

Pageantry vs. Progress: Reviewing the Biden-Xi Meeting

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U.S. President Joe Biden walks with Chinese President Xi Jinping as they meet on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Woodside, California, on Nov. 15, 2023. (BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP via Getty Images)

While U.S. President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping reached modest agreements during their Nov. 15 meeting, conflicting strategic visions will impede not only the implementation of these agreements but also long-term efforts to ease U.S.-China competition, perpetuating risks of additional trade restrictions and growing military tensions in Asia's maritime space. During their four-hour meeting on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, Biden and Xi agreed to resume military-to-military dialogues, as well as direct communication lines between the two presidents. The two leaders also pledged to keep communication lines open on all manner of economic and security issues in the future, including limiting the security threats posed by using artificial intelligence in military applications, especially for nuclear weapons. Additionally, they secured cooperation on

fentanyl trafficking interdiction, with Xi pledging to crack down on supplies of drug precursors and pill presses coming out of China. Lastly, Biden and Xi pledged to increase the number of flights between China and the United States and deepen their countries' cultural and educational ties. Both sides reiterated preexisting stances on trade disputes, economic competition, human rights abuses, the wars in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip, and the fate of Taiwan, but they did not reach any new agreements on these matters specifically.

- U.S. and Chinese climate envoys released an agreement on climate cooperation on Nov. 15, as a conclusion to their Nov. 4-8 talks prior to APEC, in which they pledged to work together on mitigating methane emissions, forest loss and plastic pollution. Both sides also agreed to add emissions reduction goals for nitrogen oxide, methane and other non-carbon-dioxide pollutants to their 2035 climate goals. They agreed to cooperate on at least five major carbon capture, utilization and storage projects by 2030 as well.
- Outside of bilateral talks, Washington tried to assign new climate and inclusivity requirements on trade and investment among APEC partners, known as the San Francisco Principles. China was the only APEC member that didn't agree to these principles, so no agreement was reached.
- The members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) met at the APEC summit and expressed their openness to admitting new members, though they did not explicitly mention China or Taiwan, both of which have applied for membership to the Japan-led and U.S.-originated trade grouping.
- On the night of Nov. 15, Xi also gave a speech to a room of U.S. businesses in which he stumped for China's views on world affairs, claiming China would never seek hegemony, Cold War or zero-sum games, and asserted that "the historical trend of peaceful coexistence between China and the United States will not change."

The agreements reached during the Biden-Xi meeting on fentanyl, military-to-military communications and the climate highlight a mutual desire for modest

cooperation, but they are also ill-fated due to troubles with implementation and deep-seated mistrust. The Biden-Xi talks were driven partly by mutual concern about the rapid deterioration of U.S.-China ties following former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan. But the meeting was also driven by the recent proliferation of trade and technology restrictions between the two countries, as well as a joint desire to keep their escalating tensions from triggering an outright military conflict. As a result of the downturn in U.S.-China relations, bilateral cooperation had fallen to very low levels up — until about three months ago, when both sides started trying to revive all manner of economic and security working groups in the leadup to APEC. Against this backdrop, the new agreements signed during the Biden-Xi meeting are noteworthy in their potential to improve cooperation and communication between the two countries, but each deal will face implementation challenges. The enforcement of the fentanyl deal, in particular, will be tough, because while China could pursue individual entities trafficking in precursors, it will probably not crack down on the fentanyl trade as a whole, especially considering it is a cash cow for China's nascent pharmaceutical companies — an emerging strategic industry that Beijing wants to nurture to become globally competitive. The military-to-military communications deal, meanwhile, will reduce the extent to which maritime and aerial encounters can escalate to shots fired. However, China has a long history (even during amicable times with Washington) of not picking up the phone, literally, when U.S. military leaders attempt to contact China directly about an exigent crisis. Moreover, while high-level military dialogues (e.g. between defense ministers) will help reduce misunderstanding between both sides, the United States and China's contradicting positions on all manner of security issues — from Israel and Ukraine to Taiwan and the South China Sea — will limit the fruitfulness of such talks. The U.S.-China climate agreement signed at APEC is also notable given the extent of bilateral cooperation pledged, as China has generally pursued its own path toward decarbonization and the green transition, and has bucked at U.S. and European efforts to sign China onto global pledges that would limit its economic freedom of movement. But the agreement's implementation, once again, will be key to watch, especially when new geopolitical controversies arise and China considers cutting climate (and defense) talks as a coercive tool against Washington.

U.S.-China strategic competition will impede efforts by both sides to build upon the progress they made at the APEC summit, maintaining the risk of additional economic restrictions, as well as the potential for military conflict in various theaters, including Taiwan. Despite the pageantry of the APEC summit and Biden and Xi's expressed optimism about the resulting U.S.-China agreements, juxtaposed strategic outlooks will pit Washington and Beijing against each other for the foreseeable future and limit progress on improving military-to-military communication, cooperation on the fentanyl trade and cooperation on climate issues, among many other goals. The United States still views China as the single largest strategic challenge to U.S. economic and military dominance, and wants to pursue limited economic competition with Beijing and expand military partnerships with China's neighbors as part of a two-pronged approach to preserving an expanded definition of U.S. national security. Beijing, on the other hand, sees the United States as a declining power intent on slowing China's rise with a zero-sum, Cold War mentality, and seeks to return to the days before Washington's pivot to Asia, in which both sides largely set aside their differences for the sake of mutual economic gain. In addition to these opposing strategic views, the United States and China also have opposing geopolitical goals, including regarding dominance in high tech, Taiwan's sovereignty, and expanding political room for authoritarian versus democratic regimes. These differences will, in turn, continue to impede U.S.-China efforts to curb the proliferation of economic risks presented by the other (such as trade restrictions and unfair treatment of businesses), as well as proliferate the low-level risk of military conflict (including around Taiwan or in the South China Sea). Though the Biden-XI meeting at APEC and follow-up meetings will push for progress on minor issues of cooperation, implementation will be crippled by mistrust and misalignment of economic goals. Furthermore, if former U.S. President Donald Trump is re-elected in 2024, his return to the White House would risk sully any U.S.-China agreements made under Biden.