

Biden and Xi agree to restore military ties, helping ease tensions

The two leaders agreed to restore military-to-military communications and sought to cool U.S.-China tensions at a time of global turmoil

By Yasmeeen Abutaleb and John Hudson
Wall Street Journal

SAN FRANCISCO — President Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping agreed on Wednesday to restore communications between their countries' militaries after they met face-to-face for the first time in a year, lowering tensions between the two superpowers at a time when the White House is struggling to manage wars in Europe and the Middle East.

The agreement aims to reestablish key military channels more than a year after Beijing severed them in a burst of anger over then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. Biden and Xi also agreed to strengthen counternarcotics cooperation in the hopes of lessening the United States' fentanyl crisis. Though modest in scope, the two agreements are a rare sign of cooperation between the world's two most powerful countries, which have been at odds over trade, cyber- and maritime security, human rights, and a range of other pressing issues.

"Miscalculations on either side can or can cause real, real trouble with a country like China or any other major country," Biden said at a news conference after meeting with Xi. "He and I agreed that each one of us could pick up the phone call directly, would be heard immediately."

Defusing a potential military showdown over Taiwan has become even more critical for a White House operating on limited bandwidth amid a ballooning war between Israel and Hamas and Russia's grinding invasion of Ukraine. "There are only so many fires that we can be putting out around the world at once," a White House official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the crush of geopolitical challenges the administration is facing.

The United States and China also agreed to restart climate talks after a years-long pause and to address the flow of precursor chemicals from China that are used to manufacture illicit fentanyl.

Biden and Xi struck a markedly warmer tone after the meeting than they did after their last meeting a year ago. Both leaders seemed eager to defuse tensions in the relationship as they grapple with domestic and global challenges.

Xi after the meeting Wednesday called U.S.-China ties the most important bilateral relationship in the world, according to a readout from state news outlet Xinhua, adding that the two countries should set an example of cooperation between major powers.

Biden on Wednesday noted that he and Xi have known each other for more than a decade, dating back to when they were both vice presidents, saying the two know how to work together.

“I think I know the man. I know his *modus operandi*. We have disagreements. He has a different view than I have on a lot of things,” Biden said. “But he’s been straight. I don’t mean good, bad or indifferent — just been straight.”

But there were still signs of frostiness in the relationship. When asked whether he trusts Xi, Biden replied: “I trust but verify, as an old saying goes. That’s where I am.” And in response to a reporter’s question, he reiterated a previous comment that he considers Xi a dictator.

Biden welcomed Xi just before noon outside the Filoli estate, a historic property outside of San Francisco, on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.

Xi, through an interpreter, said the United States and China had a responsibility to work together despite the challenges in the relationship.

The “China-U.S. relationship has never been smooth sailing over the last 50 years or more,” Xi said, adding that “turning their back on each other is not an option.”

“As long as they respect each other, coexist in peace ... they will be fully capable of rising above differences,” Xi said. “Planet Earth is big enough for the two countries to succeed.”

Biden said he and Xi agreed on Wednesday that they would communicate if either of them had concerns. “We should pick up the phone, call one another, and we’ll take the call. That’s an important progress,” Biden said.

Last month, Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored the military-to-military communication issue during a visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to

Washington. Blinken described how a Chinese fighter jet recently intercepted a U.S. B-52 aircraft over the South China Sea, alarming U.S. officials because the Chinese plane flew at an “uncontrolled, excessive speed” within 10 feet of the B-52, said a senior U.S. official familiar with the conversation.

“Blinken noted 10 feet was approximately the distance of the table at which he and Wang sat,” said the official, a point he hoped underscored the need to reopen military-to-military channels at both the senior and operator levels.

Senior officials in both the United States and China see the relationship as one of competition, and one of the goals of the Biden-Xi meeting was to figure out how to responsibly manage it.

Despite numerous points of contention, both Biden and Xi have reason to try to thaw the relationship. Biden has long feared that a misstep could lead to an escalation that neither side wants, and U.S. officials stress the need for the two countries to have an open line of communication to guard against this eventuality.

The Biden administration has identified China as the United States’ most significant long-term strategic challenge and has prioritized building relationships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region to create a bulwark against Beijing. China has taken note of strengthened U.S. partnerships with countries such as Japan, Australia, India and Vietnam and feels threatened by them, U.S. officials say.

Despite the agreement to restart military-to-military dialogue, the “deeper, more profound problem” from China’s point of view is what it sees as American military provocations and encroachment on its interests in the Asia-Pacific region, said Da Wei, director of Tsinghua University’s Center for International Security and Strategy in Beijing.

That includes Washington’s routine military surveillance flights and “freedom of navigation” voyages through international waters and airspace, he said.

“From China’s perspective, the U.S. Air Force and Navy are infringing on China’s interests,” said Da, a professor of international relations. “When the U.S. tries to sail through the Taiwan Strait, that’s a political gesture.”

From the U.S. perspective, the Chinese military has been taking increasingly risky actions to deter U.S. naval assets in the Pacific, including near-collision maneuvers aimed at intimidating U.S. aerial assets, the Defense Department said in a report to Congress last month.

Washington has recorded more “coercive and risky” flybys by the Chinese military in the past two years than in the past decade, the Pentagon said.

During a dinner with business leaders in San Francisco, Xi extended a warm hand to the American people while criticizing the way the Biden administration refers to China as a strategic threat.

“If one sees the other side as a primary competitor, the most consequential geopolitical challenge and a pacing threat, it will only lead to misinformed policymaking, misguided actions and unwanted results,” Xi told a packed crowd of business executives and China scholars who support dialogue between the two countries. “China is ready to be a partner and friend of the United States.”

Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, who spoke before Xi, thanked him for cooperating with the United States on military dialogue and counternarcotics, agreements she said would “save lives.”

“Thank you, President Xi, for your collaboration and coordination,” she said.

Chinese state media took a markedly warmer approach toward the United States in the days ahead of Wednesday’s meeting, a notable departure from the typical relentless criticism and frequent warnings that Washington will stop at nothing to contain Beijing.

State media outlets have been encouraging closer ties between the world’s two largest economies, especially at the level of student exchanges and international travel. A lengthy editorial published Tuesday on nationalist news site Guancha praised an increase in passenger flights as showing Washington’s willingness to “make the first move” to repair the relationship.

By taking this new tack, Beijing is telegraphing that more frequent dialogue between the two governments as well as people-to-people exchanges will convince Washington that cooperation is possible despite heightened competition, said Wu Xinbo, director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai.

“The Chinese side does not expect this meeting to be a turning point for China-U. S. relations,” Wu said. “However, the meeting serves as a symbol of easing tension between the two countries.”

China is adapting to strategic competition as a new normal while accepting that there will not be any “miraculous improvement” in ties anytime soon, Wu said.

Despite the importance Biden places on the Asia-Pacific region, the president has had to expend considerable time, energy and political capital on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and, more recently, Israel's military campaign in Gaza in retaliation for the Oct. 7 Hamas attack. The president's aides say the administration nevertheless remains focused on the Indo-Pacific region and pointed to recent travel there by top Cabinet members.

But the war in Gaza has clearly consumed much of Biden's time recently as U.S. officials pledge to support Israel in its goal of eliminating Hamas and simultaneously seek to keep the conflict from escalating into a major regional conflagration.

The United States is especially worried about potential escalation by Iranian proxy groups, particularly Lebanon-based Hezbollah on Israel's northern border. Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, told reporters that Biden would address the Middle East in his meeting with Xi, urging China to add its voice to those cautioning Iran against inflammatory action, because China and Iran have recently bolstered their diplomatic relationship.

The Biden administration calls China's rise the single most important geopolitical test of the 21st century. But officials have struggled to rebut claims that they are less prepared to counter China's dominance in Asia than at any other time because of their preoccupation with the wars in Gaza and Ukraine.

"Yes, the crises in the Middle East and Ukraine are serious and require sustained American engagement," said a senior administration official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss military matters. "But I would point out in neither conflict is the United States directly engaged, and we have the ability to engage in a moment's notice in a crisis on a global basis, and I believe that will continue to be the case."

The meeting marked Xi's first visit to the United States since 2017, when he sat down with President Donald Trump at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida.

Chinese officials were on guard against any potential embarrassment to their leader during the visit, experts said. Despite the careful planning, there were small groups of pro- and anti-China protesters in San Francisco, a few miles away from where the Biden-Xi summit was being held.

Some Republicans argue that Biden's meeting with Xi has come at too high a price. While the president is seeking to show that he and his team can responsibly manage

the China relationship, Republican hawks in Congress have criticized the administration as insufficiently tough on Beijing.

Nonetheless, with Biden grappling with conflicts in the Middle East and Europe and a reelection campaign at home, and Xi facing major economic challenges, both leaders stood to benefit “domestically and internationally” by showing they could hold a productive meeting, Da said.

“If they have a successful summit,” he said, “that will send out a constructive signal to the whole world.”