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TENSIONS SHOW IN US-CHINA TIES DURING US SECRETARY OF STATE BLINKEN'S VISIT

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US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's three day (April 24-26) visit to Shanghai and Beijing was an apparent attempt to arrest the slide in relations and simultaneously make clear the US 'red lines'. Since Biden became US President, Blinken is the senior-most US official to visit the People's Republic of China (PRC). Nevertheless, the visit coincided with the US authorising a US\$ 90 billion aid package to Ukraine and Taiwan. China too used the visit to set out its 'red lines', restate its ambitions, and signal that it has serious reservations about US claims that it wants to stabilise relations and doesn't want to challenge its core interests or prevent China's growth.

2. Blinken's visit came on the heels of repeated recent attempts by US President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping to reduce tensions. China has been particularly apprehensive of US efforts to 'friendshore' manufacturing to "trusted" partners and prevent its growth. Following the telephone conversation between US President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping on April 2, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen visited (April 4-9) China for five days of talks in Guangzhou with Chinese Politburo member He Lifeng, Finance Minister Lan Fo'an, People's Bank of China (PBOC) Governor Pan Gongsheng and former Vice Premier Liu He. She later visited Beijing where she met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, but did not get a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping who, however, met visiting Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov.

3. Yellen's visit was followed by the first face-to-face video talks between US Defence Secretary Austin and China's new Defence Minister Dong Jun on April 17. The People's Daily (April 17) said Dong Jun "underscored that the Taiwan question is at the core of China's core interests, which brook no compromise. The Chinese People's Liberation Army stands firm against any activities seeking 'Taiwan independence' or external support for such separatist actions". Noting the overall stability in the South China Sea situation, Dong Jun urged the "United States to recognize China's firm stance and take practical actions to uphold regional peace, as well as the stability of relations between the two countries and militaries." U.S. and Chinese defence officials also met in Hawaii on April 3-4, 2024, for the 2024 China-US Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) Working Group meeting to discuss unsafe and aggressive ship and aircraft incidents between the two militaries in the Pacific region. At this meeting the U.S. and China delegations each discussed several specific incidents over the past several years that had raised operational safety concerns. Earlier, in December 2023, General CQ Brown, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke with his Chinese counterpart in a video call — in the first senior military-to-military contact since the Pelosi visit. In January this

year, a team of Chinese Air Force and military officials travelled to the Pentagon in Washington to meet US military officials.

4. Chinese delegations too visited the US. Chinese Vice-Minister of Commerce Wang Shouwen, led a delegation to the US on April 4, for the first meeting of a working group on trade between the two nations, which aimed to improve communication and manage disagreements between them in the face of growing tensions. He highlighted concerns over the imposition of Section 301 tariffs by the US and the associated inquiries against China and demanded that the US and China must manage their disputes and increase their collaboration.

5. Despite the desire expressed by Biden and Xi to stabilise relations, Beijing conveyed a clear message that it was not prepared to yield ground and make concessions. A day prior to Blinken's arrival in Shanghai on April 23, the Head of China's U.S. and Oceania Department gave a lengthy, toughly-worded briefing to journalists. The briefing provoked comment in the U.S. questioning the need for Blinken to at all visit Beijing.

6. The Head of China's U.S. and Oceania Department said that Sino-US relations 'have stopped falling and stabilized', however, negative factors in the relationship between the two countries are also prominent. He accused the U.S. of "stubbornly advancing its strategy to contain China" and said it "continues to use wrong words and deeds that interfere in China's internal affairs, smear China's image, and harm China's interests. We firmly oppose and counteract this". He stressed that "mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation have always been the fundamental principles for China to view and handle Sino-US relations and that peace first, stability first, and trust first are China's principles for handling Sino-US relations this year". He underscored that Taiwan is part of China and will be reunified and yet again made an implicit call for recognition of China as a power on par with the US. He said the two must jointly shoulder the responsibilities of major powers and as permanent members of the Security Council bear special responsibilities for maintaining international peace and security.

7. The Head of China's U.S. and Oceania Department enumerated five major goals for Blinken's visit. These are: (i) establish a correct understanding. Whether China and the United States are partners or rivals is a fundamental question and cannot make subversive mistakes. Asserting that great power competition is not the background of this era, he said China and the United States cannot live without exchanges or dealings, let alone conflict and confrontation. At the same time he insisted China has interests that must be safeguarded, principles that must be defended, and bottom lines that must be adhered to and recalled Biden's remarks that the US does not seek to change China's system, does not seek to contain China's development, does not support "Taiwan independence" etc. (ii) strengthen dialogue. Saying they maintain interaction and have resumed communication between the two militaries, he added that the United States must realize that it cannot communicate for the sake of communication, cannot say one thing and do another, let alone have any illusions about dealing with China from the so-called "position of strength." (iii) effectively manage differences. Saying that differences cannot dominate Sino-U.S. relations, he particularly said that the US "cannot touch China's red lines on issues such as Taiwan, democracy and human rights, road systems, and development rights". Asserting that "China is unwavering in its determination and will to safeguard national sovereignty, security, and development interests", he described the Taiwan issue as "the first insurmountable red line in Sino-US

relations". He reiterated that Taiwan is part of China, and the Taiwan issue is China's internal affairs and that "the biggest threat to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is the separatist activities of "Taiwan independence" forces and external connivance and support. We will never let it go". (iv) promote mutually beneficial cooperation. (v) we must jointly shoulder the responsibilities of major powers. China and the United States are both permanent members of the Security Council and bear special responsibilities for maintaining international peace and security. China plays a constructive and responsible role as a major country on hot issues such as the Middle East, Ukraine, and the Korean Peninsula. We hope that the United States will do the same. Stating that China has taken a series of China-related measures in China's periphery in response to the United States' recent promotion of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" against China, he cautioned that "The Asia-Pacific region is not anyone's back garden and should not become a battleground for major powers". He emphasised that issues related to Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong are China's internal.

8. In similar vein the Institute of International Economic and Trade Cooperation of China's Ministry of Commerce published a lengthy 4-part report on April 1, prior to Yellen's visit. Titled "The Hypocritical Nature and the Truth of U.S. Foreign Aid", the report said "The United States has always regarded itself as the world's largest foreign aid donor. But in fact, U.S. foreign aid has always been based on maximizing U.S. interests as its fundamental starting point and goal. It ignores the practical interests and long-term development of the vast number of recipient developing countries, is selfish, arrogant, hypocritical and ugly, and arbitrarily interferes in other countries".

9. Blinken and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had nearly five and a half hours of talks. During the meeting Wang Yi spoke entirely from a prepared text. His remarks largely echoed the comments of the Head of China's U.S. and Oceania Department. The Beijing Daily (April 26) reported that in their talks on April 26, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that since last November when President Xi Jinping and President Biden met in San Francisco and jointly drew up the "San Francisco Vision", Sino-US relations have generally stabilised and dialogue, cooperation and positive aspects have increased in various fields. However, he said, "negative factors in Sino-US relations are still rising and accumulating. They are facing various interferences and sabotages. China's legitimate right to development is being unreasonably suppressed, and China's core interests are constantly being challenged". Wang Yi said the international community is waiting to see whether the two sides will cooperate to deal with global issues or whether they will confront each other or even break out into conflict. Saying that China always views Sino-US relations from the perspective of building a community with a shared future for mankind and is committed to promoting the stable, healthy, and sustainable development of Sino-US relations, he emphasised that the US should not interfere in China's internal affairs, suppress China's development, and not step on China's red lines when it comes to China's sovereignty, security, and development interests.

10. Earlier on April 25, in Shanghai, Blinken met Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Jining. Beijing Daily (April 25) reported that they exchanged views on economic and trade exchanges, scientific and technological innovation, people-to-people and cultural exchanges, etc. Referring to Xi Jinping's conversation with Biden on April 2, Chen Jining said Sino-US relations are currently stabilising. Blinken replied that China's development is beneficial to the world, and the United States is happy to see China develop and become prosperous. He said maintaining dialogue and communication is very important to avoid misjudgements, manage differences, and promote mutually beneficial cooperation.

Blinken's remarks to journalists as reported by the US State Department (April 26) noted that he and Wang Yi had agreed to hold the first U.S.-PRC talks on Artificial Intelligence in the coming weeks. It also noted Blinken's observation that while there are more than 290,000 Chinese students in the United States, there are fewer than 900 Americans studying here in China, and that the number of American students should be increased.

11. Blinken stated that the US is "very clear-eyed about the challenges posed by the PRC and about their competing visions for the future", asserting that America "will always defend our core interests and values". He said he had reiterated the US' serious concern about the PRC providing components that are "powering Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine" and said China is the top supplier of machine tools, microelectronics, nitrocellulose – which is critical to making munitions and rocket propellants, and other dual-use items that Moscow is using to ramp up its defence industrial base. He said "Russia would struggle to sustain its assault on Ukraine without China's support". Blinken told Beijing that it cannot achieve better relations with Europe while supporting the greatest threat to European security since the end of the Cold War and said he had "made clear that if China does not address this problem, we will". He also expressed concern about China's unfair trade practices and the potential consequences of industrial overcapacity to global and U.S. markets -- an issue raised earlier by US Treasury Secretary Yellen -- especially in a number of key industries that will drive the 21st century economy. He discussed China's "dangerous actions" in the South China Sea, including against the Philippines near the Second Thomas Shoal and reaffirmed that US "defence commitments to the Philippines remain ironclad". He stressed the critical importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Among other issues raised by Blinken were the wrongful detention of American citizens, erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy and democratic institutions, ongoing human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet, individual human rights cases and press freedom and access. He said they discussed a range of regional and global crises where China can play a constructive role.

12. Not without obvious design, Blinken's visit took place in the backdrop of reports that the US was identifying from a list of 100 Chinese banks which should be sanctioned for aiding Russia in its war with Ukraine. More disconcerting for China would be the reports suggesting that US authorities had also begun compiling lists of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadres and their assets in the US and West who could potentially be sanctioned.

13. The Chinese are meticulous in matters of form, protocol and hierarchy. There were a few possibly deliberate oddities in the reception accorded to US Secretary of State Blinken. When Blinken arrived in Shanghai he was received by a local Shanghai Municipal official. An official from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not fly down to receive him, in contrast to the Chinese Vice Minister of Finance coming to Guangzhou to receive US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen. When Blinken departed Beijing too, except for the US Ambassador there was no Chinese official to see him off. Blinken was informed of his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the last minute. Curiously, he was not informed of the meeting by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi whom he had just met, but by the Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong. Finally, the US Embassy in Beijing posted a transcript (in Chinese) of the talks between Blinken and Wang Yi and it was punctuated in numerous places with "inaudible" in brackets. The English version released later by the US State Department included these. A report says the Chinese did not give the US side a copy of the transcript and neither did the latter bother to collect it!

14. US Secretary of State Blinken’s visit to China was an occasion for both sides to fairly bluntly spell out their respective concerns. It followed US actions that ignored China’s concerns on Taiwan, though Taiwan figured extensively in the talks between Blinken and Wang Yi with the Chinese robustly declaring that it is their inviolable ‘red line’ and their determination to effect reunification. As if to reinforce their claim on Taiwan, the day after Blinken’s departure 22 aircraft of China’s People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) flew over the Taiwan Strait with 12 crossing the ‘median line’. There was also little evidence of China trying to create a favourable atmosphere for the talks despite senior Chinese officials, like CCP CC ILD Chief Liu Jianchao saying (March 27) that mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation are the basis for the development of constructive China-U.S. relations and calling on Beijing and Washington to refrain from doing anything that could damage the relationship.

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