

Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on President Biden’s Virtual Meeting with President Xi of the People’s Republic of China

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Via Teleconference

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5:12 P.M. EST

MODERATOR: Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining us this evening. I want to kick us off with some ground rules. This call will be on background. The speaker will be referred to as a “senior administration official.” And the contents of this call are embargoed until Monday, November 15, at 5:00 a.m. Eastern Time. Again, this call is on background, attributed to a “senior administration official,” embargoed until Monday, November 15th, at 5:00 a.m. Eastern Time.

Now, not for reporting, but for your awareness, our speaker today is [senior administration official]. Again, by joining this call, you are agreeing to these ground rules and these terms, and our speaker will be hereinafter referred to as a “senior administration official.”

With that, I’ll turn it over to her for some opening remarks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great. And thanks again to all of you for joining us this evening. As you've heard us say many times, the United States and the People's Republic of China are engaged in stiff competition, and we believe that intense competition requires intense diplomacy. That's why President Biden will meet with President Xi virtually on Monday evening, November 15th, Washington time.

First, I just want to spend a minute talking about the intense competition part and the context in which we are entering this meeting.

Since day one of his administration, President Biden has been making sure that we can outcompete China in the long term. And over the past 10 months, we've been making sure that the United States is playing our strongest possible hand. We've taken substantial steps to strengthen our competitive hand, primarily by investing in ourselves. To that end, just ahead of the meeting tomorrow, President Biden will sign into law a once-in-a-generation, bipartisan investment in our infrastructure.

We're also aligning more closely with our allies and partners to take on the challenge that we face with China. The meeting that President Biden will have tomorrow with President Xi follows President Biden's intensive and impactful diplomacy in recent weeks, including in person at COP 26 in Glasgow, at the G20 in Rome, and with our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region through ASEAN, the Quad, and beyond. Together with our allies and partners, we are writing the rules of the road that reflect our interests and our values.

But second, let me move to the intense diplomacy part that follows, that is part of the — that's part of our intense competition. You know, we believe that this leader-level meeting is important in order to responsibly manage the competition. And we think that that requires, again, leader-level engagement.

This engagement matters because it's about setting the terms of the competition in two key areas: One, ensuring that the competition does not lead to conflict. As the President has said many times, we want to ensure that competition remains in that space. And he's told a story about how

his father always would say that the only thing worse than an intended conflict is an unintended one. We know, as a responsible global leader, that it's important to keep channels of communication open. That's why President Biden initiated this meeting. We want to make clear our intentions and our priorities to avoid misunderstandings.

The President will also make clear that we want to build commonsense guardrails to avoid miscalculation or misunderstanding. That's how you sustain responsible competition.

Second, we also think that this meeting is — that the meeting and our intense diplomacy is about enforcing the rules of the road. This is an opportunity for President Biden to tell President Xi directly that he expects him to play by the rules of the road, which is what other responsible nations do.

On everything from technology to trade to international institutions and international waterways, we have concerns about the PRC's behavior. And as a part of that, alongside our allies and partners, we are focused on writing and enforcing the rules of the road of the 21st century in a way that is favorable to our interests and our values and those of our allies and partners.

And, of course, we're taking steps to enforce those rules when Beijing fails to uphold them in order to defend our interests and our values.

So I know a lot of you are probably wondering what do we hope to get out of this meeting. And I would just set that context in two different ways. The first: This meeting is about our ongoing efforts to responsibly manage the competition, not about agreeing to a specific deliverable or outcome. Setting the terms of the competition will be an ongoing effort, and this meeting between the two leaders is one step in that.

We also believe that leader-level engagement, particularly given the centralization of power in Xi Jinping's hands, is essential to facilitating effective communication between our two governments.

Since the September 9th phone call between President Biden and President Xi, we've been able to have more substantive discussions in some areas, both where our interests align, as well as day-to-day bilateral issues where we continue to face challenges. And we're looking to advance those discussions further through this meeting.

Let me just spend a minute on the agenda and what the two leaders will talk about tomorrow.

First, President Biden will discuss his approach to dealing with China. He'll talk about the importance of bounding the competition with commonsense guardrails, keeping communication lines open, and ensuring our conversations are substantive and not symbolic, just to give a few examples.

He'll also talk about his work to invest in the United States to ensure that we are delivering in our own democracy here at home and working with allies and partners — many of the things that I've already spoken about that's part of our broader approach.

Second, they'll discuss areas of divergence between the United States and China. The President will be very direct and candid about areas where we have concerns about China's behavior. And just to give a few examples of what that includes: the threats we see to the rules-based international order; unfair economic behavior, such as China's extraordinary state support of industry and its practice of economic coercion; its human rights practices; China's coercive and provocative behavior with respect to Taiwan; its approaches with respect to technology; and areas of strategic risk — for instance, in cyberspace, as well as others.

Third, they will discuss areas of potential alignment. And even as we compete vigorously with China, we know that as two large countries, there are areas where our interests align and where we should be able to work together. That includes on transnational issues, such as climate change and health security.

But I think it's important to note in this context that China taking bold action on an existential crisis, like climate change, is in its interest, and that is what responsible nations do. This is not a

favor to us. And while we may work together in these regards, that does not either alter the nature of the bilateral relationship, and we very much reject the linkage between cooperation on transnational issues and bilateral relations.

Lastly, I just want to spend a minute — because I'm sure many of you have covered previous bilateral meetings between U.S. and Chinese presidents — and I just want to say that our two countries are in a fundamentally different place with each other than we have been in the past. And I'd encourage you to keep that in mind as you report on the meeting.

You know, we are seeking a steady state of affairs between our two countries where we compete vigorously, where we push back on the many areas of concern we have with the PRC, and where we coordinate on issues where our interests align. It's a multifaceted dynamic, it's complex, and it does not have a historical parallel.

I'd also like to emphasize that unlike previous approaches to policy with respect to China, the Biden administration is not trying to change China through bilateral engagement; we don't think that's realistic. Rather, we're trying to shape the international environment in a way that is favorable to us and our allies and partners. And we've been active on that front since taking office.

All of this really makes it all the more important to have the leaders sit down face-to-face and have a real discussion about the nature of the relationship, our terms and expectations for it, how to conduct the competition in a way that is competitive but doesn't lead to conflict, and how to find ways to manage the risks that we see in that competition.

I will end by saying that President Biden knows that the competition between our two nations has global implications. And as a global leader, he takes that seriously. But ultimately, he is meeting with President Xi to protect the prosperity and security of the American people and people around the world.

So with that, we'd be happy to take some questions.

Q Thank you very much for doing this briefing. I'm wondering how the profound change in President Xi's situation — his power — after the plenum changes, if at all, the dynamic of our competition with China and the way the President will handle this meeting. I know from when he was vice premier and the President was vice president, he spent so much time with President Xi. But this is an entirely different power structure now. And how is that (inaudible)?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, thanks so much, Andrea, for the question. You know, we've certainly seen, as I mentioned in my opening comments, the continued centralization of power in Xi Jinping's hands in the plenum last week, and the historical resolution that was passed, certainly only sort of further cemented that. I think, in our mind, that just further underscores the importance of this leader-level engagement.

You're right that President Biden has spent a significant period of time with President Xi in the past, and I think he has a very clear assessment of him based on their time together.

You know, we certainly see that President Xi will be coming into the meeting tomorrow coming off of last week's events at the same time President Biden is coming in. You know, he will be, as I mentioned earlier, signing the infrastructure deal just earlier in the day — a major — a major bipartisan win for him.

We think that the United States is coming into this meeting, that President Biden is coming into this meeting with a strong hand as well, and feels well positioned to engage President Xi, having built on many aspects of our approach to the competition over the past 10 months.

But I think, again, I would just underscore that the continued — you know, the steps that we saw last week are a continuation of what we have seen throughout Xi Jinping's tenure and just continues to further underscore to us the importance of this leader-level engagement in responsibly managing the competition. Thanks.

Q Hi. Thank you so much for doing this call. I was wondering whether you could elaborate a bit further about climate change and the way the U.S. and China could cooperate in that regard,

and maybe also react to some reports we're seeing after COP26, saying that, actually, the United States and China do align but also to protect their own fossil fuel industries, and not always to push for more aggressive action against climate change.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks so much for the question. So, we've been pushing for progress on China's climate commitments since the beginning of the administration. And we think that we've seen a bit of progress from China in terms of some of its commitments, including through the discussions between Xie Zhenhua, the Special Envoy for Climate from the PRC, and Special Envoy John Kerry.

But, you know, we believe that much more work is needed. We think the PRC should be taking concrete action on climate because it's an existential crisis and because that's what responsible nations do. We think it's in China's interest to take bold action on climate change, and we're going to continue to urge them to do so. And I expect President Biden will continue to press President Xi on that in their discussions tomorrow night.

Q Thank you very much for doing this. I'm going to be a little specific. I imagine you probably won't want to get this specific, but let's just try.

The working groups that have existed between the U.S. and China have made progress, especially on visa restrictions and some steps on purchasing — for example, like a Boeing purchase. And there's also been talk of some kind of dialogue on nuclear weapons. You didn't mention nuclear in your (inaudible), But you did say other items.

So can you talk at all about whether there will be any deliverables or progress announced on those specific things — visa purchases and nuclear weapons?

And is it your understanding that China will invite Biden to the Olympics, or is that an invitation that comes from the IOC? And what would be his response? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Nick, that was like 15 questions in one, so — but I'll let you get away with it a little bit.

So you're right in anticipating that I'm not going to get down to a super granular level of detail on all those things. You know, what I what I will say, you know, is we do — you know, we have over the past few months seen some initial increased willingness by PRC officials to engage in substantive, serious discussions, and you referenced some of the working groups that were established this summer at the — through our embassy.

You know, we believe that these are important opportunities to be able to address specific bilateral issues that are in our interests. But I'm not going to go into more significant detail than that.

I would just also note, again, that this is not a meeting where we expect deliverables to be coming out. We've seen reporting along those lines. But that's just not the kind of meeting that we are anticipating the two leaders having. And I can just say specifically, you know, we are not intending to sort of launch new dialogues coming out of this meeting.

The last thing that I would just say is: We've seen the report about — that you referenced — about the Olympics. I certainly can't predict what China is going to raise, but you know, at this time, I also don't have anything further for you on that.

Q Hello. Hey. Thank you for doing this. So, I do have two questions. We do know that the COP26 just ended. The United States and China reached some consensus on fighting climate change, and that's the issue you mentioned that U.S. and China can work together.

On the issues that both sides will have differences — assuming President Biden will reiterate U.S. commitment to Taiwan's defense, upholding human rights standard in Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang at the meeting tomorrow — what is the guardrail that you're talking about on those issues President Biden would like to set and expect China to set or respect tomorrow?

Second question is: We know — although the United States and China have a joint declaration on climate — but how will the United States effectively lead the climate effort when most solar panel supply chain is in Xinjiang and which United States is sanctioning right now due to human rights and forced labor violation? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great. Well, thanks so much. So, on human rights issues, the President has been very clear in his previous conversations with Xi Jinping, and I expect him to be quite clear tomorrow, that these are universal values, but they're also values that Americans believe in very deeply, that it's sort of in our DNA. And he will continue to make clear to President Xi his concerns about China's human rights abuses.

And I think his — you know, as he is in all these conversations, I expect that to be a pretty candid and direct conversation.

I would just note that we believe that these are differences that we need to address directly and not, in some way, put to the side, as I think China would often like to do.

You know, on the question of climate and solar, we have, as you noted, taken a number of concrete measures on our own, from the executive branch, that are aimed at addressing the use of forced labor in global supply chains, including in solar. And that is an area where we continue to press on, and we certainly believe that we can do both: that we can address the climate crisis at the same time that we stand up very clearly and press for — you know, press to ensure that we are addressing forced labor in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

Q Hi. And thank you for doing this. I have two questions, if you don't mind. The first is: Has the administration reached a decision on whether to send officials or diplomats to the Beijing Winter Olympics?

And the second question is more, kind of, on the strategy with China. I mean, you mentioned that the administration has obviously been working with allies and partners to set the rules of the road and that China is going to be expected to follow these rules of the road, but I'm just — like,

how are you expecting them to react to being asked to follow rules of the road that they weren't involved in creating? I mean, do you think they're going to (inaudible)? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Amy. (Inaudible.)

You know, on the rules of the road, I think President Biden has been quite clear on this. You know, there's principles that we believe have been embraced not just by the United States but multilaterally by many, many nations. And, you know, we believe that when China sort of fails to uphold those, or tries to rewrite them in ways — particularly through, sort of, coercive means or ways that are aimed at sort of undercutting, whether it's sort of international waterways — you know, definitions around international waterways, and free and open access to them, or setting rules in new and emerging areas — you know, for instance, with respect to technology — to do that in a way that undercuts really important democratic norms and principles that he and our allies and many of our partners uphold — you know, attach a lot of importance to.

You know, he thinks it's important that the United States plays a real leading role in helping to shape those in a way that is favorable to us, to our interests, and to our values.

Q Hi, thanks so much for doing the call. I just wanted to see if — how much, if at all, do you expect the current supply chain crisis that the United States and the world are seeing to come up as part of this conversation.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks for that. You know, it's not something I expect to be a significant point of discussion, but certainly, there are a number of, sort of, economic issues and other questions that I think they will touch on through the course of the conversation.

I certainly can't predict what China may raise, but I don't expect that to sort of feature as something on — at least on our agenda.

Q Thanks. Pretty straightforward question. I mean, given the fact that they've already had two pretty extended phone calls this year — I believe 90 minutes or so, each of them — can you just speak to kind of the format for tomorrow and how you expect a different tenor or outcome from a virtual format, as opposed to a phone call — you know, winding down the pandemic era with a “how are you doing” Zoom call question, I guess? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, it's a good question. So I'd say a couple of things. You know, one, this will be the first time that they will see each other face-to-face, certainly since President Biden has been President, albeit virtually, not in person.

But I think this will be — you know, there is something different about actually seeing someone physically, about the kind of depth of the conversation you can have, versus just on a on a regular phone line.

You know, number two, we have over the course of the last several weeks had a number of conversations, just as you would with a meeting — a sort of physical meeting between two leaders — working with our Chinese counterparts to make arrangements for the meeting and to set things up in a way for them that we believe will facilitate the most productive, substantive, and in-depth kind of conversation on the real strategic issues and high, sort of, priority issues that we think are important for the two leaders to address.

I think it (inaudible) — preparing for a meeting is a different thing than necessarily just preparing for a phone call. And so I think there's just a different level of preparation that's gone into this and a sort of different, you know, kind of sense of the key things that that we really want to hone in on in that conversation from both sides that will hopefully facilitate a substantive and, as I said, both strategic and really focused conversation on the priority issues for the two leaders.

Q Hi, I had a few more questions on the logistics of this meeting. Who else is going to be participating? Will they be speaking through translators? And how long do we expect the meeting to last?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great. On who is going to be participating, I think we'll confirm that information separately. I don't have that for you at this point in time. But I think that will be followed up on by some of my colleagues.

Yes, they will be speaking through interpretation. And I don't have a set period of time for you for the meeting. I do anticipate it will run several hours, but I don't have a hard-and-fast time for you.

Q Hi, thank you for taking my question. You mentioned that industrial subsidies would be one issue that President Biden raises on the call. Can you discuss what he plans to say or whether he plans to suggest any retaliatory action for those policies?

And then related to that, there's been some discussion of tariffs on Chinese products. Obviously, China wants those removed. And there's been some suggestion that doing so could actually help with the inflation issue. Do you expect that tariffs and how they will be handled is something that the call will address? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great, thanks for that. Yeah, I think our concerns about China's industrial policy and subsidies is well known and certainly something that Ambassador Tai spoke to in her remarks earlier this fall. And so, that's something — you know, I'm not going to further preview the President's talking points beyond saying that he will make clear that those concerns are ones that he holds.

You know, I do not expect tariffs to be something that will be on the agenda for tomorrow night.

Q Oh, hi. Thank you. One quick logistical question. Will there be a pool spray at the top or at any point in the meeting? And the second: To what extent do you expect (inaudible) and the (inaudible) nuclear submarines (inaudible) play in the conversation tomorrow? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great, thank you. On the question of the pool spray, my ops colleagues will be following up on details about any logistical arrangements on issues like that. So I will defer to them on that.

On AUKUS, you know, we will see what Beijing raises. I'm not going to necessarily predict what they are going to raise. It's certainly possible that we could hear from them on that, but I'm not going to — I'm not going to sort of predict necessarily what they're going to raise with the President.

Q Thank you for doing this. Yesterday, we saw the readouts from State Department and the Chinese Foreign Ministry, respectively, about phone calls between Secretary Blinken and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang. We saw the main difference of the readout is on Taiwan. Is this sort of the preview of what's going to happen tomorrow during the meeting, when Taiwan issue is raised? I mean, like, how will President Biden address the U.S. decision with regard to the (inaudible) relations? Because the Chinese is accusing U.S. encouraging pro-independence of Taiwan. Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks so much. Certainly, Taiwan has been a topic that has been discussed throughout all of our discussions with senior Chinese officials during the course of this administration, and we definitely anticipate it will be a topic of conversation between the two presidents tomorrow night.

You know, I'm not going to, again, sort of preview what the President is going to say, other than to just note that our policy has been consistent and remains consistent. And I expect the President to reaffirm that.

You know, we've also seen, you know, not just on the Taiwan issue, but on a number of issues, differing narratives around the conversations between U.S. and PRC officials. And, you know, I think that we've been quite clear and direct in both underscoring what we have said, but also making clear to Beijing not to mischaracterize our own position, which we've seen happen a few times.

So, again, I'm not going to further predict what the President is going to say tomorrow night, but definitely do expect it to be a topic of conversation.

Q Thank you. Several times you have mentioned that there are certain economic things you don't think will come up, like tariffs and so on. And you've spoken broadly about rules of the road that Mr. Biden wants to emphasize. Can you just say more specifically what these key priority areas are that you have been working to prepare so that the conversation will be constructive in those few hours on the issues that you want to emphasize?

And could you also explain what you mean by "guardrails"? I mean, is Mr. Biden going to present a list of things or a sort of — that he wants the Chinese to observe, or a communications infrastructure or arrangement? Or what does that mean, "guardrails"?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, of course. So, you know, just in terms of the areas that we've been preparing for the two leaders to discuss — I mean, again, I can really only speak to what we are going to say and do, and, you know, we'll see what President Xi decides to raise tomorrow night.

But, you know, the things that we prepared for President Biden are, number one, a discussion of our approach to China and to his overall priorities and intentions of what the United States is trying to do. Again, that's really aimed at avoiding misunderstandings and ensuring that we are setting the terms for effective competition with China.

Second, you know, I anticipate they are going to discuss and that we certainly prepared them for discussion of areas where we — where the United States and China diverge. And I anticipate the President will be very direct and candid about areas where we have concerns.

And then the third is, as I mentioned, potential areas of alignment where we do think there should be the ability for the United States and China to work together.

So, you know, I think that that's — you know, those are the kinds of things that we've been preparing for the two of them. I'm not going to get into further previewing of the agenda before they've had a chance to speak with one another because I do think it is important for them to be able to have that private conversation. But that's kind of the broad brushstrokes on that.

You know, on the question of guardrails, I would just say a couple of things on this. You know, one, as I mentioned, the President has said many times that the only thing worse than an unintended con- — or than an intended conflict is an unintended conflict. And so, you know, there are a number of areas where he believes we need to not only keep channels of communication open, but to build those commonsense guardrails to avoid miscalculation and misunderstanding.

I don't anticipate he's going to be, you know, getting into — he's not planning to present a list or anything like what you suggested, but I think it will be a conversation around a few specific areas — and again, I'm not going to get ahead of the conversation on that — but where he does think that there are areas where we both need to have a clear understanding of one another's intentions to avoid miscalculation or misunderstanding, and to ensure that we have ways to avoid those kinds of things, if possible. So I think I'll leave it at that.

MODERATOR: Great. Thanks so much. Sorry we couldn't get to all of your questions. We recognize there's a lot of attention and interest in this. We will be — we do plan to brief again, following the meeting. So there'll be more opportunities to ask questions.

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5:48 P.M. EST

