

# What's at Stake as Blinken Heads to Beijing

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United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to China on June 18, after repeated delays of high-level meetings and amid ongoing tensions between the two countries. In November, U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping [met in Bali](#), where they agreed to further talks aimed at mending ties. But a planned trip by Blinken was canceled in February after the U.S. military shot down a Chinese [spy balloon](#) over U.S. airspace, re-aggravating tensions. What are the stakes of Blinken's trip, and what is its likely impact on the state of U.S.-China relations? —*The Editors*

## Comments



### Sheena Chestnut Greitens

In the context of sustained tension, suspicion, and competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC), Secretary of State Tony Blinken's [trip](#) is unlikely to produce major breakthroughs or to dramatically alter the trajectory of the relationship. Indeed, this visit was rescheduled after February's incursion of a Chinese [spy balloon](#) over U.S. airspace, and that, along with several recent [close air](#) and [maritime](#) encounters in the Indo-Pacific, has elevated tensions in the bilateral relationship.

In that context, the goals of Blinken's visit appear to be modest, oriented toward [risk management and stabilization](#) and an effort by the administration to lay groundwork for the United States' hosting of the APEC summit in California in November, where Xi and Biden are expected to meet.

Critics have [argued](#) that Blinken's visit epitomizes a return to engagement that is a fruitless waste of time—or worse, will tempt the United States to refrain from taking steps necessary to defend American interests, for fear of provoking Beijing. That would indeed be a mistake. It will be important for the administration to continue to robustly defend and advance American interests: strengthening the efficacy of deterrence in the Taiwan Strait, protecting victims of transnational

repression by China's security apparatus which is increasingly projecting its activities abroad, and working with allies and partners to limit vulnerability to Chinese attempts at economic coercion for political purposes.

Careful bilateral diplomacy, however, does not have to undermine robust defense of American interests. Done right, it can make those efforts stronger and more effective. European and Asian allies alike have made major shifts in their approaches to China over the last several years: Many European countries have reconsidered their economic relationships in light of Beijing's support for Moscow after Putin's invasion of Ukraine, while allies in Asia have rethought both their own defense [capabilities](#) and [planning](#) and their [openness](#) to evolution in [American defense posture](#) in the region.

Responsible bilateral diplomacy reassures allies and partners that the U.S. will remain measured in its response to PRC behavior at a time when publics across Asia, especially, [worry](#) about where U.S.-China competition could end up. Clear efforts by Washington to manage risk and open lines of crisis communication will also help clarify Beijing's responsibility in the event of potential escalation, improve the ease of allied coordination if a crisis does emerge, and decrease the likelihood Beijing could drive wedges between the U.S. and its allies. And by emphasizing that shifts in security cooperation are driven by regional demand, not Washington's [imposition](#), American steadiness can also enhance the long-term sustainability of both the international coalitions themselves, and domestic support for the augmented capabilities U.S. partners are pursuing.

One diplomatic visit is unlikely to moderate Beijing's most problematic actions, or change its perceptions of intractable American hostility to China's goals. It will not remove the fundamental conflicts of interests and values that are driving tension between Washington and Beijing. And it will not alter some of the underlying problems weakening American strategy in Asia. Chief among these is an overreliance on military power at the expense of the kind of American economic engagement desired in the region. APEC could, and should, be used to promote that engagement, but thus far domestic politics on trade have kept the administration from offering the kind of economic leadership that most countries in Asia [would prefer](#).

Ironically, one of the main factors weighing in favor of Blinken's trip also highlights a potential pitfall on the horizon for the administration in November: Successful American strategy toward China depends on the success of American strategy in Asia writ large, and successful execution of grand strategy requires not just military, but effective economic statecraft.

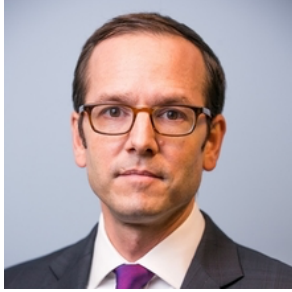


## **Bonnie Glaser**

When U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping met in Bali last November, they agreed to try to halt the downward slide in the U.S.-China relationship. Secretary Antony Blinken's re-scheduled visit to China this weekend provides an opportunity to resume that effort, though making progress may be even more challenging in the aftermath of the spy balloon episode. Distrust within U.S.-China relations is at its highest point in more than 70 years. Nevertheless, both countries have an interest in stabilizing ties, dispelling misperceptions about the other side's intentions, and averting military conflict. One reason to be cautiously optimistic that some headway can be made toward putting a floor under the relationship is that both countries now recognize and accept that the U.S.-China relationship has changed fundamentally and cannot return to the past. At the same time, however, Beijing's insistence at every turn that the United States is [responsible](#) for all the troubles in the bilateral relationship and must reflect on its mistakes before relations can return to a healthy track suggests that it will be challenging to agree on the steps that need to be taken to achieve greater predictability and stability.

Expectations for concrete deliverables from this visit have appropriately been set low by both sides. The best possible outcome of this visit is that both sides, directed by top leaders to produce mutually beneficial results, agree to hold more exchanges and dialogue in the coming months. Senior officials from both sides should engage with their counterparts in an effort to clarify intentions, reduce misperceptions, and manage differences on a range of issues. In addition, efforts should be made to work together where U.S. and Chinese interests align, especially on global challenges like climate change, public health, and food security. Communication channels that have fallen into abeyance should be revived, most urgently between the two militaries. Both sides should commit to working toward a productive Biden-Xi summit on the margins of the APEC leaders meeting that is planned for San Francisco in November.

The stakes are high. With the United States nearing election season, the window to stabilize U.S.-China relations is limited and may soon close. Blinken's visit should set in motion a process that sets both countries on a path toward a more predictable bilateral relationship. Progress will not be easy and will require enormous political courage from both sides. It's time to stop finger-pointing and take practical steps to responsibly manage what is certain to be a prolonged great power strategic competition.



## **Evan Medeiros**

The stakes could not be higher for Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to China this weekend. The U.S.-China relationship is at a precarious moment. Perceptions and policies in Beijing and Washington are hardening. The two sides lack a common set of ideas—implicit or explicit—for how to manage bilateral ties under the condition of strategic competition. The basic communication channels have atrophied substantially (this is the [first visit](#) of a U.S. secretary of state in five years), and the relationship lacks mechanisms for managing this complexity. If a crisis erupted tomorrow, few would be surprised, and many would have [predicted](#) it.

The core source of this tension and acrimony is the contrasting approaches to building more stable relations. This is fueling a disdain for diplomacy and encouraging risky behavior. Both countries want more stability for domestic reasons, and both are being told by the rest of the world to manage their competition better. But their visions for how to do this differ greatly. They cannot yet figure out a way to reconcile very different approaches to building a more stable, predictable, and resilient relationship.

Washington’s strategy has two parts: on the one hand, expanding communication, risk management, and, when possible, cooperation and, on the other hand, expanding competitive economic, diplomatic, and military policies. Washington officials [say](#), “intense competition requires intense diplomacy.”

China summarily rejects this. For Xi, stability can only come from a reduction in the U.S.’s constant strategic pressure on it and, of course, greater U.S. sensitivity to China’s top priorities like Taiwan. Beijing is now trying to pry Washington from its two-part strategy by conducting dangerous actions—such as the [naval intercept](#) in early June—to convince U.S. policymakers they cannot have their cake and eat it too. Xi calls this “struggle” and “bottom-line thinking” and more operationally risky behavior may be coming.

Domestic political dynamics in both countries are complicating all of this, further shrinking room for compromise. Gone are traditional buffers and stabilizers, such as economic ties and connections between business communities and civil society. Congress is critiquing Blinken’s every move. On China’s part, Xi Jinping’s intensive focus on national security now treats international interactions as vulnerabilities. The newly revised espionage law, in particular, may chill academic exchanges for the long-term.

Secretary Blinken has his work cut out for him. His priority needs to be to arrest the current deterioration and persuade China of the risks and costs of its dangerous actions. Solving a few bilateral problems and achieving a few “quick wins” would help too.

No single visit can do it all, and certainly not at this fraught moment. But even the U.S.-Soviet relationship had its rules, norms, and mechanisms, of course only developed after the searing experience of the Cuban missile crisis. Blinken will want to ascertain if China wants to do it the hard way or not.