

Biden-Xi phone call underscores US confrontation, not cooperation, with China

Peter Symonds
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US President Joseph Biden held a lengthy phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Tuesday which both sides described in the anodyne language of diplomacy as “candid and constructive.” In reality, nothing was resolved, as Biden, who had requested the call, restated the key elements of Washington’s economic and strategic confrontation with Beijing.

Taiwan looms as a major flashpoint with the inauguration of William Lai Ching-te, an advocate of Taiwanese independence, as the island’s new president on May 20. The Biden administration has deliberately inflamed tensions over Taiwan by all but tearing up the One China policy under which the US de facto recognises Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan. China has repeatedly warned that it will forcibly reunite the island with the Chinese mainland should Taiwan declare formal independence.

According to the Chinese foreign ministry account of the phone call, Biden reassured Xi that the US did not support “Taiwan independence,” follows the One China policy and does not seek conflict with China. Moreover, Washington’s objective was “not to change China’s system” and US alliances were not targeted against China.

Not a word of this will be believed in Beijing. The Biden administration has ended longstanding diplomatic protocols limiting official US contact with Taipei, boosted the provision and sale of arms to Taiwan and stationed American military “trainers” in Taiwan, including on islets just kilometres from the Chinese mainland.

More broadly, the US has strengthened its military alliances and encouraged a greater NATO presence and greatly expanded joint war games throughout the Indo-Pacific, all aimed against China. Indeed, Biden is to hold a meeting next week at the White House with

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida that is aimed at boosting military ties between the three allies.

Xi stressed the potentially explosive character of “the Taiwan question” as “the first red line that must not be crossed in China-US relations.” According to the Chinese foreign ministry, Xi issued what was a blunt warning. “In the face of ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist activities and external encouragement and support for them, China is not going to sit on its hands,” it stated. “He urged the US side to translate President Biden’s commitment of not supporting ‘Taiwan independence’ into concrete actions.”

The US read-out of the phone call, while short on detail, reiterated “the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and the rule of law and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.” In other words, Biden made no significant attempt to defuse the issue, which has also been inflamed by US Navy provocations in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea on the pretext of “freedom of navigation.”

At the same time, Biden raised concerns over alleged Chinese support for Russia’s defence industrial base—a hint perhaps of one possible reason for asking for the phone call. Already embroiled in a conflict with nuclear-armed Russia in Ukraine and backing Israel’s genocidal war in Gaza, Biden may well be seeking to avoid, temporarily at least, open conflict with China as he heads into a US election.

In a naked display of hypocrisy, Biden raised “continued concerns” about China’s “unfair trade policies and non-market economic practices, which harm American workers and families.” He also emphasised that his administration would “continue to take necessary actions to prevent advanced US technologies from being used to undermine our national

security, without unduly limiting trade and investment.”

While condemning China for producing goods that were competitive with US products, including electric vehicles, the Biden administration has maintained the Trump administration’s massive protectionist tariffs across a wide range of Chinese manufactured items. On the pretext of “national security,” Washington has also imposed ever broader bans on the export of key hi-tech items to China, particularly advanced computer chips and the equipment used to make them, in a bid to cripple related Chinese corporations.

The US House of Representative recently passed legislation against the China-based company ByteDance, giving it six months to sell its social media app TikTok to an American consortium or be banned within the United States on spurious national security grounds. Biden has indicated his willingness to sign such a bill into law.

Xi warned that the US side has adopted a string of measures to suppress China’s trade and technology development, and is adding more and more Chinese entities to its sanctions lists. “This is not ‘de-risking,’ but creating risks,” he warned.

Biden’s remarks preview US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen’s trip to China where, according to a Treasury official, she plans to have “frank discussions” about what the Biden administration considers “unfair” Chinese trade practices. Yellen has warned about the threat of Chinese manufacturing “overcapacity”—in other words, the ability of Chinese corporations to export cheap, competitive goods.

Speaking to the BBC, Robert Daly, director of the Wilson Center’s Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, summed up the Biden-Xi phone call as “largely performative and an attempt to show the rest of the world that in fact the countries are committed to managing the relationship well—even though the negative dynamics in the relationship has not changed.”

The phone call follows a summit between Biden and Xi in November on the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) annual gathering in San Francisco. The meeting re-established top-level contact between the US and China, following sharp tensions that erupted after the US shooting down of a Chinese balloon that drifted over the United States. The summit, however, resulted in very few tangible

measures to mend relations.

These displays of cooperation are a threadbare façade. The “negative dynamics” have not only not changed, but continue to become more dangerous. Whatever Biden’s reasons for requesting a phone call with Xi, and the immediate twists and turns in relations with Beijing, US imperialism is determined to crush by all available means, including military, the threat to US global hegemony posed by China’s economic expansion.



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