

美国高官低调访华，为布林肯打前站，这是打算“求和”的前奏？

Bid to setup groundwork for Blinken, a US State Department Senior official makes a low-key visit to China. Is US having a change of heart and ‘seeking peace’?

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Background Note by Translator

In March 2023, days after the “Two Sessions” had concluded in Beijing, a senior US state department official, Rick Waters, who at the time also headed the newly-constituted US Office of China Coordination or “China House,” visited Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing and held talks with scholars, think tank researchers, and media persons (there were also conflicting reports on whether he met government officials). As reports suggest, the low-key visit was viewed as paving the way to finalize Antony Blinken’s much awaited visit to China. Though China’s Global Times did report on Water’s trip, the low-key visit was kept under wraps from media attention.

Waters, the senior-most US official to visit China since December 2022, was hosted in Shanghai by Yang Jiemian (the younger brother of former foreign policy chief and Politburo member Yang Jiechi) and Chen Dongxiao, the former and current SIIS presidents, respectively. Before arriving in Shanghai on 23 March, Waters, who was also the deputy assistant secretary of state for China, Taiwan, and Mongolia, stopped for a visit in Hong Kong. He was the first high-ranking US official to visit Hong Kong since 2019, when anti-government protests had engulfed the city, protesting China’s

growing influence. From Shanghai, he flew to Beijing where he was reported to have held talks with foreign ministry officials. Interestingly, weeks before Blinken’s 2-day visit to Beijing in mid-June, Waters – considered one of the few people in the US government thought to understand China – resigned from all offices within the US State Department.



Rick Waters at the SIIS, Shanghai in March 2023
Image: siis.org.cn

Rick Waters, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Coordinator at the newly established Office of China Coordination (“China House”) in the US State Department, visited China last week. He carried out in-depth exchanges with representatives from business and academic circles in Chinese cities of Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing including others, reported Global Times on 27 March. Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post cited experts and wrote that the visit is part of the “working-level communication” between China and the US. This is the first visit to China by a high-ranking US official

since last December. During his trip, Waters intended to seek opinion from Chinese representatives, in order to prepare for a possible visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken to China.

Blinken was initially planning to visit China earlier this year but the trip was postponed due to the “spy balloon” incident in February. However, China was not very enthusiastic about hosting Mr. Blinken to begin with. Additionally, following the wandering balloon incident, China had retorted saying since both sides never made any announcement about the visit, the US announcing the visit is the US decision alone and China had nothing to do with the visit. China’s blunt denial of any such visit left the US highly embarrassed. This explains why the US decided to instead send the deputy assistant secretary of the State Department (a lower rank official) because apparently Washington was afraid the visit might be rejected by China. Notably, Waters’ itinerary was rather interesting as he only visited Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing and had limited interactions with scholars and entrepreneurs. But it is still unclear whether Waters held talks with Chinese officials during the trip. So, it is clear that he made this trip to explore Chinese reactions and responses to the visiting US officials.

More recently, the US has been either making announcements or indicating a possible visit to China by senior officials and willing to establish high-level communicate with China. Both Washington and Beijing are deliberating upon a potential visit by US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo to China, the White House said on March 20. US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan further expressed on March 13, that President Joe Biden and the Chinese president are expected to have a telephonic conversation soon. Besides Blinken’s eagerness to visit China, there has been a noticeable shift in US’s approach towards China. The US is willing to communicate and negotiate with China. However, this doesn’t mean there is “change of heart” in the US attitude or it intends to stop suppressing China, rather some other factors can be attributed for this change in stance.

On one hand the US is facing a series of issues, the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank being the latest, which has led to a debt crisis in the US. One wrong move might not just engulf the US into serious trouble but might also cause a world economic crisis and financial upheaval. Against this backdrop, the time is perhaps not prudent

for the US to indulge in any contest with China, after all only China can help the US in controlling the crisis. However, the continuous deterioration of the Sino-US bilateral relations has led to an escalation in the economic war, and amid the crisis, China unwilling to be talking to the US is not a favourable situation for Washington. Besides, China is consistently reducing its holding of US treasury bonds. This has, to a great extent, exacerbated the crisis in the US. The US wants China to maintain its holding of US treasury bonds, if not continue buying. This seems to be the reason behind US's willingness to engage with China.

On the other hand, the Sino-Russian cooperation is becoming closer than ever, and China's peace plan for the Russia-Ukraine crisis has gained traction in the international community. Further, following the deepening of cooperation between China and Russia, both sides are likely to accelerate the process of de-dollarisation. If not others, at least if the trade between Russia and China succeeds in achieving de-dollarisation, this will set up a precedent for the world to stand up against the hegemony of the US dollar, and will

deliver a huge blow to the US. If both China and Russia together are able to resist and withstand the US pressure, then regardless of other countries joining the effort, once the whole world starts doubting the US dollar that would be good enough to shake the foundation of the US hegemony.

Against this backdrop, with no alternatives in its sight, the US is consistently conveying its willingness to communicate with China. The US intends to trick China into paying for the US debt but such wishful thinking is of no avail. In the past, China assisted the US in overcoming the financial crisis by purchasing treasury bonds but that phase is long gone. Back then, their relations were closely intertwined, and assisting the US, to a large extent, benefited China as well. On the contrary, the Sino-US relationship has hit rock bottom now and both have already begun comprehensive decoupling. At this juncture, China would not come to the US's rescue again. China has clearly understood America's true intention of exhibiting short-term generosity and harbouring some hidden motives. China needs to maintain a clear understanding about this and continue to struggle to remain invincible.

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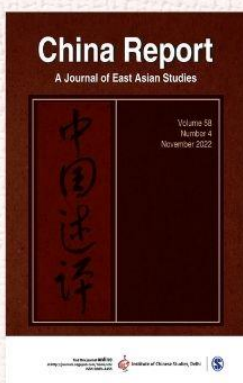


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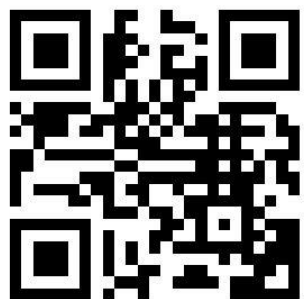
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