

Biden-Xi Meeting and Key Takeaways

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The recent meeting between Biden and Xi on the sidelines of the G20 Summit is being seen as a significant development given the trajectory of US-China relations in recent years. This article seeks to focus on the global ramifications of the meeting. Before doing so, it would be important to give a brief overview of ties between US and China in recent years.

China-US ties in recent years

The victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election resulted in the US adopting protectionist trade policies and retreating from multilateralism. The first decision Trump took after taking over as President was to pull the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement – which was a brain-child of Trump's predecessor Barack Obama – much to the chagrin of many US allies. The US also pulled out of the Paris Climate Change agreement in 2020. This decision of Trump drew criticism, not just internationally but domestically as well.

Steady deterioration in economic ties between both countries

The US-China trade wars followed by the Covid-19 pandemic resulted not just in a steady decline in bilateral relations between both countries, but also reduced the scope for both countries to cooperate on issues of global importance. While Trump's successor Biden did keep the door open for negotiation with China, ties have remained severely strained. The Biden administration in its National Security Strategy (released in October 2022) dubbed China as a competitor saying: “The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”

Like his predecessor, Biden has also adopted tough economic measures vis-à-vis China, with the most significant being the restriction on China's access to chip technology – linking them to US national security. According to new rules introduced by the US Commerce Department in October 2022, US companies would not be able to export important chip-manufacturing tools to China. The new rules will impact not just US companies, but also those products containing American technologies. The Biden administration dubbed this as an important national security measure, saying this would help in limiting the development of spy tools.

The significance of the meeting between Xi and Biden on the sidelines of the G20

First, both sides agreed that they need to resume engagement on important issues – this broke off after initial efforts by the Biden administration had failed. Second, Washington and China agreed that they need to cooperate on issues of global importance include climate change (Beijing had suspended talks on climate change after House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022). Representatives of both countries met at the COP27 meeting in Egypt.

China and US also agreed that the war between Ukraine and Russia was not benefitting anyone, though China did object to US calling the war as an invasion.

Third, China also sent out a clear message that it is not in favour of altering the current international order, while on his part, Biden said that the US was opposed to a ‘new cold war’ . Finally, there was an agreement, that competition between both countries needed to be managed and prevented from turning into conflict. This is important because in recent years the relationship has been moving from ‘competition’ to the direction of conflict.

It would be pertinent to point out, that both Washington and Beijing stuck to their stated positions. China categorically warned US against crossing the ‘red-line’ of Taiwan, while the US flagged its concerns on human rights issue.

The meeting between Biden and Xi at G20 was followed by a brief meeting between US Vice President Kamala Harris and Xi Jinping on the side-lines of the APEC Summit held in Bangkok. The US Vice President in a tweet highlighted the need for greater communication between both countries.

Many argue that the meetings between senior US and Chinese officials are important not only in the context of the bilateral relationship, but in sending out the right message to the global community, especially in the economic context. International Monetary Fund Director Kristalina Georgieva while commenting on the meeting said “that the meeting sent a very significant message to the world that international cooperation is important for all of us.” Though many commentators have rightly argued that it is important to be realistic regarding the overall impact of the Biden-Xi meeting.

Apart from this, issues like environment and climate change require the US and China to work together and would benefit the global community.

Domestic Politics of the US and China and the meeting

While China-US relations will be dictated by external events, domestic politics of the US will also influence Washington’s approach vis-à-vis China in the run up to the US Presidential election in 2024. One of the reasons cited for Biden seeking to reduce tensions with China has been domestic economic considerations, it is for this reason that there was talk of US seeking to remove tariffs on certain Chinese goods, though this decision was put on hold. Chris Devonshire Ellis in an article titled “US-China Trade and investment the winner after Biden-Xi G20 meeting’ for “China briefing” makes an

important point: “In order to prevent a worsening of the US economy during 2023 – and to better boost chances of a Presidential re-election in 2024 – Biden needs to give the economy both some stability and reassurances.”

Yet, Biden will have to tread cautiously and would not like to appear soft vis-à-vis China. Biden drew flak from a number of Republicans including Florida Senator Marco Rubio who said: “... President Biden demonstrated that he is willing to sacrifice everything – including our national security and the security of our allies – for the sake of pursuing ill-fated climate talks with our nation’s greatest adversary.”

Similarly, Xi Jinping’s stringent policies for tackling COVID-19 have led to a slow down, and there is growing resentment at home as was visible from the protests at the Foxconn factory.

While the meetings between leaders of US and China may not result in resolving issues, it may prove to be a temporary reprieve. And if both countries can work on international platforms on issues of global importance, it would prove that those who have written the obituary of multilateralism – were wrong. Most important manageable differences between both countries would do no harm to the global economic architecture since the US-China economic relationship is a very important one.

[Photo by the White House, via Wikimedia Commons]

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.

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