

# INDICATOR INSIGHT BRIEF: US SECRETARY OF STATE VISIT TO CHINA

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## Indicator

The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited China from April 24-26, meeting President Xi Jinping, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong and Shanghai Part Secretary Chen Jining.

During the meetings Blinken discussed the bilateral relationship between the US and China, as well as military-to-military communication to avoid miscalculation and conflict, serious concerns around China providing tacit support to Russia in its conflict against Ukraine, maintaining stability across the Taiwan Strait, Chinese destabilising actions around the Second Thomas Shoal, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea among other issues.

## Context

The US has viewed China's actions across the globe as potentially damaging US interests and destabilising the rules-based international order.

China has utilised "grey zone" tactics in the South China Sea, deploying large armed Coast Guard vessels to patrol South China Sea adjacent countries EEZs to assert its disputed "nine-dash line", the reasoning in which it claims ownership to extensive swathes of the region, in contempt of established UNCLOS. Furthermore, China has also deployed militarised fishing vessels, the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), throughout the region which allows China to put deniable pressure on South China Sea countries. China has implemented two strategies in the South China Sea, "nibbling like a silkworm", which involves a series of small moves that fall short of initiating a conflict, but if those actions were conducted simultaneously, they could trigger conflict, and overall result in a significant gain, an example being the creation of military infrastructure on disputed reefs and shoals throughout the region. The China Coast Guard (CCG) and PAFMM have implemented tactics incepted by PLAN Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong, the swarming of contested islands with layers of PAFMM and CCG vessels to cut them off from their respective mainlands and outside support.

In terms of Cross-Strait stability with Taiwan, China has increased its military activity around the island conducting daily flyovers across the median line of the strait and entering Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) as well as deploying naval assets around the island. Significantly in August 2022, when US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan, China undertook short-notice comprehensive military exercises around Taiwan including missile launches and aircraft carrier launches. Throughout Xi's premiership, the political messaging around unification has strengthened, stating that Taiwan and China will "surely be reunified". Shortly before Blinken arrived in China the US Congress approved \$8bn in defence aid to Taiwan.

China has been supplying dual-use technology to Russia, in support of Russia's war in Ukraine. The US has warned China over its support to Russia, US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen visited China in early April and raised the issue of China's support of Russia. There have been some domestic concerns from Chinese banks over the potential concern of the US instituting financial sanctions over the delivery of dual-use goods, resulting in some banks ceasing to facilitate transfers from Russia.

## Analysis

Although issues of significant global importance, in which China and the US have vested interests, were discussed no breakthroughs were achieved on any of the aforementioned topics. Xi and Blinken signalled the desire to stabilise the relationship between the two countries. However, there remains notable mistrust and tensions in US-Chinese relations, exemplified by Xi Jinping's remark to Blinken that "No progress means regress".

## Implications

Ambrey assessed that there will likely be no reduction in tensions in the South China Sea region and around Taiwan Cross-Strait relations and will remain areas of war risk for vessels transiting. Following Blinken's visit the US and Philippines carried out military exercises in the South China Sea in which China deployed CCG and Navy vessels within close proximity to the exercises. Furthermore, China escalated its actions around the disputed Scarborough Shoal, using water cannons which damaged a Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources vessel and a Philippine Coast Guard vessel. The act of US Congress approving \$8bn in defence aid to Taiwan also inhibits any progress in reducing tensions between the US and China over the issue of Taiwan, and therefore tensions will certainly persist.