficulty because Li was placed under sanctions by the US in 2018 in relation to Chinese imports of Russian arms when he was serving as a general.

The US has told [China](#) that the sanctions do not prevent Austin from meeting Li in a third country. But several people said it would be almost impossible for China to agree to a meeting while they remain in place. Li became defence minister in March.

There was no prospect of the Biden administration removing the sanctions, some of the people said. The White House declined to comment.

The latest stalemate in [US-China relations](#) comes as the countries struggle to arrange high-level visits by American cabinet secretaries to Beijing.

Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping [agreed that the countries needed to stabilise](#)

[relations](#) when they met at the G20 summit in Bali in November. But early efforts to kick-start high-level engagement were derailed after a suspected Chinese spy balloon flew over North America in early February.

The countries are negotiating visits to China by secretary of state Antony Blinken, Treasury secretary Janet Yellen and commerce secretary Gina Raimondo. The US is also trying to arrange the first call between Biden and Xi since the spy balloon incident.

However, Beijing is reluctant to receive Blinken because of [concerns that the FBI might release a report](#) into the Chinese balloon.

Worries about the lack of engagement between the countries' top military officials have mounted over the past year.

Admiral John Aquilino, head of Indo-Pacific command, has been trying to meet his Chinese counterparts for two years. General Mark Milley, chairman of the joint chiefs, has also not had any communication with his counterpart since the balloon episode.

The Shangri-La Dialogue, which is run by the International Institute for Strategic Studies think-tank, frequently serves as a venue for US and Chinese defence officials to meet. Austin last year [had a bilateral meeting](#) with Wei Fenghe, Li's predecessor.

The Pentagon said it wanted "open lines of communication" with Chinese military leaders but blamed Beijing for the impasse. "It has been the People's Republic of China's decision to ignore, reject, or cancel multiple US requests for senior-level communication."

The Chinese embassy in the US said the two countries were engaging in "necessary communication". US ambassador Nicholas Burns met China's commerce minister Wang Wentao on Thursday, following talks with foreign minister Qin Gang on Monday.

But Liu Pengyu, the Chinese embassy spokesperson, added that "communication should not be carried out for the sake of communication", in a comment that echoed the approach the US took towards China at the start of the Biden administration.

"We call on the US side to show sincerity, to work together with China, and to take concrete actions to create the conditions and atmosphere needed for communication and help bring China-US relations back to the right track," Liu said.

Bonnie Glaser, a China expert at the German Marshall Fund, said south-east Asian

nations were increasingly uneasy with the intensity of the competition between the US and China and the lack of high-level dialogue. She said these countries would be “shocked” if Austin and Li attended Shangri-La without holding a bilateral meeting.

“The question is, will they blame the US or China? My sense is that there is recognition in much of the region that the US has been seeking to engage with Chinese counterparts but are being stonewalled,” Glaser added.

Jude Blanchette, a China expert at the CSIS think-tank, said the dispute illustrated how “political dynamics on both sides gum up the possible stabilisation” of Washington-Beijing relations.

“The longer Beijing refuses to meet with the US, the more countries in Europe and across Asia will come to see Chinese behaviour as intransigence,” he said.

Evan Medeiros at Georgetown University said the best way for the US to achieve its aim of “detering and constraining China” was to show its Asian partners it was “always open to dialogue with Beijing”.

“The US needs to find a compromise solution for the sake of its strategic goals,” said Medeiros.

Additional reporting by Joseph Leahy in Beijing

Follow [Demetri Sevastopulo](#) on Twitter