US and China trade barbs after another high-level meeting but say they want to keep talking

Washington: The US and China fought a war of words Monday as each side worked to set the narrative after their latest testy senior-level meetings.

A US delegation led by the Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met with Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other officials in Tianjin, China, a week after the Biden administration joined an international coalition to condemn China for its global cyberattacks.

The State Department called the meetings "frank and open" -- diplomatic code for a skirmish -- and painted Beijing as an international outlier that is subverting international norms, listing China's genocide in Xinjiang and its refusal to cooperate with an international investigation into the origins of the coronavirus.

"The Deputy Secretary underscored that the United States welcomes the stiff competition between our countries—and that we intend to continue to strengthen our own competitive hand—but that we do not seek conflict with" China, State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement Monday.

Beijing, describing the talks as "in-depth and frank," responded with a torrent of condemnation. Chinese officials expressed "strong dissatisfaction" with Washington's "extremely dangerous China policy" and accused it of hypocrisy on human rights.

'Confrontation'

Chinese foreign minister spokesperson Zhao Lijian said Chinese officials "demanded that the US immediately stop interfering in China's internal affairs, stop harming China's interests, and stop stepping on the red line, stop playing on the fire, and stop orchestrating group confrontation under the guise of values."

Both countries are trying to gain an advantage as they struggle to manage the world's most important bilateral relationship and set the stage for the first leaders' meeting between President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping expected at the G7 summit in October. Despite the assertive language, both sides expressed an interest in continued dialogue.

"The US and China are in a period of strategic competition, relations are overall going downhill, and that trend has continued through the talks today," said Neil Thomas, a China analyst at Eurasia Group, the political risk advisory and consulting firm. "But the fact that both sides wanted to hold this meeting … shows that that both Biden and Xi Jinping still want to put some kind of floor beneath deteriorating relations, because they both know this is the most important bilateral relationship in the world. It has significant consequences for global stability -- for politics, for security, and economically."

Speaking to The New York Times after her meetings, Sherman said, "On areas where we have common interests, and there are great global interests, we had very substantive discussions, shared some ideas. We will have to see where that goes."

Sherman's meetings in China followed a tour through Asia with stops in Japan, Korea, and Mongolia, and came as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Singapore and Secretary of State Antony Blinken flew to India -- all reflecting the importance the Biden administration is placing on Asia.

The deputy secretary's trip to Tianjin marked the first senior-level meeting since a contentious meeting in March in Alaska between Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan and Wang and senior officials from the People's Republic of China was partially caught on camera.

Chinese government rejects WHO plan for second phase of Covid-19 origins study

Chinese government rejects WHO plan for second phase of Covid-19 origins study

The readouts after Sherman's meetings signaled that the disputes in March not only remain unresolved but will continue to create friction going forward -- particularly around the issues of human rights, in the lead up to Beijing hosting the Winter Olympics, and international attempts to determine the origins of the coronavirus.

"The Deputy Secretary raised concerns in private -- as we have in public -- about a range of PRC actions that run counter to our values and interests and those of our allies and partners, and that undermine the international rules-based order," Price said in a statement.

"She raised our concerns about human rights, including Beijing's anti-democratic crackdown in Hong Kong; the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang; abuses in Tibet; and the curtailing of media access and freedom of the press," Price continued. "She also spoke about our concerns about Beijing's conduct in cyberspace; across the Taiwan Strait; and in the East and South China Seas."

Sherman's meeting came just days after China rejected the World Health Organization plan for a second phase of an investigation into the origin of the coronavirus.

"The Deputy Secretary reiterated concerns about the PRC's unwillingness to cooperate with the World Health Organization and allow a second phase investigation in the PRC into COVID-19's origins," Price said, adding that Sherman also raised the issue of Americans and Canadians detained in China under exit bans and "reminded PRC officials that people are not bargaining chips."

A Chinese statement about Sherman's first meeting with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng said that the vice minister told Sherman the frayed US-China relationship is due not to any of the issues Sherman raised, but to Americans' portrayal of China as the "imagined enemy."

'Extremely dangerous'

Many of Xie's other comments seemed to be an attempt to flip US criticism of Beijing.

According to the statement, Xie also told Sherman that it is the US that has abandoned the rules-based international order it helped create in the aftermath of World War II, but that China would like to build a "new type of international relations" built on "respect."

Xie also said the US is in "no position to lecture China on democracy and human rights," pointing to the American genocide of Native Americans and US military action and said that the US is the "inventor and patent and intellectual property owner" of coercive diplomacy -- another criticism Washington has often leveled at Beijing for its approach to smaller, poorer countries.

During the long day of talks on Monday, spokesperson Zhao said at a regular news briefing that China had expressed its "strong dissatisfaction" with Washington's "extremely dangerous China policy."

But Zhao also added that the talks were "in-depth and frank," and that it was beneficial for the healthy development of Sino-US relations.

And Price, the State Department spokesman, said that even as Sherman delivered her critique of China's actions, "at the same time, the Deputy Secretary affirmed the importance of cooperation in areas of global interest, such as the climate crisis, counternarcotics, nonproliferation, and regional concerns" including North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, and Burma.CNN

Japan's position on defending Taiwan has taken a remarkable shift

At the center of tensions between the U.S. and China lies Taiwan. Beijing has threatened to take the island by force if necessary. The Biden administration is counting on help from its allies, especially Japan, to deter such a move. As NPR's Anthony Kuhn reports, Japan's position on the issue is undergoing a remarkable shift.

ANTHONY KUHN, BYLINE: For the past half-century, Japan has recognized Beijing, not Taipei, as China's legitimate government. The question of what Japan would do if the mainland attacked Taiwan was, if not unthinkable, at least unmentionable. That's now changed.

YASUHIDE NAKAYAMA: We have to protect the Taiwan as a democratic country.

KUHN: That's Deputy Defense Minister Yasuhide Nakayama speaking at the Hudson Institute think tank in Washington last month. At a May summit, President Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga became their countries' first leaders in 50 years to publicly raise the Taiwan issue in a statement. Retired Admiral Yoji Koda is former commander of the Japan Maritime SelF-Defense Force Fleet. He says that the recent official comments don't mean that Tokyo is changing its policy but that Japan's relationship with China… YOJI KODA: As our neighbors should be more pragmatic and practical. Pragmatic and practical means we need to say what we think.

KUHN: Koda says Japan is reacting to China's political and military muscle-flexing in the region, which makes Japan feel less secure. Japan's response to an attack on Taiwan, though, would be constrained by its postwar constitution, which limits the use of its military.

JEFFREY HORNUNG: So the United States would not expect Japanese forces to be right on the frontline of the - you know, the sharp end of the spear.

KUHN: Jeffrey Hornung is a political scientist at the RAND Corporation. HORNUNG: Japan's strength - it's been built around a defensive capacity.

KUHN: If Japan were directly attacked, its military could fight in self-defense. If not, Hornung says, there are still things Japan could do to help the U.S. short of sending troops to Taiwan, like reconnaissance.

HORNUNG: Defense of U.S. bases, defense of Japanese waters like defending chokepoints or defending airspace.

KUHN: The change in Japan's rhetoric has its critics. Former defense official Kyoji Yanagisawa says it doesn't matter what Japan's role would be in a possible conflict over Taiwan. If the U.S. and China fight, Japan is going to get hit.

KYOJI YANAGISAWA: (Through interpreter) As long as the U.S. military uses Japanese bases to launch attacks, Japan will certainly be affected in the event of an emergency with Taiwan. We cannot avoid being involved. Sooner or later, Taiwan emergency will turn into a Japan emergency.

KUHN: The problem, he says, is that Japanese officials are now thinking more about how to win a conflict than how to avoid it in the first place. He adds that Japan's government now appears to have completely sided with the U.S., but he cautions that the more ties between Beijing and Washington deteriorate, the more Tokyo needs to keep its lines of communication to both sides open.

YANAGISAWA: (Through interpreter) Given its position, Japan should insist that the U.S. avoid anything that could lead to war. At the same time, Japan should insist on the same from China. KUHN: But retired Admiral Yoji Koda argues that Japan must also prepare for a worst-case scenario. He expects the U.S. and Japan to draft an operational plan for a Taiwan conflict within the next year or so. If it fails to do so, he says the…KODA: Japanese government would be called the most stupid government in Japanese history.

Why a Taliban victory may not be...

From P3

"It hasn't changed. It hasn't stopped. The Americans knew it all along."

A colonial power

That has been most clear to Afghans, who have been shocked by the speed and scale of destruction of the current Taliban campaign – and are suspicious of any claimed Pakistani change of heart.

"Every Afghan now knows that the name used for these invasions is Taliban, but it's actually the Pakistani Army in the uniform of the Taliban," says Orzala Nemat, a Kabul-based analyst.

"Pakistan is planning this, has a huge hand in orchestrating what's happening. It's a very sophisticated offensive," she says. "This time, if the Taliban have a full takeover, the damage … will spread beyond Afghan borders, to Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere, and everyone should be aware of that.

"We are not faced with some madrasa-educated, ordinary-village young man," says Ms. Nemat. "We are faced with a colonial power fighting Afghans, again, in the uniform of the Taliban. That is how it should be

Five years in, Uzbekistan's reform ...

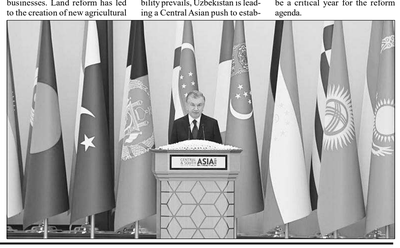
From P6

Ten elite "Presidential" schools are being established this year, along with nearly 200 schools specializing in chemistry, biology, mathematics and information technology. A program intended to send top students to international universities has been begun and, over the past several years, more than two dozen leading international universities have opened branches in Uzbekistan.

Against this background, the green shoots of an emerging private sector are starting to appear. The government allocated more than $9 billion in state aid for new businesses this year, creating an environment in which thousands of small businesses have begun trading. Graduates are getting startup funding to establish their own businesses. Land reform has led to the creation of new agricultural and processing enterprises.

Global headlines have been devoted to Uzbekistan's huge privatization plans. But it is the growth of homegrown private businesses which may prove more transformative. Accordingly, diplomats and trade negotiators have been assigned to expand the country's trading opportunities. To the west, a new GSP+ agreement has been signed with the European Union, establishing duty-free entry for some 6,000 individual Uzbekistan products.

Even more ambitious plans are taking shape on a north-south axis. Much depends on what happens in neighboring Afghanistan, following the withdrawal of US and allied military forces, but if peace or at least some form of stability prevails, Uzbekistan is leading a Central Asian push to establish a road and rail corridor south, through Afghanistan, to the Pakistan ports. This would open whole new markets, both in South Asia and the world beyond, for Uzbekistan goods. So, now comes Stage Two. The long-awaited privatizations have begun, with two state-owned banks, Poytaxt Bank and UzAgroExportBank, put up for auction late last month. Managements have spent the past year, along with everyone in international finance, growing accustomed to virtual road shows and videoconferencing. State-owned businesses currently represent about 55% of Uzbekistan's economy. The objective is a 75% reduction in the number of state enterprises by 2025. COVID-19 permitting, 2022 looks likely to be a critical year for the reform agenda.



'We're so proud of her': Afghanistan's gutsy female ...

From P5

Despite all these troubles, despite the disapproval of family members and the abuse of strangers, cycling among women has grown in popularity, they say, from a tiny group a decade ago to a 220-strong female contingent within the cycling federation. There are seven women's provincial teams and an annual women's race is held in Kabul every summer. Women aren't necessarily getting involved because they want to become part of the national team, says Habibzai; they are doing it for pleasure, for fun, because they can.

All this progress, however, like so much else in Afghanistan, is now hanging in the balance.

Habibzai says that for two months now she has felt unable to go out training on the long-distance routes out of the capital she used to take, for instance to Bagram, where until recently the US had its main airbase. Such are her fears about the security situation that she feels confined to her local neighborhood. "I'm currently suffering from a great depression," she says.

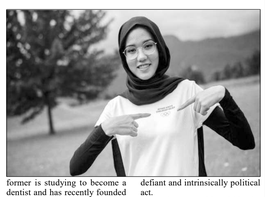
"It is not easy for us, not for me and for other girls as well, to ride bikes these days … Ever since the US army announced their departure the situation became worse and … we are in danger, to be honest."

According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (Unama), the total number of casualties during the first quarter of this year was 1,783 (573 killed and 1,210 injured), a 29% rise on the same period in 2020. There was also a significant increase in the number of casualties among women and children.

Sarmat says that a rise in targeted killings is particularly frightening for a group of women who, as she puts it, "whether [they] like it or not, are making a political statement every time [they] go out on the bike".

"Many people know the members [of the national cycling team], because these are the girls who are the pioneers of this sport in Afghanistan," she says. "So it's really scary to go along for training because of everything that has been happening."

Both Habibzai and Sarmat have big dreams for the future. The



former is studying to become a dentist and has recently founded the women-only Cheetah cycling club. The latter splits her time between Afghanistan and Singapore, where she hopes to study astrophysics at graduate school and then bring back that expertise to her home country.

Both, of course, want to keep on cycling. Whether the Afghanistan of tomorrow will be stable and peaceful enough for them to do so is another question entirely. In the meantime, just the act of getting on their bikes remains a defiant and intrinsically political act.

"When you ride within the city the women around us, the girls around us, seem quite motivated," says Habibzai. "It shows that we are free to do anything. So, what are we symbolizing is actually peace, in a country that … for decades has suffered from wars. It's a place where women were not given any rights to even drive a car, but we are riding bikes." The author is, Lizzy Davies, who writes about global development for the Guardian.