

Phone call between US and Chinese presidents underscores dangerous tensions

Peter Symonds
13 September 2021

US President Joseph Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping held their first phone conversation since February last Thursday [US time], amid mounting tensions fuelled by Washington's aggressive stance toward Beijing across the board—diplomatic, economic and strategic.

Few details were issued. Both sides issued brief read-outs from the 90-minute discussion, but no decisions were announced and no joint statements were issued. In short, Biden initiated the call in a bid to enlist China's assistance on matters of US concern, but offered nothing in return and the standoff between the world's two largest economies continues.

The tensions were evident even in the limited official reports. A White House statement declared that the two leaders had “discussed the responsibility of both nations to ensure competition does not veer into conflict.” An administration official told reporters that Biden's message had been to ensure “we don't have any situation in the future where we veer into unintended conflict.”

The very fact that the prospect of “conflict” between two nuclear-armed powers is raised in formal statements indicates it is under discussion behind closed doors. Over the past decade, beginning with the “pivot to Asia” initiated by the Obama administration, in which Biden was vice-president, the US has sought to undermine China and prepare militarily for war.

According to a Chinese foreign ministry statement, Xi made clear that “the policies that the United States has adopted toward China for some period of time have pushed Chinese-US relations into serious difficulties.”

Xi warned: “Whether China and the United States can properly handle mutual relations is a question for the century that concerns the fate of the world, and both countries must answer it.”

A senior White House official told reporters on Friday that Biden had requested the call after becoming “exasperated” by the unwillingness of lower-level Chinese officials to hold substantive talks with his administration.

The “unwillingness” of Chinese officials is no surprise. The Biden administration has not only continued, but escalated, the Trump administration's aggressive anti-China policies, including:

- * Perpetuating the Wuhan Lab lie that the COVID-19 pandemic originated at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, despite expert evidence to the contrary and a World Health Organisation investigation which found it was “extremely unlikely” to be the case.

- * Denouncing China for “genocide” of the Muslim Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang region of the country—another unsubstantiated lie. Beijing undoubtedly uses police-state measures in Xinjiang, as it does elsewhere in China, but there is no evidence it is engaged in the physical elimination of the Uyghur population.

- * Strengthening ties with Taiwan and thereby undermining the One China policy that has been the basis of diplomatic relations between China and the US for three decades. In 1979, the US ended diplomatic ties with Taipei, effectively acknowledging that Beijing was the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

- * Maintaining Trump's trade war measures that included tariffs on more than \$360 billion worth of Chinese goods, leading to China to retaliate with tariffs on more than \$110 billion of US products. The US has also provocatively imposed bans on Chinese hi-tech giants, such as Huawei, aimed at limiting their sales and access to components.

Driving the dangerous confrontation between

Washington and Beijing is the determination of US imperialism in its historic decline to prevent any challenge to its global hegemony by all means, including war. While also targeting Russia and Iran, the US regards China as the chief threat to its position and has demanded that Beijing abide by the “international rules-based system” by which Washington has set the rules for global capitalism since World War II.

Shortly after taking office, Biden made abundantly clear that his administration would maintain Trump’s anti-China policies. At the first top-level meeting between US and Chinese officials in Alaska in March, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken provocatively opened up with a list of American denunciations and grievances against China, triggering an extraordinary slanging match before the press.

China’s top foreign policy official Yang Jiechi responded by pointing to Washington’s hypocrisy on “human rights” and indicating that US references to an international rules-based system were tantamount to insisting that Beijing bow to US interests. China upheld the UN-centred international system, he said, “not what is advocated by a small number of countries of the so-called ‘rules-based’ international order.”

Yang also noted that, unlike the US, China did not believe “in invading through the use of force, or toppling other regimes through various means, or massacring the people of other countries.”

The only difference between the orientation of Trump and Biden toward China is a tactical one. Biden has sought to marshal support from US allies for its confrontation with Beijing, in particular by holding the first-ever leaders’ meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—a quasi-military alliance with India, Japan and Australia, directed against China.

Since March, meetings between Chinese and US officials have continued to stall amid mutual acrimony. In July, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman flew to China and met with Foreign Minister Wang Yi but left complaining that she faced a list of demands and grievances. This month, Wang told Biden’s climate envoy John Kerry, who visited Tianjin for talks, that cooperation on climate could not be separated from other issues, and called on the US to take steps to improve the broader relationship.

According to the US statement on last week’s call between Biden and Xi, the “two leaders had a broad,

strategic discussion in which they discussed areas where our interests converge, and areas where our interests, values, and perspectives diverge.” As well as climate change, the US was evidently seeking Chinese assistance over North Korea and its debacle in Afghanistan.

After reviewing US policy toward North Korea, the Biden administration is appealing for talks with Pyongyang. At this stage, the North Korean regime has rejected negotiations, which in the past two decades have led to nothing but broken US promises and crippling sanctions. Washington now wants Beijing to pressure Pyongyang to come to the negotiating table by threatening to cut off its economic lifeline.

The Biden administration is concerned that the ignominious collapse of the US puppet regime in Afghanistan will open the door for greater Chinese and Russian influence in the strategic Central Asian country. Chinese officials have held talks with senior Taliban officials, seeking guarantees that the new regime will not allow its territory to be used by Uyghur separatist groups.

Even as it seeks Chinese cooperation, however, the Biden administration continues to ramp up its confrontation with Beijing. Top US officials are reportedly discussing whether to launch an investigation into Chinese industrial subsidies, with a view to imposing greater trade penalties on Beijing.

Just hours before Biden spoke to Xi, the media reported that his administration was considering allowing Taipei to include “Taiwan” in the name of its representative office in Washington—a further undermining of the One China policy that would anger Beijing.

Biden’s call for Chinese cooperation has a hollow, hypocritical ring to it. He is steering a course not toward “peace and prosperity” but conflict and war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact