**[US-China thaw?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1792910/us-china-thaw)**

[Maleeha Lodhi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8829/maleeha-lodhi) Published November 27, 2023 Updated about 2 hours ago

OVERSHADOWED by Israel’s war on Gaza, the [meeting earlier this month](https://www.dawn.com/news/1789856) between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping didn’t receive as much media attention as China-US summits usually do. But it yielded a welcome thaw in their long frosty relations.

Their meeting on the sidelines of the [Asia Pacific Economic (APEC) forum](https://www.dawn.com/news/1790607) in San Francisco was their first face-to-face interaction in over a year, and ranged over bilateral and global issues and all the contentious areas that divide them. Both sides saw the summit as an opportunity to stabilise ties, which in recent years have sunk to an all-time low.

The meeting was preceded by a series of visits to Beijing by top American officials, including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, CIA chief Bill Burns and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also visited Washington in October. These multiple diplomatic engagements helped to bring down the temperature and also create a helpful environment for the California summit.

No big breakthrough was anticipated at the summit. And there wasn’t one. However, agreement on several fronts marked a step towards easing tensions, holding out the possibility of building on the modest progress achieved for a more predictable and stable relationship.

Improvement in the tone of the relationship was significant, with positive vibes from both sides. Xi told Biden that the “planet was big enough” for both the global powers. Biden spoke of the need to responsibly manage the competition “so it doesn’t result in conflict”.

He also said that “a stable relationship between the world’s two largest economies is not merely good for the two economies but for the world”.

In his solo press conference, Biden later repeated a remark he [made earlier this year](https://www.dawn.com/news/1790016) that he saw Xi as a “dictator”. This provoked an angry response from Beijing but did not detract from the diplomatic advance made at the summit. The Chinese media described the meeting as “a new starting point” for bilateral relations.

China’s foreign ministry spokeswoman called the summit “a positive, comprehensive and constructive meeting of strategic and far-reaching significance”.

The three areas where the two sides were able to reach agreement were: to restore high-level military-to-military communication, establish a presidential hotline, and cooperate to restrict the production of fentanyl, a precursor chemical responsible for drug overdoses in the US.

Re-establishing military relations, [suspended](https://www.dawn.com/news/1703382) by Beijing since 2022, was, of course, the most significant. This means the resumption of China-US Defence Policy Coordination Talks, China-US Military Maritime Consultative Agreement meetings, and telephonic contact between theatre commanders.

If implemented without hurdles, this should help to reduce the risk of miscalculation, especially given the fraught situation in the South China Sea, where both sides have air and naval deployments.

The future trajectory of this critical relationship has far-reaching repercussions for the world.

The agreement on counter-narcotics involved China’s commitment to check the production of fentanyl precursors to prevent their ending up with drug cartels and contributing to America’s drug problem.

Biden is reported to have conveyed his appreciation for Xi’s commitment, while also saying he would “trust but verify” Chinese actions in this regard. The creation of a counter-narcotics working group is expected to coordinate these efforts.

Cooperation in these areas and the mutual desire to strengthen communication channels may help to halt the slide in China-US relations. But while the talks were said to be wide-ranging and also covered the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the summit didn’t see differences between the two global powers narrowing over the major issues and disputes that drive tensions in their strategic competition — Taiwan, trade, technology curbs and military postures. Indeed, both sides used the summit to again spell out their positions and red lines on Taiwan.

Xi told Biden to cease arming Taiwan and reiterate that reunification was inevitable. The Chinese foreign ministry readout later said Beijing expected the US side to now “follow through on its statement of not supporting Taiwan independence and support China’s peaceful reunification”.

Biden called for restraint by China on Taiwan while reiterating US support for its ‘One China’ policy. Western analysts noted that Biden seemed to step back from his tough rhetoric of a year ago, when he repeatedly referred to China’s coercive posture on Taiwan, and in a departure from previous US policy, even said American forces would intervene militarily to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion.

Taiwan, however, continues to be a dangerous flashpoint in the China-US confrontation. This was laid bare earlier this year when there was a near collision in June between a Chinese warship and a United States Navy guided-missile destroyer.

This underscored what the international community has long feared — an inadvertent drift into a conflict that neither side wants but may be unable to avert in a region bristling with heightened military activity. Thus, the renewal of high-level military contacts acquires importance in enabling the two countries to reduce the risk of a full-blown crisis or conflict.

US-China competition has also intensified in the area of technology. Washington is engaged in a battle to maintain supremacy with an intense ‘chip war’ underway.

A year ago, it imposed sweeping measures to bar American companies and allied countries from exporting chips and advanced chip equipment to China to cripple its semiconductor industry, which manufactures chips and circuits for modern electronics ranging from supercomputers and smartphones to automobiles.

Despite the fact that these sanctions proved to be counterproductive, last month the US tightened restrictions on exports of advanced computer chips to retard China’s efforts to develop artificial intelligence.

The US justified the new curbs as aimed at limiting China’s use of these for military purposes. Beijing slammed them as a violation of “the principles of fair competition” and designed to thwart its technological progress.

Given unresolved differences on these and other contentious issues in their strategic rivalry, the San Francisco summit represents a tentative melting of the ice between the two superpowers, but little more for now.

It suggests that in the months ahead, the focus of the relationship will be on crisis management. Nevertheless, the effort at de-escalation comes as a relief for the international community increasingly concerned about a confrontation that has far-reaching repercussions for the global economy and world stability.

*The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.*

*Published in Dawn, November 27th, 2023*