

吴心伯：中美关系，缓和还是改善？

Wu Xinbo: 'Easing' or 'Improving' Sino-US Relations?

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Background Note by Translator

At the invitation of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited the United States from October 26 to 28.

This is the first time that senior USA officials have visited China since June this year, after US Secretary of State Blinken, Treasury Secretary Yellen, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Issues John Kerry, Commerce Secretary Raimondo, Senate Majority Leader Schumer, and California Governor Newsom visited China. Visit the United States. Therefore, Wang Yi's trip and the future direction of Sino-US relations have received widespread attention from the international community.

On October 21-22, 2023, the 2023 Annual Conference of the China Asia-Pacific Society and the academic seminar "Asia-Pacific in Turmoil and Change: Opportunities and Challenges" were held at the American Studies Centre of Fudan University. Professor Wu Xinbo, Dean of the Institute of International Studies (IIS) at Fudan University and Director of the Centre for American Studies, gave a speech at the meeting entitled "Sino-US

Relations: Ease or Improvement?". Observer.com was authorized to compile and publish the full text for the benefit of readers. The article has been reviewed by the author himself.



Xi-Biden at Bali Summit 2022
Image: Nikkei Asia

Full text of the speech by **Wu Xinbo, Dean, IIS and Director Centre for American Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai.**

Today, I will share with you my views on the current state of relations between China and the United States. My topic is: 'Sino-US relations: Easing or Improving?'

I

New Trends in Sino-US Relations

Since May this year, there have been the following new trends in Sino-US relations:

First, high-level exchanges between China and the United States have increased significantly.

Following the US Secretary of State's visit to China in June, the US Treasury Secretary, the Secretary of Commerce, a bipartisan delegation from the Senate, and the Governor of California, etc. have visited China one after another, and a delegation from the US House of Representatives will also visit soon. At present, the United States' exchanges with China have expanded from the executive branch to the legislative branch, from the federal to the state level, showing a trend of full recovery.

I believe that the US Congressional delegation's visit to China is of very important significance: on the one hand, it reflects the support of the US Congress for the Biden administration to strengthen Sino-US exchanges; more importantly, it also sends a signal to American society that as the United States engages in strategic competition with China, Sino-US exchanges are still necessary and desirable.

Some time ago, high-level exchanges between China and the United States were basically one-way, that is, visits by senior

US officials to China. This was followed by senior Chinese officials visiting the United States. For example, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice Premier He Lifeng will visit the United States. As a result, interactions between China and the United States are improving and strengthening.

Second, China and the United States have established a series of new dialogue mechanisms.

Starting in May this year, an agricultural cooperation mechanism was established between the Ministries of Agriculture of China and the United States. Later, a working mechanism for the Ministry of Commerce was established between the ministries of commerce of the two countries. The Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank of China also agreed with the US Department of the Treasury to establish an "Economic Working Group" and "Financial Working Group"; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will hold three foreign policy dialogues with the US State Department, including China-US Asia-Pacific Affairs Consultation, Maritime Affairs Consultation, and Foreign Policy Consultation. At the end of September, Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong held Sino-US consultations on Asia-Pacific affairs with US Assistant Secretary of

State for Asia-Pacific Affairs Conda in Washington.

The dialogue mechanism between China and the United States is being rebuilt and restored, a phenomenon that has not happened since the late Trump administration.

Third, the US business community has played a more active role in Sino-US relations this year.

On the one hand, they have increased lobbying pressure on the Biden administration. For example, in July, the CEOs of the three major US chip giants gathered in Washington to meet with senior officials, such as the US Secretary of State and the Secretary of Commerce, to express their concerns about the US policy of restricting semiconductor exports to China. In addition, when the US Secretary of Commerce and the US Senate delegation came to Shanghai, the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai also had active contact with them and expressed their desire to expand Sino-US economic and trade relations.

On the other hand, the US business community has also stepped up its exchanges with China this year. We have noticed that executives from some large

American companies have visited China and been received by Chinese leaders. The first American guest that President Xi met this year was Bill Gates. Later, the presidents of several major American companies visited China and were also received by Premier Li Qiang. This also sends a positive signal, that is, the exchanges between the business and political circles between China and the United States are fully restored after more than three years of suspension.

The US business community is more actively influencing Sino-US relations this year. On the one hand, they are very concerned about the direction of Sino-US relations. On the other hand, with the arrival of the US election, they can use their advantages in donations to influence the Biden administration's attitude toward China-policy direction.

Fourth, there are some signs of improvement in the atmosphere of Sino-US relations. For example, we have seen that at the official level, the two countries have significantly reduced mutual accusations in the recent period, and the discussion of China policy within the United States is increasing. These discussions include the concept of strategic competition with China, the analogy between Sino-US competition and the

Cold War, the effects of the US blockade on competition with China, the importance of Sino-US cultural exchanges, the necessity of Sino-US cooperation, and the direction of US policy towards Taiwan, etc. This was unimaginable a year ago and shows that the atmosphere within the United States is gradually loosening on the China issue.

The fifth and the last most important trend is the possible meeting between the heads of state of China and the United States during the APEC summit next month.

If this meeting is held successfully, it will be the first meeting between a Chinese leader and a US leader on US soil since 2017. It will be the first time in six years, and is extremely symbolic. We hope to achieve certain substantive results.

II

The Motivation Behind New Trends

In the second part, we analyse whether there may be some positive changes in Sino-US relations and what are the driving forces behind these changes. I will analyse the following three aspects:

First, an economic perspective. After two or three years of being in office, the Biden administration has gradually realized that the United States cannot fully "decouple" from China and that the United States cannot do without China. As is clearly reflected in the speech of the US Treasury Secretary Yellen in April this year. Yellen's was ostensibly a speech by the Treasury Secretary, but in fact, it went through a lot of internal coordination. According to American sources, her final speech was the 68th draft, which means it had been revised 67 times. This speech emitted several important signals, including the United States has no intention to "decouple" from China; the United States has a strict national security definition of China's technological blockade or restrictions; Sino-US cooperation is in the interests of both parties and the interests of the world economy, etc.

From China's perspective, I think we now also hope to stabilize and improve Sino-US relations and ease the pressure on our domestic economic development. Especially after the epidemic is over, our economic recovery will be hard-won, and the road will be tortuous. If we can improve foreign economic and trade relations at this time, especially the

economic and trade relations with the United States, it will be of positive significance to the recovery of our domestic economy, enhance market confidence, and attract more foreign investment to China.

So, from an economic perspective, both sides now have interests and needs to improve bilateral relations.

Second, the diplomatic field.

In this field, the biggest difference between the Biden and the Trump administrations is that the latter engaged in unilateralism. Trump only cared about the affairs of the United States and basically did not bother about matters in other parts of the world, so he did not have many reasons to cooperate with China. While on the other hand, Biden still hopes to maintain the United States' dominant position in the world, so the United States has to deal with many problems in the world.

As long as the United States wants to deal with many problems in the world, it cannot do without cooperation with China. The latest Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an example; in addition to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Korean Peninsula issue, etc.,

there is a long list of issues that require the United States to cooperate with China.

From China's perspective, we also need to improve Sino-US relations to alleviate various external pressures on us. Recently, many countries have been paying close attention to the possibility of a summit meeting between China and the United States because any disturbance in Sino-US relations will affect these countries and require corresponding policy adjustments.

Third, people-to-people and cultural exchanges, including cooperation in science and technology, culture and education. In these aspects, China and the United States also have mutual needs.

From a US perspective, the US scientific community hopes to update and extend the China-US Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement. Currently, the Biden administration is temporarily extending it for six months. The United States' final decision on whether to extend the China-US Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement may have to wait until the new government takes office after the election. It is better to extend it for six months now than not to extend it at all.

American universities and research institutions, including more than 1,000 American experts and scholars, jointly wrote to the Biden administration calling for strengthening Sino-US scientific and technological cooperation. I think the main reason behind this is that when Deng Xiaoping visited the United States and China and the United States began scientific and technological cooperation, China benefited more from it. But it is different today. Today, the United States also benefits more and more from its cooperation with China. The US also benefits from scientific and technological cooperation because China's scientific research capabilities are rapidly improving.

The higher education aspect involves the financial sustainability of many universities in the United States, especially private universities. The decrease in Chinese international students means that the income of these universities is decreasing, and they are facing greater financial pressure. Therefore, it is not at all surprising some universities in the United States are now more willing to resume exchanges with Chinese universities.

In the field of tourism, US Secretary of Commerce Raimondo mentioned during

her visit to China that if the number of Chinese tourists to the United States returns to the level of 2019, it can contribute 30 billion US dollars to America's GDP every year and add 50,000 jobs to the United States. It can be seen that in the current context of very uncertain economic growth prospects in the United States, the United States hopes to promote the restart of tourism cooperation between the two countries.

On the other hand, from China's perspective, the demand for related interests is also obvious.

First, we hope to continue to maintain Sino-US scientific and technological cooperation without "decoupling". Our scientific and technological development still needs to maintain international cooperation.

Second, I think China still needs to use the US higher education system to cultivate its cutting-edge talents. Over the past 40 years, the most important benefit to China from the development of Sino-US relations lies not only in the economy but also in the nurturing of talent. The effect of the United States in cultivating high-level talents for China in the past few decades

may be fully reflected in the next few decades.

In addition, we also hope to improve American society's attitude towards China by expanding Sino-US cultural exchanges. During the COVID-19 epidemic in the past few years, the anti-China and anti-China atmosphere in the United States was very intense. This situation can only be effectively controlled and improved through exchanges and interactions between the two societies.

In short, does there exist a mutual interest and need between China and the United States in improving relations? The answer is - "Yes, there is".

III

Judgement of the Direction of Sino-US Relations

In the third part, I shall dwell on the current and future direction of Sino-US relations.

Are China-US relations now easing or improving?

"Ease" and "improve" are fundamentally not the same. The so-called "ease" is more reflected in the easing of competition

between China and the United States and the easing of tensions. However, these are superficial and temporary, lacking policy adjustments by both parties and substantive progress in the relationship between the two countries. The so-called "improvement" is based on the policy adjustments of both parties, and there is concrete and sustainable progress in the relationship between the two countries. For example, a series of problems have been solved, and the relationship can move forward. This is called improvement.

So, are Sino-US relations heading towards "easing" or "improving"?

I think the current Biden administration's China policy has two characteristics:

First, it serves the needs of the APEC Summit. To put it bluntly, it is to do whatever it takes to bring President Xi on board to attend the APEC summit in San Francisco and make the summit a more successful one. This is in order to make Biden's diplomacy appear successful and, at the same time, send a signal within the United States to show that he is doing his best to maintain stability in US-China relations while at the same time carrying out strong competition with China.

Second, I think the Biden administration's current China policy has a primary goal of stabilization rather than improving relations with China. In other words, as friction between China and the United States continues, no major conflict should occur. The United States is facing enough troubles now, and the election is approaching, so he hopes to stabilize Sino-US relations. As for whether to improve Sino-US relations, I think that currently, this is not a key consideration for his policy team.

Two indicators help us make an observation whether the future trend will be to ease or to improve China and US bilateral relations:

The first indicator is to see whether the upcoming meeting between the heads of state of China and the United States is likely to produce some substantive results. Officials from both sides are currently intensively engaged in making arrangements and in doing homework towards realizing the summit meeting on the APEC sidelines and to make sure there will definitely be results, but it remains to be seen how substantial these results are.

The second indicator is the trend of Sino-US relations after the summit. Before the summit, Biden hopes that Sino-US

relations could be eased. But after the summit, he may no longer have such a political need.

Furthermore, Sino-US relations will also be impacted by two major events: the leadership election in Taiwan in January next year and next year's US presidential election. If the DPP continues to be in power, cross-Strait relations will remain intense, and the tightening of cross-Strait relations will also spill over to Sino-US relations, which may cause the previous relaxation to come to an end.

Regarding next year's US election, in the election year, the US Republican Party will definitely use the "China card" to attack China. This is not surprising. But the key here is whether Biden will follow suit. That is to say, it depends on whether the Biden administration will become tougher on its China policy after the Republican Party attacks China. If he does this, Sino-US relations will further decline.

To conclude, so far, some of the loosening in Sino-US relations has been more easing than improving. It remains to be seen whether the goal of improvement can be achieved on the basis of easing through a meeting between the two heads of state.

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The views expressed here are those of the original author and not necessarily of the translator or of the Institute of Chinese Studies

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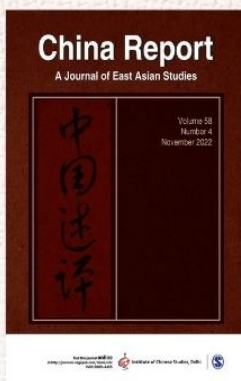


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