

When Biden Meets Xi

Diplomacy Can't Repair the Relationship—But It Can Still Prevent Disaster

By Danny Russel

It is no secret that the U.S.-Chinese relationship has entered dangerous and unstable territory. Chinese President Xi Jinping, recently elevated by the Sixth Party Plenum to the apex of socialist greatness (alongside Mao Zedong), sees the world in a turbulent state “unprecedented in the past century.” The East, in his view, is rising, whereas the West is in decline; China, Xi said, has “time and momentum on its side.” To take advantage of this favorable correlation of forces, he set aside the “hide and bide” caution of former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in favor of a far more assertive, competitive, and uncompromising international posture. Under the banner of “dual circulation,” Xi has doubled down on his quest for indigenous technology to reduce China’s dependence on the world while increasing the world’s reliance on China.

In the United States, meanwhile, President Joe Biden is operating in a political environment filled with bipartisan suspicion, frustration, and hostility toward China. He is grappling with the thankless trials of alliance cat herding as he tries to rally partners to push back against problematic Chinese behavior. He is contending with a worrisome host of new capabilities that Beijing is bringing online. The U.S. Department of Defense’s recently released “China Military Power Report,” for instance, projects that Beijing will acquire some 1,000 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2030—more than double the Pentagon’s estimate just last year. This dramatic acceleration, plus the scale of China’s investment in nuclear “triad” delivery systems, hints at an unsettling shift from nuclear deterrence to nuclear warfighting capability.

A slew of other troubling problems weighs heavily on the U.S.-Chinese relationship. The United States is increasingly concerned about China’s Belt and Road Initiative, its export of surveillance technology, and its resumption of state-sponsored cybertheft of intellectual property. These concerns are layered on top of long-standing complaints about China’s unfair trade practices, treatment of minorities, intolerance of political expression, and bullying of its neighbors. Beijing also has a lengthy list of grievances, including Washington’s charge of genocide in Xinjiang, new U.S. sanctions and restrictions, past detention of the Huawei CFO Meng Wangzhou, robust military operations in the South China Sea, and escalating gestures of support for Taiwan.

It is in this fraught context that Biden and Xi announced plans to hold a “virtual summit” on November 15. News of the videoconference has elicited a mix of hopes and fears. It is the first face-to-face meeting between the two presidents, albeit a virtual one, and for some observers in the two countries and around the world, it represents a possible inflection point: an opportunity to shift relations between the United States and China to a cooperative footing. For others, particularly skeptics in the United States, the fear is that Biden will be duped into yet another round of bilateral dialogues that yields only empty promises and buys time for China to grow stronger.

But both perspectives miss the mark. Biden and his team are veterans who came into office seized by a sense of urgency in great-power competition and determined to reject the massive

ceremonial meetings favored by Beijing. They will not be lured into unproductive dialogues. On the other hand, expectations for this conference should necessarily be modest, given that none of the issues facing the United States and China will yield to quick fixes—and given that Zoom calls are no substitute for extended in-person engagement. Yet even if there is to be no dramatic breakthrough, diplomacy can serve a critical purpose. This meeting offers Biden and Xi an important opportunity to begin establishing crucial guardrails to help prevent a [crisis](#).

If Biden and Xi can establish a regular rhythm of communication, leading to in-person meetings once conditions permit, then the United States and China can more easily manage the volatility and risk in the relationship. If they can open channels of authentic communication at lower levels that aim to inform and explore rather than boast and berate, they can improve the prospects for managed—though still intense—competition. If Biden’s assurance that the United States remains committed to a genuine “one China” policy is credible to Xi, and if Xi’s assurance that China remains committed to peacefully resolving the status of Taiwan is credible to Biden, then they can ratchet down tensions over this hot spot. In doing so, the two leaders could help prevent U.S.-Chinese rivalry from spiraling into ever more dangerous confrontation.

STOPPING THE SPIRAL

When Biden took office in January, Beijing seemed to harbor unrealistic expectations that the new president would quickly lift tariffs and return relations to the relative comity of the Obama era. After four turbulent years of unpredictable policy reversals and hostile rhetoric by the Trump administration, many Chinese officials welcomed the election of a sane and seasoned leader with a decade-old friendship with Xi and extensive experience in foreign policy. They chalked up candidate Biden’s strong stand on China to politics and assumed that once elected, he would change course, as many of his predecessors had done.

But such hopes were quickly dashed by the tough talk and sharp elbows of the new administration, and well into the first year of the Biden presidency, the U.S.-Chinese relationship is still mired in deep mistrust and marked by unbridled, mostly zero-sum competition. Biden’s focus on domestic renewal and repairing alliances, linked to his belief that the United States needs to strengthen its position in order to engage effectively, meant the president was in no rush to delve into negotiations with Beijing. U.S. frustration with underperforming dialogues in the George W. Bush and Obama years helped to further disincentivize bilateral negotiations. As a result, engagement, which had ground to a halt by the end of the Trump administration, has proved difficult to restart.

Many Chinese officials—perhaps Xi included—felt disappointed, if not betrayed, by Biden’s hard line and his effort to build international coalitions in opposition to China. Their dashed hopes, along with a new measure of hubris, have fueled increasingly bellicose stances by Chinese officials, including the on-camera tirade by Yang Jiechi, the party’s top foreign policy official, at a March meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan. Chinese anger was displayed again in the churlish treatment of visiting Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in July when, apart from other indignities, the Chinese Foreign Ministry publicly released its list of demands to Washington while her meeting was still underway. In every meeting with Biden administration officials, Beijing has insisted that cooperation was on hold until the United States acted to “improve the atmosphere and return to the ‘correct’ path” of respecting China’s “core interests.” In effect, the

message to the United States was “lift tariffs, remove export controls, back off on issues such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea—and then we can talk.”

These “Wolf Warrior”-type demands are emblematic of how difficult diplomacy has become between the United States and China. Today, each side is convinced of the superiority of its own system and is focused on the weaknesses of the other’s. Each seems determined to effect a change of behavior by the other side through deterrence and coercion rather than through incentives or compromise. For China, 2021 has been a high-testosterone year of nationalist anniversaries and chest-bumping assertiveness—on the Indian border, toward Australia and Canada, in the East China and South China Seas, and in the Taiwan Strait. For the United States, it has been a year of struggle and recovery in which the “China challenge” has been a major animating force. That makes the November 15 meeting a rare and important opportunity for the leaders to try to change the tone and reduce the prospect of a destabilizing crisis.

Taiwan presents a particular [risk](#), especially at a time when U.S.-Chinese crisis communication mechanisms and reciprocal guardrails have atrophied, inviting miscalculation and impeding de-escalation in the event of an incident. In and around Taiwan, aggressive military signaling, access to semiconductors, and risky political gestures have created a combustible mix that could lead to an unwanted confrontational showdown that none of the parties can easily stop. As Biden is fond of saying, the only thing worse than a war is an unintentional [war](#).

Although this coming summit cannot resolve, or even begin to resolve, issues such as the future of Taiwan, it does represent a chance for both leaders to reestablish some of the safeguards that can prevent these disputes from being decided by force. And it is crucial that this summit help launch such an effort, since both U.S. and Chinese domestic political calendars will make it increasingly difficult to tackle thorny issues. As the November U.S. congressional midterms loom closer, the high pitch of bipartisan anti-China fervor in Washington makes the prospect of compromise and progress with China seem increasingly remote. At the same time, Xi faces the crucial 20th Party Congress, where he clearly plans to extend his leadership tenure for another term, if not for life. Neither leader can afford to look weak.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

My 33 years as a diplomat, including as a special assistant to the U.S. president, taught me the importance of the human factor in international relations. And leaders, in my experience, are only too human. Sometimes, these human qualities may be risk factors—pride, after all, “goeth before a fall,” and decisions made by leaders in the heat of the moment can have tragic consequences. But the personal relationship between Biden and [Xi](#), two very different men, may prove a saving grace in the year ahead.

In the summer of 2011, I accompanied then Vice President Biden on a visit to China to meet with then Vice President Xi, a trip that marked the beginning of their rapport. Over meals, long walks, and other informal settings, the two leaders conversed at length about personal and policy matters, describing their respective worldviews and the challenges facing their nations. The bond between them grew steadily through a series of subsequent meetings, including after Xi ascended to the presidency and became President Barack Obama’s counterpart.

This decade-old connection remains an asset to both sides. When Biden placed a call to Xi on September 9, he was first greeted with a litany of complaints about the administration’s hard-

line policies and its failure to reverse Trump-era tariffs and restrictions. But although that phone conversation may have begun with recriminations from Xi, it ended with a constructive agreement that top officials should meet on neutral ground and work through the arrangements for a videoconference between the two leaders. The personal relationship forged between Biden and Xi surely contributed to the positive arc of their phone call. Had they not known each other well, Biden could not have intuited how best to get through to Xi. Were it not for the respect built over the years, Xi would not have taken seriously what Biden had to say.

In a testament to the power of high-level diplomacy, the Chinese government released a statement after the call touting the importance of the leaders' in-depth communication. Chinese media then reported that the two presidents had agreed to maintain frequent contact and had instructed officials to intensify dialogue and work to develop bilateral relations. Virtually overnight, the tone of editorials in state media and the talking points of Chinese scholars in international conferences shifted; the half-empty glass of U.S.-Chinese relations suddenly seemed half-full. In the intensely ideological and conformist atmosphere of today's China, no apparatchik will depart from the safety of the party line without a clear signal from the leader. That official readout of Xi's call with Biden was a message to officials throughout the system that it was now safe to set aside "Wolf Warrior" bombast in favor of dialogue.

The November 15 Xi-Biden videoconference can serve as a further catalyst for meaningful diplomacy. It can kick-start serious engagement, with all the probing, explaining, testing, negotiating, and perhaps even compromising that diplomacy entails. After all, as Jake Sullivan has said, "Intense competition requires intense diplomacy." One virtual summit won't transform relations, but it can help both parties begin to make progress on areas of shared interest, including on issues where global security most demands the United States and China work together—from preventing an arms race to protecting the environment. The U.S. and Chinese climate negotiators, John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua, have demonstrated as much by unexpectedly producing a U.S.-Chinese joint statement on bilateral cooperation during the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow.

The world is not likely to see a return to the large-scale, ponderous, and protocol-heavy diplomacy of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogues of the past, no matter how productive Biden and Xi's conversation is. The yield of such diplomacy was too small for U.S. officials, given the deficit of real-world solutions that those talks produced. Yet the previous administration's experiment with denunciatory diplomacy by presidential tweets or lectern-thumping tirades by the secretary of state was an abject and dangerous failure. Real engagement is a very human mix of relationship building, active listening, persuasion, and creative problem solving. The U.S.-Chinese relationship is in dire need of such diplomacy—particularly at high levels—in order to stem a downward spiral that could lead to war.

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