

US spars with China over ‘human rights’

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The third annual Strategic and Economic Dialogue between the US and China took place in Washington last week. While efforts were made to dress up the meagre outcomes from the talks, there was no mistaking the underlying tensions between the world’s two largest economies across a range of economic and strategic issues.

US Vice President Joseph Biden deliberately sounded a jarring note in opening the meeting by raising Washington’s “vigorous disagreement” with China over the issue of human rights. He drew attention to a series of arrests in China during recent months even though, as he put it, “I understand that disagreement, when we voice it, [is] upsetting or rankles.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton chimed in with her own criticisms, drawing a parallel with the uprisings in the Middle East and declaring “that societies that work towards respecting human rights are going to be more prosperous, stable and successful.” That had been proven, she said, “most particularly in the last months.”

Clinton made more strident remarks last month to the *Atlantic* magazine, and these were published in the midst of the dialogue. In the interview, she described China’s human rights record as “deplorable.” Asked about Beijing’s reaction to the upheavals in the Middle East, she said: “They’re worried, and they are trying to stop history, which is a fool’s errand. They cannot do it. But they’re going to hold off as long as possible.”

The cynicism and hypocrisy of these comments is obvious. The “human rights” issue has become the Obama administration’s tool of choice in targeting countries like Libya and Syria. US officials remain silent on the abuse of democratic rights by American allies such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and openly justify the Washington’s own gross violations, such as in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Moreover, given the US record, Clinton’s remarks contain an implicit threat. If Beijing fails to bow to Washington’s demands, the US could, as it has done elsewhere, try to exploit opposition and dissent in China to pressure the regime into making concessions.

Clearly the comments did rankle. Speaking in Beijing, China’s Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Cui Tiankai declared that other countries raise the issue of human rights in China probably because “they are trying to make some political gains.” He insisted that China had been making progress and that all countries, including the United States, needed to keep making progress on human rights.

The remarks on human rights set the tone for the two days of talks on May 9-10 on economic and strategic disagreements.

US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner asserted: “We are seeing very promising shifts in the direction of Chinese economic policy.” While both sides hailed the establishment of “a framework of comprehensive economic cooperation,” the number and scope of specific agreements were limited.

China agreed to relatively minor steps to open up its state-dominated financial sector to US and other foreign firms. Beijing also offered to make it somewhat easier for foreign companies to win government contracts and undertook to continue a campaign against the infringement of intellectual property rights.

The public rancour over the Chinese currency that characterised exchanges between Washington and Beijing last year was absent. In part, that was because China has allowed the yuan to rise slowly against the US dollar as a means of combating its domestic inflation. Nevertheless, tensions remained as US officials continued to press for a

faster revaluation and greater access to the Chinese economy.

In turn, Chinese Vice Premier Wang Qishan pressed for “a clear timetable and road map” for the US to meet China’s economic demands, including a relaxation of US export controls on hi-tech products and fairer access for Chinese investment in the US. He also called for the US to refrain from “politicising economic and trade issues.”

For the first time since its commencement in 2006, the US-China dialogue was expanded to include military issues. Military-to-military consultation between the two countries broke down after China ended talks in January 2010 in protest over the Obama administration’s decision to sell \$6.4 billion worth of sophisticated weaponry to Taiwan. Frictions escalated when Washington intervened for the first time on the side of South East Asian countries in their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Military discussions resumed earlier this year but the undertone of distrust and rivalry was apparent amid the diplomatic niceties of last week’s exchanges. As reported in the *Financial Times*, US officials warned that with the growth of the Chinese navy “the potential for both co-operation and clashes with the US is rising.” Secretary of State Clinton reiterated the US demand for more “transparency” in China’s military expansion, saying “we must demystify long-term plans and aspirations.”

Speaking to the National Defence University in Washington, General Chen Bingde, the People’s Liberation Army chief of general staff, warned against the US tendency to “hype” the military threat from Beijing. Overstating the expansion of the Chinese military, he said, “not only distorts China’s strategic intentions, and tarnishes our international image, but also pollutes the political environment for Sino-US relations.”

At a Pentagon media briefing, Chen also warned that the sale of new US weapons to Taiwan would damage ties between the US and China. “As to how bad the impact will be, it will depend on the nature of the weapons sold to Taiwan.”

Behind the diplomatic veneer at the US-China dialogue, the underlying rivalry between the two powers has been intensified by the Obama administration’s more

aggressive stance toward China over the past two years, particularly in Asia. As the two sides left the talks, all the potential flash points remained—from the Korean peninsula and Taiwan to the South China Sea and the Indian subcontinent.

Just a week before the dialogue commenced, the US assassination of Osama bin Laden in flagrant violation of Pakistani sovereignty undoubtedly rang alarm bells in Beijing. While it welcomed Bin Laden’s death as “a positive development,” the official Chinese response “firmly” defended Pakistan’s right “to lay out and implement anti-terror strategies based on its own domestic situation”—that is, without American intervention.

More broadly, there are fears in Chinese ruling circles that Bin Laden’s death might pave the way for the US to lessen its involvement in Afghanistan only to intensify its efforts to counter Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

A commentary last week in the state-run *People’s Daily* reviewed the recent reshuffle in the Obama administration, saying it reinforced Clinton’s push “for a more forceful US attitude to China in 2010” and “to broaden and strengthen alliances with Asia-Pacific partners”. The writer, Li Hongmei, concluded: “In light of the coming [US] election, there is no way that Obama will soften his attitude to US-China relations.”

Li pointed out that Obama’s management of the Iraq and Afghanistan war could be seen in a different light. “He is winding down these wars not only in order to rebuild America’s economy and improve its international standing, but also to recalibrate US foreign policy toward an Asia-Pacific future.”

For all the talk of cooperation at last week’s US-China dialogue, both countries are manoeuvring to undermine their rival, raising the danger of confrontation and conflict in the Asia-Pacific region.



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