

Blinken Aims at Xi in Speech Vowing to Shape the Global Order

By Iain Marlow and Peter Martin

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the US will seek to influence China's behavior by shaping the world around Beijing in remarks that took direct aim at President Xi Jinping's performance leading the world's second-biggest economy.

"Under President Xi, the ruling Chinese Communist Party has become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad," Blinken said Thursday in a speech laying out the Biden administration's approach toward China. "We cannot rely on Beijing to change its trajectory. So, we will shape the strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open, inclusive international system."

Blinken warned that China is seeking to dominate the industries of the future and said the US response will be to bolster investment at home; work closely with allies, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region; and compete with China on a "level playing field." He said Xi's government is actively undercutting the international system that aided China's own rise.

"Rather than using its power to reinforce and revitalize the laws, agreements, principles and institutions that enabled its success, so that other countries can benefit from them too, Beijing is undermining it," Blinken said.

The top US diplomat's comments were unusually direct, and his public remarks mirror the administration's classified China strategy, according to people familiar with the issue.

Asked about the speech, Liu Pengyu, spokesman for the Chinese embassy in Washington, said, "It is never China's goal to surpass or replace the US or engage in zero-sum competition with it. History and reality show that China and the US both stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation."

Beyond the blunt talk, there was little new in the speech, and the biggest hole in the strategy continues to be its economic vision -- despite President Joe Biden's unveiling of a new 13-nation Indo-Pacific Economic Framework designed to counter China's influence. The US didn't invite China to join that forum, and hasn't revealed the criteria for other nations to come in.

"The missing piece was a bold trade initiative," said Richard Fontaine, head of the Center for a New American Security. But there's little appetite in Washington these days to take on a new free trade agreement.

And despite signaling for months that the administration's China strategy was almost ready for public airing, key unresolved issues remain, including the fate of tariffs on \$300 billion of Chinese goods that Biden inherited from the Trump administration. A top US trade official said Wednesday that the administration's review of those tariffs is likely to take months.

Blinken said the US doesn't want to "sever" China from the global economy, but warned that "Beijing, despite its rhetoric, is pursuing asymmetric decoupling, seeking to make China less dependent on the world and the world more dependent on China." And he said that businesses shouldn't sacrifice Western values in seeking access to China's markets.

Mentioning areas of potential cooperation, Blinken cited climate change, food security, addressing Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs and "global macro coordination" as the world's economy recovers from the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The US doesn't want a new Cold War with Beijing, he added.

"We will engage constructively with China wherever we can -- not as a favor to us or anyone else, and never in exchange for walking away from our principles, but because working together to solve great challenges is what the world expects from great powers, and because it's directly in our interest," he said.

Those passages about cooperation aren't likely to be seen as the takeaway message in Beijing. The unusually frank rhetoric against Xi's government comes after tensions between the nations soured further over what the U.S. sees as China's tacit support for Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine and comments by Biden suggesting the US would take military action to defend Taiwan in case of invasion.

In a nod to questions over whether Biden misspoke when making that recent suggestion on defending Taiwan, Blinken reiterated that US policy toward the island hasn't changed. "We do not support Taiwan independence," he said. But he added that America has a "strong unofficial relationship" with Taipei.

In a statement, Taiwan's Foreign Ministry thanked Blinken for reiterating its security commitment to the democratically ruled island and noted the US briefed Taiwan on the contents of the speech in advance.

Blinken's remarks weren't intended to introduce new policies but rather to clarify US goals in its relations with China and signal that Washington has a clear strategy to advance its interests, said Bonnie Glaser, director of the Asia program at the German Marshall Fund of the US.

"The key message is that the US can't change China but can seek to shape the strategic environment around China and by doing so sharpen China's choices," she said.

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