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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Not such a historic meeting

U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping met for the first time in person as leaders of their respective nations on the margins of the Group of Twenty (G20) gathering in Bali, Indonesia. This was an important meeting, but not a historic one - it did not lead to any breakthroughs in the US-China relationship.

"Instead, both sides signaled that they wanted to establish a floor for the relationship and build guardrails to prevent competition from turning to conflict. This was an important meeting, but it will take sustained diplomacy from both sides to make these goals a reality", said David Sacks, a research fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, where his work focuses on US-China relations.

The Washington Post agrees that there was no substantive progress made in a conversation that lasted longer than three hours. "The meeting between President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping actually serves as a sober reminder of the unfortunate reality that the two superpowers are headed for more confrontation, not less, in the months and years ahead", said the Post's Josh Rogin. So, what was on the table that the two presidents could not agree on?

Taiwan

The most thorny topic the US president raised was US objections to China's "coercive and increasingly aggressive actions" towards Taiwan, which he said undermined peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and jeopardised global prosperity. Xi told Biden that the Taiwan question was at the "very core of China's core interests" and the "first red line" in bilateral ties that must not be crossed. China has blamed the US for initiating discord.

A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said last week: "The root cause of the tensions in the Taiwan Strait is that the Taiwan authorities have been soliciting US support to seek 'Taiwan independence'." But Biden reassured China that the US commitment to the "One China policy" had not changed, after the Chinese foreign ministry told the US last week to "stop fudging, distorting and hollowing out the One China principle", and insinuated that the US was attempting to contain China using the Taiwan issue as a pretext.

Climate

The leaders said they would "empower key senior officials" on areas of potential cooperation, including tackling the climate crisis, and maintaining global financial, health and food stability." However, it was not immediately clear if that meant China would agree to restart climate change talks it had paused in protest at a controversial visit to Taiwan by the US House speaker, Nancy Pelosi, in August.

Russia

According to The White House, the leaders agreed that "a nuclear war should never be fought" and could not be won, "and underscored their opposition to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine". The Chinese readout did not warn Russian President Vladimir Putin about nuclear use at all, instead noting that China was "highly concerned about the current situation in Ukraine" and supported peace talks between Russia and Ukraine.

Beijing also expressed hope that the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union "will conduct comprehensive dialogues with Russia." According to David Sacks, China would have sent a strong message to Putin had it publicly asserted that Russia's use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine would be unacceptable. In reality, China does not seem ready to denounce Putin or distance itself from Russia.