

After the Biden-Xi Summit: Finding Common Ground with China

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Abstract: This article considers the bases for establishing common ground with China in a period of rising tensions between the two nations.

“It seems clear to me we need to establish some common-sense guardrails,” President Biden told President Xi Jinping in their November 16 video summit. Xi reportedly replied to his “old friend” with a metaphor about boats finding their way together through rough waters. This meeting of the two leaders was only the third time they have communicated directly; the other two were telephone calls. Nor was it the usual summit: no preliminary fanfare, no final communique, no evident agreements on the numerous contentious issues in US-China relations. Yet it was an important event.



The November 16, 2021 Biden-Xi video summit

Conflict Management

In the midst of all the wrangling between the US and China about human rights, trade, Taiwan, and a host of other issues, a central concern both countries share is how to *manage* the relationship. What is the most effective structure for ensuring that conflict over issues doesn’t spill over into armed conflict? In the Obama era, the answer was numerous US-China dialogue groups focused on specific issues. Under Trump, these were largely abandoned, without sustained diplomacy to replace them. Instead, Trump played the blame game on COVID and trade while making China the US’s number-one enemy. Biden has neither restored the dialogue groups nor erected a new scaffolding for repairing relations with China. His national security team is made up of people who believe that engagement with China has not produced many results and therefore should not be restarted. Consequently, we don’t have a structured way to address not only old problems with China that are intensifying, such as over Taiwan, trade and technology, but also new problems, such as on nuclear weapons.

Biden’s comment about establishing “common-sense guardrails” is self-evidently correct, as is Xi’s opening comment that the two countries need a “sound and steady” relationship. But how to structure relations so as to reduce tensions remains the burning question.

Engaging China

I submit that the way forward is to make engagement with China a US strategic objective. The reason is simple: China is one of the two most important challenges for US national security, the other being the climate crisis. And engaging China in positive ways is in the national interest. Advantages for the United States include avoidance of dangerous confrontations and decreased likelihood of misperceptions and miscommunications; recruitment of scientific talent from China; reduction of tariff barriers that result in lower costs to consumers and increased competitiveness for trading firms; opportunities to reduce military spending from force reductions in Asia and avoidance of an arms race; more opportunities for people-to-people exchanges; participation in each other's trade networks and a variety of other multilateral fora; promotion of public health research and climate change mitigation; wider cooperation in UN peacekeeping operations and other programs; opportunities for nuclear weapon reductions; a greatly improved security climate across Asia; and cooperative efforts on aid to developing countries. Most of these US advantages are also positives for global security.

One has to ask: Are US national security objectives served by *not* engaging proactively with China? Put another way, does the absence of US-China cooperation somehow promote progress on urgent international issues? It is hard to see how forming a coalition of states to confront China on its human rights violations or its militarization of the South China Sea islands will induce positive changes in Chinese policy. Or how high tariffs on Chinese exports will change their trade policies or benefit American consumers. Or how climate change and pandemics can be effectively addressed on a world scale. To be clear, naming and shaming

China's repression of human rights, refusing to abide by its unilateral takeover of some South China Sea islands, seeking to reduce the trade deficit with China, and competing with China on clean energy are all appropriate policies. But these aims are not served, and in fact are undermined, by pressure tactics and adversarial rhetoric. The Chinese will respond in kind, with the predictable result that tensions will rise even more. US policy on Taiwan is another case in point.

Taiwan and "Strategic Ambiguity"

Heightened tension between China and the United States has raised the possibility of a direct confrontation for the first time since Chinese missile tests near Taiwan in 1996. The new round of tensions over Taiwan can be traced to the Trump administration's upgrading of support of Taiwan—additional arms sales; an official visit to Taiwan by the US secretary for health and human services, the highest-level visit by a US official since 1979;¹ and strong official statements backing Taiwan's status. Early on in the Biden administration, the Chinese responded with pressure of their own: repeated violations of Taiwan's air defense zone by PLA aircraft and regular coastal patrolling by PRC coast guard and PLA naval vessels, all justified as reactions to US naval maneuvers near Taiwan, increased US military aid to Taiwan (including an undisclosed number of Marine and Special Forces trainers, continuing a deployment that Trump started), and closer political ties.

The bedrock principles of China's Taiwan policy are that Taiwan is a part of China and is a Chinese internal affair with which outsiders may not interfere. US policy since the Nixon visit to China in 1972 has rested on support of "one China," but at the same time has justified military and political support of Taiwan and "strategic ambiguity" about what the United States might do if China were to attack Taiwan.

Those clearly contradictory policies have always rankled Beijing, and in the Biden administration, policy on Taiwan has become even more ambiguous—and dangerously so. Some US officials argue for a stronger verbal commitment to Taiwan’s defense, others for directly warning Beijing not to attack Taiwan, still others for increasing military aid or the number of official US visits to Taiwan. Biden himself has added to the confusion—or the ambiguity. He has said more than once that the United States has a “commitment” to defend Taiwan, just as it has with Japan and South Korea. That is not true. He said he told Xi at their virtual summit meeting in November 2021 that the United States is “not encouraging [Taiwan’s] independence, but also said Taiwan may act “independently” as it sees fit. Biden further said after the meeting with Xi that the United States still upholds the Taiwan Relations Act, passed by Congress in 1979, but made it seem as though the act committed the United States to Taiwan’s defense if Taiwan’s government so desired.

China reacted to these statements by noting the US commitment to one China dating back to the Nixon administration and warning that talk of Taiwan’s independence was “playing with fire.”² The state department has had to “clarify” Biden’s inaccuracies by reaffirming strategic ambiguity in policy on Taiwan. For example, at a news briefing, a State Department spokesman said that under the Taiwan Relations Act, “the United States maintains the capacity to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security or the social or economic system of the people on Taiwan.”³ Secretary of State Antony Blinken followed up with this statement on April 11, 2021: “All I can tell you is we have a serious commitment to Taiwan being able to defend itself. . . . it would be a serious mistake for anyone to try to change that status quo by force.”⁴

The Chinese have their own version of strategic

ambiguity. Xi Jinping adheres to the longstanding PRC view that reunification with Taiwan is a sacred responsibility. That position has never ruled out the use of force, particularly if Taiwan should prepare for or outright declare its independence. Xi, however, has not threatened to use force and in fact has repeatedly emphasized reunification by peaceful means. For instance, in a speech on the 100th anniversary of the CCP’s founding, Xi attacked the notion of Taiwan independence as usual but vowed to “uphold the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus, and advance peaceful national reunification.”⁵ Not long after, Xi elaborated, denouncing Taiwan “separatism” and underscoring the urgency of fulfilling the mission of regaining Taiwan.⁶ The speech came as Chinese flights near and into Taiwan’s air defense zone (but not its air space) greatly increased, a sharp contrast with what Xi said:

Using peaceful methods to achieve unification of the motherland most fits with the overall interests of the Chinese people, including our Taiwan compatriots. We firmly support the basic direction of “peaceful unification and one-country one-system,” and firmly support the One China principle and the “1992 Consensus,” in promoting peaceful development on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Compatriots on both sides want to stand on the correct side of history and the glorious undertaking of together completing the unity of the motherland and the great revival of the people. . . . No one should underestimate the strong resolve of the Chinese people to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the firm will, and the great strength. The historical task of completing the unity of the motherland will certainly be realized, and certainly can be realized.

According to the Chinese recounting of Xi's conversation with Biden, Xi reiterated both China's resolve on reunification and the hope it would be peacefully accomplished. He blamed the "Taiwan authorities" and certain Americans who support "using Taiwan to control China" for the latest tension. China will be patient about Taiwan, but "if the 'Taiwan independence' splittist forces are provocative and forceful, to the point of breaking the red line, we will have to take drastic measures." Contrary to prevailing media and academic discussion of the Taiwan issue, Xi's statement does not portend imminent attack or his determination to absorb Taiwan while he is at the height of his power and America is divided. China's red line on Taiwan is clear, but so long as the United States and Taiwan maintain the status quo—no movement toward independence on Taiwan and US adherence to strategic ambiguity—that red line is unlikely to be passed. Still, the risks of a US-China collision remain if only because of the persistence of tensions, careless language, provocative actions by both countries, and the absence of structured dialogue.

Finding Common Ground

Taiwan and other outstanding issues with the US notwithstanding, the Chinese leadership welcomed deeper engagement with the United States. In his opening remarks to Biden, Xi cited several areas of mutual interest, including economic, energy, military-to-military, education, and science and technology. He expressed the hope for more extensive contact

with Biden, advocated using multiple channels of communication, and noted that while tensions are "normal," they needed to be managed to prevent their intensification. Xi urged "injecting momentum" (*zhuru dongli*) into the relationship so that "China and the United States can 'make a great cooperative 'cake'" (*zuo da Zhong-Mei hezuo de "dangao"*).⁷ The Chinese foreign ministry, in its response to the summit, had this to say: "The key is that both sides should meet each other halfway and use actions to create a good atmosphere to ensure that the meeting achieves positive results. . . . China is open to all options that are conducive to the development of Sino-US relations."⁸ Notably, that statement came from the ministry's leading "wolf warrior," Zhao Lijian, who is usually associated with vitriolic comments on US policies. I suspect that he and the ministry were told to echo Xi's position.

China's veteran America watcher, Wang Jisi, a longtime proponent of US-China engagement, offers the opinion that the best hope for resolving US-China differences is to address their different "mindsets." He writes: "Whereas the Chinese insist on identifying principles, the Americans want action on immediate issues. The Chinese believe in first 'finding common ground while reserving differences,' which means agreement on a set of principles, including mutual respect and win-win cooperation."⁹ Bridging the US-China divide is a huge challenge, but Professor Wang's advice offers a starting point: finding common ground. The climate crisis is one such opportunity, and one that would "create a good atmosphere" for further progress in reducing tensions and building trust.

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Notes

- ¹ Ana Swanson, Mike Isaac, and Paul Mozur, "Trump Targets WeChat and TikTok, in Sharp Escalation with China," *New York Times*, August 6, 2020. Azar's visit came under the 2018 Taiwan Travel Act, which set the stage for official US visits.
- ² Kevin Liptak, "[Biden Says Taiwan's Independence is Up to Taiwan After Discussing Matter with Xi](#)," CNN, November 16, 2021.
- ³ Ned Price, [Department Press Briefing](#), April 7, 2021.
- ⁴ "[Blinken: China Aggression Against Taiwan Would be 'Serious Mistake,'](#)" *The Guardian*, April 11, 2021.
- ⁵ Xi Jinping, "[Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China](#)," July 1, 2021.
- ⁶ "[Commemoration of the 110th Anniversary of the 1911 Revolution Solemnly Held in Beijing; Xi Makes Important Speech](#)," *Renmin ribao*, October 9, 2021, (my translation).
- ⁷ "[Xi Jinping and US President Biden Hold Virtual Summit](#)" (in Chinese), November 16, 2021.
- ⁸ "[Foreign Ministry: The Video Conference is Another Instance in China-US Relations of the Two Countries' Leaders Guiding the Ship with the Rudder at a Pivotal Moment](#)," November 16, 2021.
- ⁹ Wang Jisi, "[The Understanding Gap](#)," *China-US Focus*, March 11, 2021.