

BIDEN AND XI MEET VIRTUALLY AS US-CHINA CHASM WIDENS

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President Joe Biden opened his virtual meeting with China's Xi Jinping on Monday by saying his goal is to ensure competition “does not veer into conflict.”

The two leaders are meeting by video amid mounting tensions in the U.S.-China relationship.

Biden has criticized Beijing over human rights abuses against Uyghurs in northwest China, squelching democratic protests in Hong Kong, military aggression against the self-ruled island of Taiwan, and more.

Xi's deputies, meanwhile, have lashed out against the Biden White House for interfering in what it sees as internal Chinese matters.

“We have a responsibility to the world and to our people,” Biden said at the start of the meeting. He added that “all countries have to play by the same rules of the road.”

Biden would have preferred to meet Xi in person, but the Chinese leader has not left his country since before the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

The White House floated the idea of a virtual meeting as the next best thing to allow for the two leaders to have a candid conversation about a wide range of strains in the relationship.

Xi told Biden the two sides need to improve communication. The two leaders traveled together when both were vice presidents and know each other well.

“I am very happy to see my old friend,” Xi told Biden at the start of the meeting.

The American president has held up his relationship with Xi as evidence of his heartfelt belief that good foreign policy starts with building strong personal relationships.

But as the two leaders prepare to hold their first presidential meeting on Monday, the troubled U.S.-China relationship is demonstrating that the power of one of Biden's greatest professed strengths as a politician — the ability to connect — has its limits.

“When it comes to U.S.-China relations, the gaps are so big and the trend lines are so problematic that the personal touch can only go so far,” said Matthew Goodman, who served as an Asia adviser on the National Security Council in the Barack Obama and George W. Bush administrations.

White House officials have set low expectations for Monday's virtual meeting: No major announcements are expected and there's no plan for the customary joint statement by the two countries at the end, according to administration officials.

The public warmth — Xi referred to Biden as his “old friend” when Biden visited China in 2013 while the then-U.S. vice president spoke of their “friendship” — has cooled now that both men are heads of state. Biden bristled in June when asked by a reporter if he would press his old

friend to cooperate with a World Health Organization investigation into the coronavirus origins.

"Let's get something straight: We know each other well; we're not old friends," Biden said. "It's just pure business."

Biden nonetheless believes a face-to-face meeting — even a virtual one like the two leaders will hold Monday evening — has its value.

"He feels that the history of their relationship, having spent time with him, allows him to be quite candid as he has been in the past and he will continue to be," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said in previewing the encounter.

Biden and Xi, ages 78 and 68 respectively, first got to know each other on travels across the U.S. and China when both were vice presidents, interactions that both leaders say left a lasting impression.

Of late, there have been signs that there could be at least a partial thawing after the first nine months of the Biden administration were marked by the two sides trading recriminations and by unproductive exchanges between the presidents' top advisers.

Last week, for example, the U.S. and China pledged at U.N. climate talks in Glasgow, Scotland, to increase their cooperation and speed up action to rein in climate-damaging emissions.

Monday's meeting — the two leaders' third engagement since Biden became president — comes amid mounting tensions in the U.S.-China relationship. The two held long phone calls in February and September where they discussed human rights, trade, the pandemic and other issues.

Biden has made clear that he sees China as the United States' greatest national security and economic competitor and has tried to reframe American foreign policy to reflect that belief.

His administration has taken Beijing to task over committing human rights abuses against ethnic minorities in northwest China, squelching pro-democracy efforts in Hong Kong and resisting global pressure to cooperate fully with investigations into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic.

Tensions have also risen as the Chinese military has dispatched an increasing number of fighter jets near the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which Beijing considers part of its territory.

Chinese officials have signaled that Taiwan will be a top issue for the talks. Biden has made clear that his administration will abide by the long-standing U.S. "One China" policy, which recognizes Beijing but allows informal relations and defense ties with Taipei. Chinese military forces held exercises last week near Taiwan in response to a visit by a U.S. congressional delegation to the island.

The president intends, in part, to use the conversation to underscore the need to establish "guardrails" in the relationship to ensure that the two sides in the midst of their stiff competition avoid "unintended conflict," according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters on White House planning for the meeting and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

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