

Biden-Xi meeting underscores discord over Taiwan

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President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping's inaugural in-person meeting as national leaders of their countries may have been feted as a first tentative step toward improved relations. But their actual remarks only underscore stark differences between the United States and China over the fate of Taiwan.

Biden had met with Xi as vice president in former President Barack Obama's administration, but the Nov. 14 tete-a-tete marked the first time he did so as president since he beat former President Donald Trump in 2020 and took office on Jan. 20, 2021. Xi has been the paramount leader of China since 2012, a decade in which the communist nation, the world's most populous country with more than 1.4 billion people, has grown increasingly assertive in its South Pacific territorial claims. Beijing has a particular focus on Taiwan, the island long home to the descendants of the Chinese Nationalist government that fled the mainland in 1949 after losing a civil war in the aftermath of World War II.

And the topic of Taiwan was never far below the surface at the Biden-Xi confab, held on the sidelines of the G-20 leaders summit in Bali, Indonesia. It came as Biden has alternatively drawn praise and criticism of his administration's position on Taiwan. Biden, a former Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman during his 36-year career as a Democratic senator from Delaware, has, as president, reiterated the "One China" approach that's been U.S. policy since the trans-Pacific rivals established diplomatic relations in 1979. The policy recognizes only one Chinese government while reiterating U.S. preparedness to intervene should the behemoth mainland launch a military strike against the smaller island nation.

Biden pushed that message aggressively in his meeting with Xi.

"We oppose a unilateral change in the status quo by either side," Biden said during a post-meeting press conference. "I absolutely believe [there] need not be a new Cold War."

Biden added, "I do not think there's any imminent attempt on the part of China to invade Taiwan."

But Xi's version of the conversation, at least as conveyed to Chinese state media, does not permit much room for compromise between Beijing's and Taipei's respective visions of their relationship. Xi, for instance, reportedly cautioned Biden that Taiwan is "at the very core of China's core interests," adding that "the first red line that must not be crossed."

"We hope to see and are all along committed to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, but cross-Strait peace and stability and 'Taiwan independence' are as irreconcilable as water and

fire," state media reported. "We hope that the U.S. side will match its words with action and abide by the 'One China' policy and the three joint communiques."

A delicate dance

For Keith Krach, a Trump administration undersecretary of state for economic growth, energy, and the environment, China has relentlessly pursued reunification with Taiwan "by slowly turning up the heat on the boiling frog of international geopolitics — to the point where Western nations have become unwilling to risk provoking Chinese aggression."

Krach told the *Washington Examiner*, "After eliminating any form of competition, Xi bypassed the normal two-term limit for China's president and was crowned ruler for life with unlimited powers." That means "there hasn't been a dictator in the world with so much power since 1945. His ambitions are boundless and unconstrained."

Krach, chairman of Purdue University's Krach Institute for Tech Diplomacy and the Atlantic Council's Global Tech Security Commission, contended Taiwan has never been more vulnerable nor critical to liberal international order, particularly amid Russia's war in Ukraine and pandemic-era semiconductor shortages, since the Republic of China government first fled to the island in 1949 after the Civil War.

"We must continue to be crystal clear about standing with Taiwan," Krach said. "That means providing Taiwan with military aid, ensuring adequate training for their self-defense, and continuing to build an economic shield with our allies. The more of us are invested in Taiwan, the more Xi would be deterred."

Biden's commitment to the diplomatically intentionally ambiguous "One China" policy is both a continuation and a break from the Trump administration's approach, analysts said. In December 2016, as president-elect, Trump spoke by telephone with Taiwan's president, a striking break with nearly four decades of diplomatic practice.

But as president, Trump and his administration took a tougher line against China, promoting an "America First" foreign policy that in some ways allowed China to conduct what it considers to be its own internal affairs, including territorial designs on Taiwan. That's not necessarily a positive development, said Eric Gomez, a defense studies senior fellow at the Cato Institute, also citing the August 2022 Taiwan visit by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), a strident critic of the communist Chinese regime.

"China sees things like Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, U.S. efforts to get regional allies to agree to stronger language about Taiwan in joint statements, and congressional efforts to pass new and tougher Taiwan legislation as evidence that the United States is moving away from its long-standing 'One China' policy," Gomez said.

He added: "The United States sees worrying actions out of Beijing, including the treatment of Hong Kong and increased Chinese military activities in Taiwan's air defense identification zone, as indicators of growing hostile intent toward Taiwan."

Smart diplomacy or capitulation to communists?

Former Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell, another Trump administration alumnus, questioned Biden's strategy of leader-to-leader engagement. "Constant begging" for climate and military-to-military dialogue projects "fear and weakness" and will not alter China's behavior since Beijing considers the U.S. to be "a direct threat."

"The [Chinese Communist Party] has never lived up to its commitments, [for example, the South China Sea], Hong Kong, pandemic reporting with the [World Health Organization], and will always treat any agreement as 'scraps of paper' if they don't see a clear advantage in following through," said Stilwell, an adviser to the Vandenberg Coalition, a foreign policy nonprofit organization promoting "the power of American leadership to protect American national security."

But the Biden-Xi meeting drew praise from American Enterprise Institute's Zack Cooper, a China-focused senior fellow. The meeting could renew communication between the two countries, which "has to start with Biden and Xi" because Chinese diplomats are unlikely to collaborate with U.S. officials. That is, "unless they feel it has been sanctioned by Xi," he said. Channels were cut after Pelosi's trip to Taiwan.

As Cooper noted, the meeting did not culminate in a joint statement or any other major deliverables. Instead, both sides decided to elevate high-level talks, such as those related to climate change, and that Secretary of State Antony Blinken should travel to China to make progress on areas including global macroeconomic stability, incorporating debt relief, health security, and global food security.

Yet Stilwell warned China will not "rest" until Taiwan "no longer has an international presence" because it is "an embarrassment" and demonstrates that "Chinese culture doesn't require authoritarian governance." Krach also described "a peaceful Taiwan" as "a lynchpin of democracy and a role model of freedom." "That's why he wants it gone," Krach said of Xi.