

US-China relations

US and China agree to hold talks on nuclear arsenals

Breakthrough came during Monday's virtual summit between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping



Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping during their virtual summit on Monday © Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington and **Tom Mitchell** in Singapore YESTERDAY

Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping have agreed to hold talks aimed at reducing tensions, as US anxiety grows at China's expanding nuclear arsenal and its recent test of a hypersonic weapon.

Jake Sullivan, US national security adviser, said the US and Chinese leaders had discussed the need for nuclear "strategic stability" talks in their [virtual meeting](#) on Monday. China has previously refused to hold nuclear talks, partly because the US has a much larger weapons arsenal.

"The two leaders agreed that we would look to begin to carry forward discussions on strategic stability," Sullivan told an audience at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

The two sides did not decide on a format for the talks and the US wants to see if China will follow through on the pledge from Xi. The Chinese embassy did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The development is the first sign that the two sides have reached an agreement on easing tensions over serious security issues. It comes against a backdrop of the worst relations between the US and China since the two countries normalised diplomatic ties in 1979.

The Pentagon recently said China planned to more than quadruple its stockpile to at least 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030. The US has about 3,800. It said China was building hundreds of silos for intercontinental ballistic missiles and had a nascent “nuclear triad” — the ability to launch nuclear missiles from land, sea and air — after deploying a nuclear bomber.

The US defence department also said China was changing its nuclear posture in ways that suggested it was shifting away from “minimum deterrence” — a policy intended to ensure it had just enough weapons to retaliate against an enemy strike — after five decades.

The Financial Times reported last month that China in July tested a nuclear-capable hypersonic weapon that can orbit the earth. General Mark Milley, chair of the US joint chiefs of staff, said the test was close to a “Sputnik moment”, in a reference to the Soviet Union putting a satellite into space in 1957.

Asked about China’s rapid nuclear expansion, which has become more apparent over the past year, and the hypersonic missile test, Sullivan said the issues “matter profoundly for America’s national security”.

“President Biden did raise with President Xi the need for a strategic stability set of conversations . . . that needs to be guided by the leaders and led by senior empowered teams on both sides that cut across security, technology and diplomacy,” he said.

The national security adviser added that the talks with China would not be at the same level as the “strategic stability dialogue” that the US holds with Russia, which has the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, and with which the US has held decades of arms-control negotiations.

“There’s less maturity to [the nuclear aspect] in the US-China relationship, but the two leaders did discuss these issues. And it is now incumbent on us to think about the most productive way to carry it forward from here,” Sullivan said.

While the leaders made progress on the nuclear issue, there was no sign of any easing of tensions over Taiwan. Biden said he supported the “one China” policy, in which Washington recognises Beijing as the sole seat of government of China, but voiced concern about Chinese military activity near the island.

The state department said China had consented to issue visas to a group of US reporters and had committed to increase the validity of visas to one year. Washington will reciprocate by giving Chinese journalists one-year visas. The state department added that US journalists currently in China would now be allowed to freely depart and return.

“We welcome this progress but see it simply as initial steps,” the state department said. “We will continue to work toward expanding access and improving conditions for US and other foreign media, and we will continue to advocate for media freedom as a reflection of our democratic values.”

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