

APEC summit: Will US-China conflict come to an end?



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Now the world is watching keenly the city of San Francisco in the U.S. where the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit is going on now. Today after formal programmes at the conference, the U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping are scheduled to get into a huddle. Their meeting will be the topic of discussion for several days in the global arena.

For the past few years, the U.S.-China relationship is anything but one of bonhomie. It has been far from genial and cordial, running into scores of complications. The big question that the current APEC summit raises is if the two countries' relationship will change for the better.

The story of U.S.-China relation

In the beginning, the U.S.-China relationship was not riddled with a great deal of enmity and bitterness. In fact, during the World War-II, both countries were very much in the coalition of Allied powers which ultimately won the war. At the time, it was Kuomintang party which was ruling China. But the Communist party defeated Kuomintang in the civil war and installed a new government led by Mao Zedong in 1949. The new dispensation in China had since not been in harmony with the U.S.

In the Korean war (1950-53), the U.S. took a stance in support of South Korea while China and the Soviet Union sided with North Korea. In the ensuing Vietnam War (1955-75) too, China was opposed to the U.S. However, the U.S.-China enmity got reduced in its intensity in 1972 when the U.S. President Nixon visited Beijing. In 1979, both countries had rapprochement and their diplomatic and bilateral relations resumed. During this period, Deng Xiaoping opened the Chinese doors wide to the world, triggering a heavy flow of foreign investments. Consequently with abundant human resources, China was industrialised.

In the millennium China became a member of the World Trade Organisation. This was possible only with the U.S. help. The

ideology of uncontrolled trade and commerce took the Chinese goods worldwide. As a result, China became the second largest economy in the world.

Three contradictions

Both the U.S. and China had contradictions over several issues during the tenures of Bill Clinton (1993-2001), George Bush (2001-2009) and Barack Obama (2009-2017). However the political relationship continued with leaders of both countries meeting in the White House and at people's forums. The two countries' prominent contradictions arose over three important matters: Trade, Taiwan and human rights.

First comes trade. Since the days of liberalisation that China began adopting, the two countries' trade ties progressed. When Chinese exports formed a major chunk of the trade, the U.S. called it an unequitable commerce. But China came up with a repartee, asking if the U.S. traders and consumers had not benefited from the low-cost Chinese goods.

Next is Taiwan. Taiwan has been a separate nation since 1949. But it is Chinese principle that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China. The world countries including the U.S. and India have accepted this stance. Yet the U.S. has not stopped providing military and economic assistance to Taiwan, displeasing China.

The third issue is over human rights. The U.S. accuses China of transgressing human rights in the provinces of Xin Zhiyong and Tibet and of clamping curbs on use of internet and being

imperialistic. However, China justifies its activities, saying that they are all part of its internal affairs.

Transcending all these differences of opinion, both countries' trade and commerce have flourished. China has invested the foreign exchange in the U.S. stocks which it has earned from additional exports. It has been beneficial to the U.S. citizens who do not have much of savings habit. Commerce and trade progressed in the face of the political contradictions and conflicts.

Trade war

After Trump donned the mantle of the U.S. President (2017-2021), the U.S.-China relation took a nosedive, turning all the more bitter. Trump announced a trade war against China in 2018, clamping levies on several Chinese goods and driving the U.S. companies to dislocate their factories in China. Besides, the U.S. continued supplying arms to Taiwan.

Nonetheless, Biden, who assumed office in the White House in 2021, changed all rules clamped by Trump. Biden, though, retained the anti-Chinese strand running through Trump's policy.

Two recent incidents further complicated the U.S.-China relation. Firstly, a Chinese balloon was spotted on the U.S. skies and shot down by the U.S. alleging that it was a spying balloon which, however, had been sent as part of space research, according to China. Secondly, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi met the Taiwan President. China has condemned these two incidents.

What will they speak?

It is against this complex background that the leaders of both countries are set to meet. While the U.S. may raise the question of human rights violations by China, the latter may urge the U.S. to stop supporting Taiwan and lift the levies on the Chinese goods.

Moreover, the U.S. fears that Iran may come out against Israel. So, it wants China to persuade Iran to avoid supporting Israel. China, in turn, may demand that the U.S. urge North Korea not to deploy nuclear arms.

Apart from all these issues, the climate change and international curbs on nuclear arms may also figure in their dialogue, say political observers. In fact, both the U.S. and China are interested in bringing in a ban on the use of artificial intelligence in automatic weapons and nuclear arms. Resolutions on this count may be formulated.

It seems that the Indo-Chinese border dispute may not find space in the talks by the leaders of the U.S. and China. Yet India will be watching this dialogue keenly.

Second cold war

Some observers have billed the US.-China conflict as the second cold war. But the fact is that yet another era of cold war is not possible. Why? During the earlier cold war (1945-1991), several

countries had to take side with either of the two superpowers. But such a compulsion is not prevailing currently. Next, the two superpowers waged several battles against each other either directly or indirectly. A similar situation is not possible nor easy either in this age of information and communication technology. Importantly, both the Soviet Union and the U.S. do not depend on each other. This is the age of globalisation wherein no country can afford to function separately. Both the U.S. and China are bound by demands and dictates of commerce and trade which they cannot overlook. So, dialogue is a must now. All bilateral conflicts and contradictions cannot be expected to be ended in one go. But some hopeful initiatives may be taken. After all, the world is made up of hopes. Isn't it?

Translated by V. Mariappan.