

Sherman's China Visit Was a Quiet Disaster

By Dean Cheng, the senior research fellow for Chinese political and security affairs at the Heritage Foundation's Asian Studies Center.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met last week with senior Chinese diplomats. The meeting, White House and State Department spin notwithstanding, did not go well. This seems to have been a surprise only to the U.S. side.

The visit ran into problems even before it began. The initial itinerary and announcements indicated that Sherman would be visiting South Korea, Japan, and Mongolia but not China. There was no reason why this should be problematic; after all, the Biden administration has emphasized that it would be rebuilding U.S. alliances and upgrading friendships.

But reports revealed that the trip was supposed to include a visit to China. And when the State Department was visibly disappointed and miffed that the Chinese were not offering Sherman a suitable counterpart for the meeting, it became clear that the trip was as much about talking with China as it was about reassuring U.S. allies and friends.

Sherman's expectation was that she would meet with Le Yucheng, a more senior vice foreign minister, rather than the lower-ranking Xie Feng, who is responsible for relations with the United States. The Chinese often play this game of protocol, especially since their governmental structure does not quite parallel other systems. In the Chinese foreign-policy hierarchy, for instance, Yang Jiechi, the senior Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official responsible for foreign policy and a full member of the CCP's 25-member Politburo, is more powerful than Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi in setting China's diplomatic course. Sherman accepted the meeting with Xie after the Chinese also arranged for her to meet with Wang.

Amid all the discussions about meeting the "right" Chinese officials, the actual substance of the meeting got shorter shrift. As with other meetings, agendas and specific topics received far less attention than pressing the Chinese for access to the right people.

Exhibit A was the Anchorage summit in March, which was informally billed as a "listening opportunity." Kurt Campbell, the White House coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, reportedly openly derided Wang and Yang, China's top foreign-policy officials, as "nowhere near within a hundred miles" of President Xi Jinping's inner circle. Given that Yang is the first foreign-policy official on the Politburo since 1999 (and he was appointed by Xi), such an assessment is questionable and likely seen as an insult in Beijing—prompting the next squabbles around protocol.

Worse, the State Department continued the pattern of appearing desperate to meet with the Chinese. The Biden administration has never clarified who asked for the Anchorage summit in March. It has suggested that the Chinese gave ground by coming to the United States, but who initiated the meeting remains a mystery. In the Sherman meeting, though, the U.S. side was definitely the suitor.

It should not have been surprising that Beijing exploited the opportunity for all it was worth. Despite claims that Xi was pushing for a softer approach, based largely off a misreading of a single line in one of his speeches, for the last several weeks, Beijing has been signaling that its “wolf warrior” diplomatic approach would continue. Earlier in July, Vice Foreign Minister Le declared that the United States must accept that its hegemony was “in decline.” Foreign Minister Wang, meanwhile, stated that China would have to give the United States a “tutorial” on how to treat other nations respectfully, even as Sherman and Foggy Bottom were negotiating for the visit.

When Sherman met with Xie, he took the opportunity to castigate the United States. Xie blamed Washington for the “stalemate” in relations and accused the United States of “demonizing” China. He then presented Sherman with two lists of Chinese grievances and demands—one on “U.S. wrongdoings that must stop” and the other on “key individual cases that China has concerns about.”

While the contents of the lists have not been formally released by either side, Chinese reports indicate that the list of U.S. wrongdoings includes demands for the United States to unconditionally lift visa restrictions on CCP members and to stop targeting Chinese companies, media, and Confucius Institutes, as well as revoking the extradition request to Canada of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou. The second list comprises more specific cases involving rejected student visa applications and claims of harassment of Chinese diplomatic and consular missions.

In presenting these lists, Xie was not acting as a rogue diplomat. Wang himself apparently reiterated the same demands. In his meeting with Sherman, he made more demands that the United States not challenge China or “violate Chinese sovereignty,” apparently including backing off U.S. commitments to Taiwan.

State Department spokespeople insist that Wang and Sherman had a “frank and open discussion,” which demonstrated “open lines of communication.” Apparently, just having talks is seen by many in Foggy Bottom as a victory, no matter how humiliating the tone and conditions. In an interview with The Associated Press, Sherman took pains to note that she had raised the subjects of Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet.

But she also noted that she had raised the possibility of U.S.-China cooperation on a range of issues, including climate change and North Korea. This was also reiterated in the State Department readout of the meetings, which notes that “the Deputy Secretary affirmed the importance of cooperation in areas of global interest, such as the climate crisis, counternarcotics, nonproliferation, and regional concerns including DPRK, Iran, Afghanistan, and Burma.” Given that Xie had said U.S. policy typically involves “demanding cooperation when it wants something from China ... and resorting to conflict and confrontation at all costs,” it is not clear that these suggestions went over well.

The Chinese government, both at Anchorage and now in Tianjin, has made it clear that it sees itself as holding the upper hand with the United States. China’s leaders are showing the United States and its representatives all the respect they feel due to a declining power. The tone and overall rudeness are calculated, making clear to not only the Chinese public but the rest of the global audience that Beijing can disrespect American diplomats with impunity. Unfortunately, Washington’s apparent desperation to have talks, any talks, with the Chinese only underscores this perception, not only in Beijing but likely across much of Asia.

This unsubtle signaling is also reflected in the two lists of demands, as well as Wang's characterization of how the United States should behave. In essence, China is stating that the United States has no right to deny China access to the American public (via state-run Chinese media), U.S. schools (via Confucius Institutes), or the U.S. economy and supply chains.

There is no corresponding set of Chinese obligations, however. In the Chinese view, fault lies entirely in Washington, and remediation also rests entirely on the U.S. side. Thus, there is no promise, nor expectation, for the Chinese to give Western media access to China, no prospect that there will be Jefferson Institutes established in Chinese universities. Nor is there any prospect that foreign journalists will have comparable access to China or even that those it has expelled will be allowed to return. Similarly, there is no reason to think that China will scale back "Made in China 2025," a de facto declaration of mercantilism as China seeks to make itself the dominant power in 10 major industries.

Sherman had stated that the United States expects China to "understand that human rights are not just an internal matter; they are a global commitment which they have signed up for." Yet, as the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson reiterated after Sherman departed, Beijing expects the United States to keep quiet and cease discussing China's "internal affairs," a phrase generally referring to human rights issues, Taiwan, and (of late) Hong Kong.

As Yang explicitly stated in Anchorage, China will no longer tolerate, much less accept, U.S. efforts to dictate the rules of the rules-based international order. This theme animates various Chinese speeches and statements, including Xi's controversial speech commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP. As the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson noted, any discussion of "guardrails" or norms for U.S.-China relations "must be discussed and agreed on by both sides."

Beijing has become increasingly strident in this regard, not only to portray itself domestically as the defender of Chinese interests but also to signal to a variety of third countries that China has "stood up." As Chinese writers have long noted, strategic communications always have three audiences: the domestic audience, the adversary's leadership and masses, and third parties who might be influenced or shaped.

The Biden administration risks signaling to Beijing that Washington is desperate for a deal. The constant reiteration of climate change as an arena for U.S.-China cooperation, coupled with President Joe Biden's repeated declarations that climate change poses the greatest threat to the United States (and the world), leaves little bargaining room for the United States. Beijing has already made clear, if only by its construction of more coal-fired electricity capacity than the rest of the world combined, that it will not allow concerns about climate change to shift major investments and construction. Beijing may well have been heartened by recent reports that suggest the Democratic Party is divided on whether to focus on confronting climate change or China. Thus, if the United States wants to make China change course, it will have to offer China concessions. The two lists are, in effect, China's initial demands. The Chinese leadership is undoubtedly waiting to see how the Biden administration responds, whether it is more concerned with climate change or confronting China.

Both Anchorage and Tianjin make clear that, from the Chinese perspective, they are not in a conciliatory mood. If the United States and China are to have improved relations, or any prospect of cooperation, Beijing expects Washington to make the concessions. Chinese officials, meanwhile, have patronizingly declared that Beijing is willing to treat the United States as an

“equal.” U.S. decision-makers should recognize this Chinese perspective before they go, hat in hand, to ask for another meeting with their Chinese counterparts.

Dean Cheng is the senior research fellow for Chinese political and security affairs at the Heritage Foundation’s Asian Studies Center