



Chinese President Xi Jinping and his US counterpart Joe Biden in the gardens at the Filoli Estate in Woodside, California, on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference on Nov 15. Both China and the United States considered the summit a success. President Biden described the meeting to the press as "some of the most constructive and productive discussions we've had". PHOTO: NYTIMES

Biden-Xi meet: A positive step in managing complex US-China ties

There was no reset but the San Francisco summit was a vital step to stabilise the relationship amid challenging times.



Chan Heng Chee

There is a cottage industry in the US about the Biden-Xi summit in San Francisco. Most of the writings fall into, want for a better description, the glass half-full or the glass half-empty or, in some extreme cases, a glass totally empty.

What one makes of the four-hour meeting, the atmospheres around President Xi Jinping's visit and other events depends a great deal on where one stands. The US-China relationship is complex and complicated to be easily unpacked and served with a dismissive attitude.

Both the United States and China considered the Nov 15 summit a success. President Joe Biden described the meeting to the press as "some of the most constructive and productive discussions we've had". The US could count a few deliverables.

The Chinese side was also pleased with the talks. There were three speeches prepared for the press to be read out at the dinner with American chief executives that took place after the Biden-Xi meeting. Mr Xi selected the most friendly one, which reflected his mood after the summit wrapped up. He addressed the people and said that "the future of the China-US relationship will be created by our peoples".

Mr Xi talked of three things that would not change in the bilateral relationship. He spoke of the historical trend of peaceful co-existence between China and the US, the ultimate wish of the peoples for exchanges and cooperation, and the expectation of the whole world for a steadily growing China-US relationship. With his high-profile remarks when he highlighted the US-led "comprehensive containment, encirclement and suppression of China", this was a big change in tone. It came as a surprise to the audience, who was expecting a heave of statistics and the usual China growth story. President Xi received a standing ovation for the speech.

But there was no breakthrough and no reset. None was expected. Both sides set about lowering expectations for the meeting. The purpose was to stabilise the relationship or, as US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said, "to set a floor" to the downward spiral.

It had been a year since the Biden-Xi meeting in San Francisco. Most of the writings fall into, want for a better description, the glass half-full or the glass half-empty or, in some extreme cases, a glass totally empty.

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The Chinese, on their part, were

discreetly preparing for the Biden-Xi meeting to gain some seeking reassurance that nothing would embarrass China and Mr Xi. The Chinese held a Track 2 dialogue (non-official) and an important Track 1.5 dialogue (including officials) with US think-tanks in preparation for a potential meeting.

SUMMIT OUTCOME

What were the results of the Biden-Xi meeting?

There was obviously strong intent to do better, as if the bilateral issues was not grave enough. Global stability was further challenged by the eruption of yet another war, in the Middle East.

Anyways, the most critical and significant results of the talks involved the two sides

exchanging views on the Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas war, fearing out whether they could work together, especially since each backed the other side in the war.

All reports from the meeting are that both China and the US do not want the two conflicts to turn into wider wars or be viewed through Cold War lenses. Dr Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, political risk consultancy, described both powers as "radical geopolitically" and this was not just the two presidents but also

the senior officials down the line. There was a need for necessary speculation and suspensions and is an important achievement.

Each side has its own

prioritisation of the deliverables.

President Biden presented the agreement on fentanyl as the centrepiece of the meeting. The fentanyl crisis is a huge domestic issue in the US. It hits American families and especially young people. It was brought up during Secretary Blinken's visit to Beijing in June. The illegal fentanyl in the US is said to come from Mexico, produced using Chinese

chemicals.

Before the meeting, China had already taken necessary measures to tell Chinese companies not to export S1 ingredients used in製造製品. The meeting agreed to set up a working group on both sides for

counter-narcotics and law enforcement. For China's cooperation on fentanyl, the US removed from its "entity list" and lifted sanctions imposed on the Chinese Academy of Public Sciences, the Institute of Forensic Sciences, which includes the National Narcotics Laboratory of China.

This was to facilitate the work. The US had pressed for and achieved the restoration of high-level military-to-military cooperation, which was cut off after the August 2022 visit by then US Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan. Two meetings will be put back on track – the US-China Defence Policy Coordination Team and the US-China Military Maritime Consultative

Agreement. Telephone

conversations between theatre commanders would resume. This is considered critical for stabilising the relationship and to avoid misinterpretation in case of accidents at sea or in the air because of close encounters.

The US and China agreed to address the risks of advanced artificial intelligence (AI) systems through US-China government talks. It was a short paragraph in the joint statement, but it came on the heels of China's participation at the AI Safety Summit organised by the British government on Nov 1 to 2, there is clearly room to expand this area of cooperation.

China's economy, meanwhile, was running into serious trouble. Recovery post-Covid-19 had been more than slow, and direct investment was slowing down rapidly. China understood it had to manage its relationship with the US better.

There is no doubt that as a result of the Biden-Xi summit, regional tensions have somewhat eased for the moment, which is a relief for the Asia-Pacific countries. It is better for leaders to talk than not...

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representatives from the European Union as well as India, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

The US was represented by Vice-President Kamala Harris and China by its Vice-Minister for Science and Technology Wu Zhaojun. CEOs of top tech firms, such as Mr Elon Musk, Mr Sam Altman, Mr Brad Smith (Microsoft) and Mr Dennis Hassabis (DeepMind) and Alipay and Tencent were also present. All 28 countries plus the EU signed on to the Bletchley Declaration, which called for transparency and accountability from actors developing frontier AI technology. There were talk that this could be a world-wide framework to be modelled after the United Nations International Panel on Climate Change. Discussions would continue in six months when the meeting is held in South Korea, and six months later in Australia.

This AI agreement shows that the US and China, in spite of their rivalry, especially in technology, are willing to work together on existential safety questions concerning AI.

The most eye-view of the Biden-Xi summit was shared by China's Ambassador to the US Xie Feng. He spoke of five pillars that had been laid out in San Francisco for the sound development of the US-China relationship. He listed climate change, counter-narcotics, law enforcement and AI as one pillar. Like climate change, these three items would be something the US and China could work on going forward. Importantly for the Chinese, at the end of the independent Biden reiterated that "the US does not support 'Taiwan independence', does not seek a new Cold War or to suppress China's development or to decouple from China".

China would like to see some of the restrictions and sanctions lifted, though that would involve tough negotiations. Presumably, Dr Yellen's economic and financial working group, established with Vice-Premier He Lifeng to deepen commercial and financial issues working group, established with Chinese counterpart Wang Wentao, would help to reduce misunderstanding and find solutions to trade and investment issues.

EASING OF REGIONAL TENSIONS

But there is a larger security consequence enabled by the summit of the two leaders. It has allowed the allies of the US to work more closely with both the US and China. Australia, under Prime Minister Albanese, had been working on improving its relationship with China, which, of all US partners and allies, has deteriorated the fastest and deepest, according to Australian diplomats. China, on its part, wanted to turn the page with Australia, after the Scott Morrison government. The outcome of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's visit to Beijing in November was viewed as a positive on both sides. Dr Albanese was in Washington before he went to Beijing.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, too, met Mr Xi during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in an effort to improve many bilateral issues. On Nov 26, the foreign ministers of South Korea, China and Japan met for talks to discuss preparations for a trilateral leaders' summit, the first in four years.

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It is better for leaders to talk than not... The US presidential election in 2024, campaign rhetoric will undermine the bilateral relationship, with Republicans and Democrats trying to out-tough the other on dealing with China. At the moment, the US and China agreed that high-level visits and meetings would continue in 2024 to keep communications going, which may be helpful as a counterbalance, but positions taken next year by the US will have to be monitored.

The path ahead for stabilisation is still rocky but the San Francisco summit was a necessary and positive step to provide guard rails to manage the US-China relationship.

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