

US-China ties: Kissinger may be humanity's last hope

Both sides should allow him to work on stabilising their relationship with just three small steps to avoid any further deterioration in ties



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For *The Straits Times*

At the age of 99, Dr Henry Kissinger finds himself in a paradoxical position. On the one hand, he is widely revered, especially in the West. On the other hand, he is ignored, especially by his own country. If he had not been ignored, we would not have had the current crises on Ukraine and Taiwan.

On Ukraine, Dr Kissinger proposed a win-win compromise formula in a 2014 *Washington Post* article in which both the West and Russia would have had to sacrifice something. Russia would have had to accept Ukraine as an independent country, free to join the European Union if it wished to do so. The West would have had to declare that Ukraine would never join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato). Hence, Russia would not be threatened by Nato forces and arms close to its heartland. If Dr Kissinger's formula had been adopted, Ukraine would have avoided the current war. Thousands of Ukrainian lives would have been saved.

On Taiwan, Dr Kissinger, in an interview with Bloomberg on July 20 this year, said that the US should stop its "endless confrontations" with China. In utter defiance of his wise advice, Mrs Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives who is the third most powerful person in the country, decided to make an official visit to Taiwan barely two weeks after the Kissinger interview, knowing full well that China would have no choice but to react forcefully to a deliberate provocation. New York Times columnist Tom Friedman described her visit as "utterly reckless, dangerous and irresponsible". Sadly, Mrs Pelosi, 82, did not visit Taiwan because she cared for its people. Indeed, she endangered rather than helped them with the visit. She went to Taiwan for selfish reasons. Since she is about to lose her position as House Speaker when the Democrats (as is likely) lose

their control of the House in the mid-term elections in November, she wanted a last "hurrah" of global publicity before leaving office. Future historians will certainly accuse her of recklessness because she was prepared to start World War III just to get some personal publicity. All Asians should unanimously condemn her for starting a fire in our neighbourhood without taking any responsibility for the dangerous consequences.

Thanks to Mrs Pelosi, US-China relations have sunk to a new low. China has suspended climate talks as well as military-to-military dialogue with the US. The less the two superpowers talk to each other, the more dangerous the world becomes. Indeed, there is a real possibility that this negative relationship between the two could spiral out of control, with a military accident in either the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait triggering a direct war between them. The chances of this happening are no longer zero.

So what can we do to stop this dangerous downward spiral in US-China relations? Fortunately, there is a simple solution that both sides can agree on without losing face. This solution rests on one foundation: that Dr Kissinger is one of the few Americans who are equally revered in both Beijing and Washington. US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping could agree that Dr Kissinger could be flown to Beijing to work on US-China relations. Notwithstanding his age, the former US secretary of state is still active, giving press interviews and travelling.

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Since relations are so bad, he should not have an ambitious agenda. His goal should not be to improve US-China relations. Instead, his goal should be to stabilise the US-China relationship to avoid any further deterioration. There are three small steps that the two sides could agree on.

1ST STEP - NO NUCLEAR WAR

The first step is for both sides to declare that neither will start a nuclear war. Hence, even if an American plane is shot down accidentally in the South China Sea or if a Chinese destroyer is accidentally sunk in the East China Sea, both sides would agree to not escalate this incident into a nuclear war. It is clear that the leaders on both sides understand the danger of a nuclear war. Estimates by the United States nuclear warfighting plan predicted as many as 335 million fatalities globally within 72 hours if a nuclear war had broken out in the 1960s. Today, that number would be much higher.

In theory, both sides agree that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought". This sentence was put in a statement issued by the permanent members of the UN Security Council (including China and the US) in a joint statement in January this year. In practice, both the US and China have contingency plans for fighting a nuclear war. This is why Dr Kissinger should, as a first step, secure an agreement that a nuclear war will never be fought.

2ND STEP - REMOVE TRADE TARIFFS

The second step is for both sides to immediately remove all the trade tariffs imposed on each other during the Trump administration. In private, many serious Biden administration officials admit that Mr Trump's trade tariffs have not hurt China. Indeed, China's trade surplus with the US has gone up after these Trump tariffs were imposed, from US\$342 billion (S\$471 billion) in 2019 to US\$353 billion in 2021. American workers and consumers have had to pay higher prices for consumer products because of these tariffs. This was why Mr Biden, while on the campaign trail in 2019, said that "President Trump may think he's being tough on China. All that he's delivered as a consequence of that is American farmers, manufacturers and consumers losing and paying more". US Trade Representative Katherine Tai is blocking the lifting of these tariffs because she is afraid of a backlash from American trade unions. The Biden administration can send some former senior Democratic figures, like Mr Barack Obama and



Former United States secretary of state Henry Kissinger could be flown to Beijing to work on US-China relations, says the writer. According to the writer, there are three small steps which the two sides could agree on that would ensure that even as their geopolitical contest accelerates, there would be a clear limit beneath which both superpowers would never fall. ST FILE PHOTO

Mr Larry Summers, to explain to these trade unions an undeniable truth: American workers will be better off if these Trump tariffs are lifted. If China agrees to this mutual lifting of tariffs, Americans will benefit. And the whole world would cheer if Dr Kissinger can accomplish this as global economic growth would also shoot up. A small positive step like this could change the chemistry of US-China relations.

3RD STEP - RESUME CLIMATE TALKS

The third step is for both sides to agree to a resumption of climate talks. Climate change is a common challenge that both China and the US face. Yet, since China cut off climate talks as a response to the reckless Pelosi visit, the US could make a painless concession to persuade Beijing to return to the table. For some strange (indeed, mysterious) reasons, the US continued space cooperation with Russia (even after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014) and refused to allow similar cooperation with China, even during the Obama presidency. We all know how massive the universe is. It is silly for earthlings to allow small disputes on planet earth to block space cooperation. A package deal where China and the

US agree to both climate and space cooperation (and knowledge in these areas reinforce each other) would indicate that a floor has been established beneath which the US-China relationship would never founder.

None of these three steps would imply an end to the massive US-China geopolitical contest which will continue for the deep structural reasons that I have documented in detail in my book, *Has China Won?* However, these three steps would ensure that even as their geopolitical contest accelerates, there would be a clear limit beneath which both superpowers would never fall.

The whole world will breathe a huge sigh of relief when such a floor is established for the US-China relationship. The world will also send Dr Kissinger a big thank you note if he accomplishes all this on a visit to Beijing. It would show that he is revered and heeded, not revered and ignored.

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