

In talks with Chinese president, Biden bullies China over Ukraine

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US President Joe Biden held a lengthy phone call with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in an attempt to pressure China to distance itself from Russia amid the continuing war in Ukraine. While Biden threatened punitive measures if Beijing assisted Moscow in any way, Xi made clear that China was not about to be bullied.

Yesterday's call between the leaders of the world's two largest economies, which lasted nearly two hours, took place amid the intensifying conflict in Ukraine fuelled by the US and its NATO allies, which have imposed crippling economic sanctions on Russia and funneled billions of dollars in arms to the Ukrainian military.

The anodyne White House readout of the phone call reported that Biden had “described the implications and consequences if China provides material support to Russia.” But the threats failed to wring any concessions or agreement from the Chinese president, other than to maintain “open lines of communication” and manage “the competition between our two countries.”

No doubt what a senior Biden official described as “a direct, candid” conversation was considerably more heated behind closed doors. Xi is well aware that having recklessly engineered the crisis in Ukraine, which threatens a direct war between NATO and Russia, the Biden administration also has China, which the US regards as the chief threat to its global hegemony, within its sights.

On the eve of Biden's phone call, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the media the US president “will make clear that China will bear responsibility for any actions it takes to support Russia's aggression, and we will not hesitate to impose costs.” Blinken declared that China, with its close ties to Russia, had “a special responsibility” to persuade Russian President Vladimir

Putin to end the war, but “it appears that China is moving in the opposite direction.”

US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman piled on the pressure with a similar warning. Xi had to tell Putin “to end this war of choice” in Ukraine. She told CNN: “China needs to stand on the right side of history. It needs to ensure that it does not backfill, financially or in any other way, sanctions that have been imposed on Russia.”

Expressing the dissatisfaction in Washington over the phone call, White House press secretary Jen Psaki reiterated the threats against China, saying the US had a “range of tools” at its disposal, including sanctions, if Beijing assisted Moscow. She said Biden would discuss a combined Western response when he travels to Europe next week to meet with NATO, European Union and G7 leaders.

All these comments and threats are steeped in hypocrisy and cynicism. Having armed the right-wing Ukrainian government and associated fascist militia ever since the US-backed coup ousted the country's elected president in 2014 and pushed Russia into a corner, the US and NATO are now providing the Ukrainian military with huge quantities of sophisticated weaponry. Yet they are accusing China—without a shred of evidence—of considering military aid to Russia.

The Biden administration's objective from the outset has been to isolate Russia and mire it in a war in Ukraine, with utter indifference to the calamity facing the Ukrainian people or the dangers that the conflict could escalate into a much broader war between nuclear-armed powers. Its failure to offer any guarantee that NATO would not further encroach on Russian borders by making Ukraine a member was the trigger for Russia's desperate and reckless invasion.

China has not criticised the Russian invasion and has

blamed the conflict on the actions of the US and NATO. At the same time, Beijing has not recognised Russia's annexation of Crimea nor Putin's declaration of the independence of two areas of eastern Ukraine held by pro-Russian separatists. Beijing has repeatedly called for peace talks and offered to mediate on the basis of recognising the legitimate security concerns of both Russia and Ukraine.

According to Chinese media accounts of the phone call, Xi called on Biden for a "cool-headed and rational" approach to the conflict and stressed that "the Ukraine crisis is not something we want to see." China has been driven into close relations with Russia as a result of Washington's aggressive approach to both countries, but has significant ties with Ukraine. The war cuts directly across Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, involving massive infrastructure investment linking China to Europe.

Xi opposed the unilateral economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the US and its allies, and warned of the potentially disastrous consequences for the global economy. "Sweeping and indiscriminate sanctions would only make the people suffer," Xi is reported as saying. "If further escalated, they could trigger serious crises in global economy and trade, finance, energy, food and industrial and supply chains, crippling the already languishing world economy and causing irrevocable losses."

While the coverage of Xi's remarks is relatively muted, other Chinese officials hit out at the US before and after the phone call with Biden.

As reported in the state-owned *Global Times*, an unnamed official warned: "China will never accept US threats and coercion, and if the US takes measures that harm China's legitimate interests and the interests of Chinese enterprises and individuals, China will not sit idly by and will make a strong response." The official stressed that the US should not have any illusions or miscalculations about this.

The *Global Times* declared that these "strong signals were sent as the Biden administration has intensified its disinformation campaign over China's 'military support' to Russia and attempted to threaten China with 'dire consequences.'"

Responding to Deputy Secretary of State Sherman's remarks, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying tweeted: "It is the US that is on the wrong

side of history." If the US had "refrained from repeatedly expanding NATO and pledged that NATO would not admit Ukraine, and had not fanned the flames by supplying weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, the situation would have been very different."

Beijing is particularly concerned at the parallels between Washington's provocative actions in Ukraine and its inflaming of tensions over the dangerous flashpoint of Taiwan. The Biden administration has accused China of preparing to invade the island while at the same time deliberately undermining the "One China" policy that is the foundation of US-China relations.

Under the One China policy, the US has de facto recognised that Beijing is the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan, while opposing any forcible reunification of the island with China. Beijing has repeatedly warned it would respond with force to any formal declaration of independence by Taipei.

According to the Chinese media, Xi told Biden that the China-US relationship had not got out of the predicament created by the Trump administration. Some people in the US had sent a wrong signal to "Taiwan independence" forces, Xi said, and added, "This is very dangerous."

While Biden reportedly declared that US policy on Taiwan had not changed and emphasised that Washington opposed any unilateral changes to the status quo, his administration has junked the long-established diplomatic protocols that underpinned the One China Policy, which limited contact between US and Taiwanese officials.

The lack of any agreement as a result of the Biden-Xi phone call underscores the recklessness of US actions in Ukraine and the danger the war could rapidly escalate into a far broader conflict by drawing in other powers, including China. Just as the Biden administration backed Russia into a corner, so its escalating criticisms of, and threats against, China can only heighten the already sharp tensions in the Indo-Pacific.



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