

Now that the Chinese Communist Party's National Congress is over, Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) has an opportunity to mold the direction of Beijing's international perception by shoring up its declining economic prospects without being perceived as weak by party rivals.

However, Beijing would need to scramble to repair the dented image and distrust over its increased bellicosity and intent — regionally and globally.

Washington is aware that its decades-old supportive approach to Beijing is no longer feasible, and that an inevitable reorientation is needed to face Beijing's runaway rise.

For all the arguments about the US' decline and diminished power, Washington is confident of its capacity to deter Beijing.

US President Joe Biden went into last week's G20 meeting with Xi with a strategic counterattack, sugarcoated with a conciliatory message to Beijing. Not with the hope that Beijing would tone down its tactics and approach, but to ensure that Xi and his elites get a direct message of intent by Washington.

The reassuring tone sent to Xi was not a strategic weakness, as some have argued. It was a strong message that played the higher moral card, and reinforced the US' steadfast values, norms and rules.

This message should reassure allies that the US can be the calm and responsible player, countering China's narrative. Beijing and Washington are aware of the capacity of the US to deter China's potential violations of the global order, if need be.

The US has the edge of capacity and can take a more confrontational approach in calling out China's actions, but Washington instead showed its morality and responsibility. By taking a conciliatory tone, Washington can reap the long-term benefit of taking the moral high ground.

Biden, Xi play G20 power politics

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China needs the US more than the US needs it. Washington would need Beijing to continue adhering to the rules-based international order, and to be a responsible major global player. Beijing needs the US to maintain free and safe global trade, and as a technological and economic base for Beijing to achieve its “Chinese dream.”

Biden hoped to lure Beijing into the misconception that the US is weak enough to come in at a seemingly lower position.

If China continues unperturbed, or even acts to intensify tensions, the US would leverage its established card to highlight China’s hypocrisy and true intent — China could no longer be seen as a victim, as its credibility would be turned on itself.

Biden and Xi might downplay the prospects of a new cold war, but the reality on the ground points to one already intensifying.

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