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

US-China relations are so bad, he should not have an ambitious agenda. Hitherto 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 take.

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 Tomcat 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 not to escalate this incident into a nuclear war. The key point is that the leaders on both sides understand the dangers of a nuclear war. Estimates by the United States and China nuclear warfighting plans predict as many as 38 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, the US and China have contingency plans for 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$50.2 billion ($5 billion) in 2018 to US$303.3 billion in 2021. American workers and consumers have had to pay higher prices for Chinese 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 done is a consequence of that is America 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 senior former senior democratic figures, like Mr Barack Obama and Mr Larry Summers, to explain to these trade unions unavoidable truths. American workers will be better off if these Trump tariffs are lifted. If China agrees to this, then they can lift the tariffs on US goods.

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 relentless Pelosi visit, the US could make a public 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. I have written all this in my book. I do not need to rehash it here.

Since relations are so bad, he should not have an ambitious agenda. Hitherto 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 take.