

US-China relations

Biden urges Xi not to allow competition to 'veer into conflict'

Leaders hold first virtual meeting as ties between US and China fray over Taiwan



A screen in a Beijing restaurant shows Xi Jinping and Joe Biden at a virtual meeting © Tingshu Wang/Reuters

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington and **Tom Mitchell** in Singapore 8 HOURS AGO

Joe Biden and Xi Jinping held extensive talks about Taiwan in a virtual meeting on Monday but failed to establish any “guardrails” to ensure that tensions over the island do not escalate into a dangerous conflict.

The US president opened the three-hour meeting by telling his Chinese counterpart that they had to ensure competition between the powers did “not veer into conflict”. But they did not reach agreement or find any way to ease tensions over Taiwan, which China claims as part of its territory.

“On Taiwan, there was sort of nothing new established in the form of guardrails or any other understandings,” a senior US official said. “The president was very clear in reaffirming very longstanding US policy and raising very clear concerns, but the idea of establishing specific guardrails with respect to Taiwan was not part of the conversation.”

Taiwan has evolved into a [flashpoint](#) as China increasingly flies fighter jets and bombers into its air defence identification zone.

China has suggested that Biden was weakening the “one-China” policy, under which the US has recognised Beijing as the sole seat of government since the countries normalised relations in 1979. Biden has made policy changes that have made it easier for US officials to engage with Taiwanese counterparts.

measures” if anyone crossed its “red lines” on Taiwan, and pressed Biden to make sure he did not weaken the “one China” policy.

Biden said last month that the [US would defend Taiwan](#) from any Chinese attack. The comments contradicted the longstanding policy of “strategic ambiguity”, under which Washington refrained from detailing how it would respond to a Chinese attack. The policy is also intended to give China pause about military action.

The White House rolled back Biden’s comments at the time. On Monday, it said Biden told Xi that he supports “one-China” and “opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo”.

Aside from [Taiwan](#), the two leaders appeared to agree on the need to ensure that US-China relations, which have fallen to their lowest level in decades, did not spiral further downwards or towards conflict.

“None of this is a favour to either of our countries . . . it’s just responsible world leadership,” Biden told Xi in his opening remarks in front of the media.

The Chinese president told Biden that the two sides needed to “manage differences and sensitive issues in a constructive way to prevent Sino-US relations from derailing”, according to Xinhua. He compared the two countries to two large ships that needed “stable rudders” to avoid a collision.

The White House said Biden had raised concerns about Chinese policy in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet, and on human rights more broadly.

The US had hoped that China would discuss nuclear issues amid concerns in the US over the country’s rising capability. Beijing tested a [nuclear-capable hypersonic weapon](#) in July and the Pentagon last week said the Chinese military would [quadruple its nuclear stockpile to more than 1,000 warheads](#) by 2030.

China had shown no interest in nuclear “strategic stability” talks. The senior US official said the leaders did discuss “strategic risk” and the importance of having further conversations but did not elaborate.

The virtual meeting followed two telephone calls between the leaders this year. Biden wanted to hold an in-person summit but Xi has not left China for almost two years

White House had not expected the meeting to produce a fundamental shift in relations.

“We were not expecting a breakthrough, there was none to report,” the person said, adding that the meeting was about ensuring that the US and China “have sort of a steady state of affairs”.

Additional reporting by Xinning Liu in Beijing

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