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## CHINA-US: LIMITED RAPPROCHEMENT AFOOT?

by JAYADEVA RANADE

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrived in Washington on a two-day (October 26-28, 2023) visit after a telling interval of five years. Official readouts of the visit indicate some progress during Wang Yi's visit. Important were the disclosures that consultations on maritime affairs and arms control would resume and Chinese President Xi Jinping would visit San Francisco this November for the APEC Summit -- this will be the second meeting between the two since US President Biden assumed office.

In the interim, China's leadership and official media has maintained a steady rhetoric critical of the US. Beijing has persisted with aggressive actions against India, the Philippines, Japan and Taiwan and Chinese President Xi Jinping continues to confidently push his global agenda offering the world an alternative model with his Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative and Global Civilisation Initiative. Speaking on October 30, at the ongoing 10<sup>th</sup> Beijing Xiangshan Forum, the Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission General Zhang Youxia again stressed that 'China will never tolerate and will be relentless against anyone who dares to split Taiwan from China in any way.'

That China decided to send Wang Yi, who as member of the Politburo and Director of the CCP's Central Foreign Affairs Commission is the senior most diplomat and foreign policy advisor to Chinese President Xi Jinping, to Washington for talks and to discuss Chinese President Xi Jinping's meeting with US President Biden on the side-lines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in San Francisco next month is significant. It points to the US and China both deciding to arrest the deterioration in their relations beginning with a meeting between US President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the APEC Summit. In view of the capital intensive policy initiatives taken by China in the past five years to become an advanced technology power, counter the US and West's efforts at 'reshoring', and the growing US military presence in the region, it is unclear as yet whether and what concessions either side made.

US-China relations slid downhill considerably since Chinese President Xi Jinping, quite unlike his predecessors or the usual world leaders, openly challenged Washington's global leadership role at the 19th Party Congress in November 2017. It predictably triggered a severe and sustained US reaction beginning February 2018. While the US has consistently insisted that China is its biggest concern and economic competitor, it continues to target China's hi-technology sector in a bid to effectively diminish its ambitions to become a leading world technology power by 2025. Days prior to Wang Yi's arrival in Washington, US President Biden announced further restrictions on hi-tech exports and sales to China. The objective has been to degrade China's ability to pose a military challenge to the US. Measures to steer US and

Western companies away from doing business with China, euphemistically called 'de-risking', or 'de-risking', were simultaneously initiated. While Europe has been reluctant to disengage from China because of its deleterious effects on Europe's economy, some US companies have begun to move away. According to official Chinese data, US and EU imports from China have dropped substantially in the last two years. This has made recovery of China's export-led economy more difficult.

The US has meanwhile steadily deployed its forces in the Indo-Pacific region around China. Washington has simultaneously been consolidating and strengthening its relationships with countries in the region with a focus on military cooperation. It announced arms sales and military training programmes for Taiwan and President Biden on four occasions affirmed US support to Taiwan in case of Chinese aggression and, though the US State Department issued clarifications each time, this has added to the US policy of strategic ambiguity. The US and China have both released reports alleging assertive and, at times, risky, actions by the other. Tension is high in the region and the South China Sea with China's tense relations and manoeuvres against Taiwan keeping alive the real possibility of clashes.

Wang Yi's visit comes amid China's efforts to assess US strength and capability to interfere in the Indo-Pacific while engaged in the war in Ukraine and effort to contain Israel's war on Hamas from spreading to the larger Middle East region. A backdrop to Chinese calculations is its firm friendship with Russia and the strengthening ties with Iran. Inside China there is widespread lack of trust, including among officials, in the pronouncements of the US and West that they do not desire to 'contain' China. The statements by General Zhang Youxia and other leaders also address this audience.

Notwithstanding the negative official Chinese media rhetoric though, there have been reports of meetings between US and Chinese officials in third countries to try and ease tensions. Meetings have been held in Italy, Switzerland, Indonesia and Malta. The US made the first substantive move with US Secretary of State Blinken visiting China in June this year, his first since assuming office in January 2021. This was followed by a series of visits by senior members of the US Administration. The first was by US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen early this July. US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry visited later in July and was followed by US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo in August. During this period only one Chinese official, namely Chinese Commerce Vice Minister Wang Wentao, visited the US to attend an APEC meeting in May 2023.

In September, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson said that Chinese Premier Li Qiang had a brief exchange with U.S. President Biden at the G-20 Summit in New Delhi, when Li Qiang emphasized to Biden that China's development is an opportunity rather than a challenge to the United States, and China and the United States should strengthen exchanges. It reported President Biden as replying that "the United States hopes that China's economy will continue to grow and will not prevent China's economic development".

Negative rhetoric in China's official media has also recently yielded to more conciliatory coverage. Noticeable were the People's Daily (October 27) reporting that Xi Jinping and Biden had sent congratulatory messages to the annual Gala Dinner of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. Widely covered by the official Chinese media was Xi Jinping's meeting

with California Governor Gavin Newsom in Beijing on October 26. Newsom also met the Beijing Party Secretary. Earlier on October 9, Xi Jinping received a bipartisan group of US senators led by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Schumer had earlier met: Politburo Standing Committee member and head of the National People's Congress (NPC) Zhao Leji; Politburo member and Foreign Minister Wang Yi; and Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Jining. Xinhua reported that Xi Jinping had told Schumer he wants to work together and avoid conflict. He said, "China maintains that the common interests of the two countries far outweigh their differences" and that "The 'Thucydides Trap' is not inevitable." According to Xinhua, Schumer responded that "The U.S. side does not seek a conflict with China, nor does it seek to decouple" and "The United States is willing to enhance dialogue and communication with China in an open and candid manner...and stabilize and strengthen U.S.-China relations."

The readouts issued by the Chinese and US also indicated progress during Wang Yi's current visit to Washington. Important was the disclosure that Chinese President Xi Jinping would visit San Francisco this November for the APEC Summit. This will be the second meeting between the two since Biden assumed office.

Official and media reports confirmed that Wang Yi had two rounds of closed-door meetings with US Secretary of State Blinken on October 26 and 27 before meeting US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and US President Biden on October 27. Wang Yi struck a positive note prior to meeting Blinken, and said China and the United States need to have dialogue. "Not only should we resume dialogue, the dialogue should be in-depth and comprehensive so that with dialogue we can increase mutual understanding, reduce misunderstanding and misjudgment, constantly seek to expand common ground and pursue cooperation that will benefit both sides so that we can stabilize China-U.S. relations and return it to the track of healthy, stable, and sustainable development".

The US State Department spokesperson said the two discussed a range of bilateral, regional, and global issues, including addressing areas of difference as well as exploring areas of cooperation. Blinken, it said, reiterated that the United States will continue to stand up for our interests and values and those of our allies and partners. Blinken also expressed his condolences on the passing of former Premier Li Keqiang. Details of the issues discussed have not yet been revealed and it would be pertinent to see the areas of convergence and differences in the views of the US and China.

According to US media reports, Blinken told Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi that he wants to enlist Beijing's help in keeping the Israel-Hamas war from widening. The US State Department said that they discussed "a range of issues," including both "areas of difference" and "areas of cooperation." It again emphasized the need for "open lines of communication" with Beijing to "responsibly manage" tense ties. The White House reported that National Security Advisor Sullivan and Wang Yi had "candid, constructive, and substantive discussions on key issues in the U.S.-China bilateral relationship, the Israel-Hamas conflict, Russia's war against Ukraine, and cross-Strait issues, among other topics". Sullivan discussed concerns over China's dangerous and unlawful actions in the South China Sea and raised the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Both sides reaffirmed their desire

to maintain this strategic channel of communication and to pursue additional high-level diplomacy.

Reports of these meetings will be carefully scrutinised as they begin to emerge to assess whether compromises have been made. The US has been visibly and repeatedly pushing for contacts and dialogue, including a Summit level meeting. It has dropped confrontational words like 'containment', uses 'de-risking' instead of reshoring, and has striven to maintain ambiguity regarding Taiwan. Biden has on four occasions expressed US support to Taiwan in case of a Chinese military adventure but each time the US State Department has walked back on Biden's remarks.

Far from making any such gestures, China has stayed firm on its policy of becoming a major world power and dominating the Indo-Pacific region. It continues to follow an aggressive policy with continuing military build-up on the borders with India, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) damaging a Philippines vessel ferrying supplies to its personnel on Scarborough Reef, and almost daily intrusions of Taiwan's waters and Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) by air and sea. At the same time, there are adequate indications of rising domestic dissatisfaction in China. Among the contributory factors is that people blame Xi Jinping for mishandling the relationship with US and accentuating economic hardship. As the window of opportunity for Xi Jinping to defuse tensions or divert the people's attention by attempting a military adventure shrinks, Wang Yi will try and assess US resolve willingness to 'contain' China. The window for the US is shrinking too. As Washington pursues a policy of only economic competition with China, it risks allowing China to overtake it in global influence, economic and military power.

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