

## Joe Biden and Xi Jinping Have Talked: What Next?

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Relations between the U.S. and China took a precipitous dive during the Trump administration and that trajectory unexpectedly continued after President Joe Biden took over. Biden and President Xi Jinping finally talked—virtually, which may become the new norm in the post-COVID world. Hopefully their online meeting halted the relationship’s rapid descent, but what next?

A civil presidential chat is only a first step, necessary but not nearly enough. The talk is expected to represent a commitment to communication not only between the two principals, but also policymakers at all levels. The two governments largely went without contact between 1949 and 1972, with disastrous consequences—the Korean War. Instead of receding toward that ugly past with diminished dialogue, they should use the approaching anniversary of the fabled opening of the relationship to spur a reset.

Of course, in some ways ties today are far more complex: two great, powerful nations are competing in the same international space. So how can leaders in Beijing and Washington manage such multifaceted relations? Biden made perhaps the single most important point when speaking with Xi: it is critical not to allow competition to become conflict.

No doubt, hawkish critics of the People’s Republic of China would contend that peace at any price is unacceptable. That is true in principle. However, it is difficult to imagine a serious cause for war. The U.S. and PRC are competitive, but the Pacific Ocean separates their homelands and militaries. China threatens no existential American interests: any foreseeable military clash would occur nearly on the PRC’s border. Moreover, the potential cost of a serious contest with Beijing would not be Afghanistan/Iraq, but Korea/Vietnam, if not worse, potentially much worse. In this situation, both countries have very good reason to create strong firebreaks to war.

Making relations between the two nations particularly complex is the number of ongoing controversies—investment, trade, intellectual property, Taiwan, territorial claims, religious liberty, Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, economic sanctions, climate change, the Belt and Road

Initiative, cyber security, COVID-19, and more. Some appear amenable to cooperation or compromise. Others seem “irreconcilable,” as David J. Firestein of the George H.W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations, observed.

Different issues should be addressed differently, as their unique circumstances require. It might help to separate controversies by level of difficulty, including divergence in objective and likelihood of resolution.

For instance, despite the tsunami of criticism flying back-and-forth across the Pacific, there are issues upon which the two governments might cooperate. The Biden administration has emphasized climate change, but that subject is not alone.

Another topic might be business activities which both governments agree warrant continued coupling rather than decoupling. Then relevant trade and investment questions—regarding standards, rules, restrictions, etc.—could be handled in a more positive environment.

Elsewhere, both governments share objectives but disagree on means. For instance, Beijing and Washington favor Third World development while clashing over BRI. They back denuclearization of both Iran and North Korea but disagree over tactics. Both governments desire new energy supplies, while preferring sources over which each has control.

In these areas compromise might bring the two governments closer together. Perhaps some BRI projects could be coordinated with more traditional sources of development finance, at financial terms agreeable to all. Beijing might better enforce sanctions against North Korea if Washington consulted the former over terms of a proposed engagement program with Pyongyang. A joint energy venture might help avoid conflict and move forward to both nations’ advantage.

Some issues inevitably would offer greater challenges. Yet even where significant differences make solutions difficult, dialogue would still prove useful. For instance, consider economic endeavors in which one or both governments believe decoupling is required. How to do so with the least disruption?

Potential geopolitical entanglements might yield similar objectives even as both governments seek predominance. For instance, the coup in Burma/Myanmar was in neither Washington nor Beijing’s interest. Yet the two governments have different views of the appropriateness and effectiveness of outside intervention. Perhaps they could agree to some common steps.

Moreover, consider the mix of questions involving journalists, visas, and consulates over which the two governments have penalized and retaliated against the other. Beijing and Washington have different visions for what they often treat as weapons, but nevertheless might be able to find a mutually beneficial compromise. Indeed, in their virtual meet-up the two presidents agreed to relax media restrictions, a positive start.

Finally, there are the seeming irreconcilables. When it comes to objectives, the U.S. and PRC are at sharp odds over Taiwan, human rights, territorial disputes in East Asian waters, use of economic coercion by both governments, and military acquisitions and deployments. There

seems to be little reason to seek joint resolution of such issues, because the two governments take contending positions and are unlikely to compromise absent political collapse or military defeat.

However, Beijing and Washington could do better at managing these problems—even finding virtue in “kicking the can down the road.” Where a final resolution is impossible, the two governments should seek intermediate accommodations which both parties could accept. Perhaps a Taiwan which retains its separate existence while pushing less for recognition from international organizations, and over which both China and the U.S. moderated their military activities.

On human rights the parties could design a dialogue of mutual respect in which both sides listened rather than demonized. For instance, Americans should understand why the PRC has acted as it has in areas as diverse as Xinjiang and Hong Kong. While most Americans would remain critical of Chinese policies, there might be room for discussion of less burdensome alternatives to address Beijing’s concerns which might help move the issue forward.

On territorial questions America might help the PRC and its neighbors find a modus vivendi which mixed suspension of efforts to settle sovereignty, acknowledgement of though no agreement on Beijing’s legal claims, shared economic development, and halt to ongoing militarization of disputes. Rather than pushing to solve the problems, the objective would be to prevent a clash while developing positive alternatives.

Ultimately, both sides must accept the other. Americans should recognize that China will not turn into a more populous United States in attitude and behavior. Chinese should acknowledge that Americans care about values and attitudes and will act on them. Both governments should make peace knowing that there will be differences, often wide ones, even as they treat both peoples, though often not their actions, with respect.

The recent Biden-Xi conversation was a necessary first step, but now comes the hard work of resolving some differences and managing other ones. However, this century ends up being known—as the American, Chinese, or Sino-American—relations between the two greatest nations must remain peaceful and cooperative. Which will require difficult and sustained work in the days and years ahead.

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