

HALTING THE SLIDE: ON BIDEN-XI MEETING

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November 17, 2022 12:10 am | Updated 12:34 am IST

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The United States and China have agreed to more “responsibly” manage their increasingly fractious relations, following [a meeting between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping](#). In their [first face-to-face meeting, since Mr. Biden assumed the U.S. presidency](#), in Bali on November 14, 2022 ahead of the G20 summit, they appeared to agree that the downward slide in relations, especially in the wake of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August, suited neither side. The biggest takeaway is an agreement that “competition should not veer into conflict” and that both must, as the White House put it in a statement, “manage the competition responsibly and maintain open lines of communication”. Mr. Xi echoed that sentiment by saying “relations should not be a zero-sum game where one side out-competes or thrives at the expense of the other”. To that end, both sides have reopened dialogues that remained frozen since Ms. Pelosi’s Taiwan visit, starting with working together on climate change, a key challenge that cannot be addressed without the world’s two biggest polluters. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will now travel to China, while other suspended joint working groups, including on global economic stability, debt relief, food security and health security, are likely to resume.

While the resumption in contact is certainly significant, it is, however, only a first and tentative step towards stabilising an increasingly fraught relationship; none of the substantive differences has been resolved. On trade, Mr. Xi noted China’s opposition to “starting a trade war or a technology war, building walls and barriers, pushing for decoupling and severing supply chains”, reflecting Beijing’s displeasure at Washington’s latest export controls on chips, which have dealt a hammer blow to its semiconductor ambitions. Human rights is another sticking point. Mr. Biden “raised concerns” about Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, while Mr. Xi retorted that “no country has a perfect democratic system” and “just as the United States has American-style democracy, China has Chinese-style democracy”. The biggest factor, however, remains the Taiwan question. While Mr. Biden assured Mr. Xi that there was no change in the “one China policy”, the view in Beijing is that the U.S. has been gradually “hollowing out” its Taiwan commitments. Should Ms. Pelosi’s likely successor, Republican leader Kevin McCarthy, go ahead with his already declared plan to visit Taiwan, relations may yet again be plunged into crisis. While the thaw in ties between the world’s two biggest powers will be welcomed in most Asian capitals that are wary of a brewing Cold War, the respite may yet turn out to be brief.

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