

Engaging the Chinese, Maintaining U.S. Principles: The First China Meeting of the Biden Administration

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

A number of high-level meetings will define the Biden Administration's policy toward the Indo-Pacific for the next four years.

Chinese officials are likely to demand an end to U.S. restrictions on Huawei, support for Taiwan, and prosecution of suspected Chinese spies.

U.S. officials must convey continued commitment to key principles, directly address U.S. concerns regarding human rights, and express commitment to a strong defense.

A number of high-level meetings will define the United States' policy toward the Indo-Pacific region for the next four years.

On March 12, the leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States met virtually for the first "Quad" summit. The four states encompass nearly two billion people and \$31 trillion in gross domestic product. The Quad members also reflect a multinational commitment to the rule of law and democratic principles, as reflected in their joint statement, which specifically affirmed their support for "the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity."¹

The Quad is not a formal alliance, but a grouping of like-minded states, initially precipitated by the 2004 tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia. Then, after a decade in hiatus, the forum was revived by the Trump

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Administration in 2020 to address the range of changing Asian and global economic, political, and security environments. Strategically, the Quad's goal has always been the peaceful management of the rise of China.

On March 18, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor (NSA) Jake Sullivan will meet with Chinese State Councilor for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Anchorage, Alaska. It will be the first high-level meeting between Chinese and American officials since President Joe Biden took office.² It will be the first Chinese opportunity to not only take the measure of the new U.S. Administration, but to lay out what China expects from the Biden team. Equally important is that it will be the first opportunity for Washington to make clear its goals and priorities in its interactions with Beijing.

If the Quad meeting was a summit of like-minded states, the senior officials meeting in Alaska is an exchange between powerful states that have fewer and fewer points of commonality. The Chinese will no doubt arrive with a very clear understanding of the message they want to send. It is essential that the United States build on the Quad's joint statement, as well as on the messages that Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will take on his trip to India from March 19 to 21,³ to lay out the American vision of future U.S.–China relations.

While one American official stated that the “goal will be to compare notes on what each of our hopes and plans are for domestic politics, what our goals are internationally, regionally and globally,”⁴ the Chinese view is unlikely to be nearly so nebulous or tentative. Rather than “comparing notes,” Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan should expect a barrage of Chinese demands on the U.S., including:

- Ending U.S. restrictions on sales of microprocessors to Chinese companies such as Huawei and ZTE;
- Ending U.S. opposition to the incorporation of products from Huawei and other Chinese companies into third-party 5G networks;
- Ending the U.S. prosecution of Meng Wenzhou, Huawei's chief financial officer, who has been detained in Canada awaiting extradition to the United States;
- Ending U.S. “interference” in Chinese internal affairs, such as criticizing Chinese mistreatment of Uyghurs and condemning the crackdown on Hong Kong's political system and democracy activists; and

- Ending U.S. support for Taiwan which Foreign Minister Wang characterized earlier this year as “playing with fire.”⁵

In return, the Chinese will undoubtedly make the same blandishments they have in the past: win-win cooperation, a new model of great-power relations. China’s top foreign policy officials will undoubtedly try to keep the focus on such issues as addressing COVID-19 (despite failing to cooperate with the World Health Organization) and climate change (despite building more coal-fired power plants⁶ than the rest of the world combined).

Communicating Key U.S. Policy Choices to China

For the United States, as it kicks off a renewed diplomatic effort in the Indo–Pacific, it is essential that it be proactive in establishing a long-term agenda. Although still in process, Blinken and Sullivan should convey to Yang and Wang the following highlights of a long-term agenda:

- **Continued commitment to key principles.** Beginning with the Quad and extending to U.S. alliances and commitments in the region, there is a general support for democracy, open markets, and a rules-based order. Whether it is fellow Quad members or democracies of Southeast Asia and various parts of Oceania, there is widespread agreement that authoritarian, one-party rule runs counter to the proper international order. Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan need to make clear to the Chinese that these are not only American principles, but principles shared by an array of states: respect for human rights, freedom of expression, a free press, and freedom of the seas.
- **Directly state U.S. concerns about Chinese behavior in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.** The Administration has expressed clear concern on both of these issues. Not addressing them in person and with a sense of priority will give the Chinese the wrong impression. The truth is, as Secretary Blinken has publicly acknowledged, the Chinese regime is committing genocide against the Uyghurs. He must say so directly to Chinese officials. The Chinese will be looking for hints of any inconsistencies in U.S. policy. The same issues arise for Hong Kong. Beijing is not living up to its commitments in the 1984 Sino–British Joint Declaration. Yang and Wang can mince words about what exactly was meant by a “high degree of autonomy” for Hong Kong, and, given the messaging from the National People’s Congress and the Chinese

People's Political Consultative Conference, they probably will. But there is no denying that Hong Kong is far less autonomous than it was just two years ago. The imposition from Beijing of the National Security Law gives the lie to Xi Jinping's commitment to "one country, two systems." China cannot be allowed to unilaterally impose a redefinition of its formal international pledges.

- **A renewed a commitment to free trade.** One of the key elements that has enriched Asia over the past half century has been the open international markets, sustained by a general adherence to the rules of free trade. Indeed, the greatest challenge that China poses has arguably been its exploitation of the international trading system. The justifications for the imposition of Section 301 tariffs by the Trump Administration⁷ involved Chinese efforts to unfairly secure intellectual property through a variety of means, including state-backed economic cyber espionage. The Biden Administration must make clear that, while the U.S. remains committed to free trade, it will also continue to counter China's predatory actions, both unilaterally and in concert with its allies, and at the World Trade Organization.
- **A strong defense capability.** The United States is the only nation that can hope to counter China's increasingly capable military. China already has the largest navy and air force in Asia, the vast bulk of which are concentrated in East Asia, rather than spread worldwide the way the U.S. military is. This force of modern naval combatants, stealth fighters, modern tanks, and armored fighting vehicles is backed by space and cyber capabilities that outpace its neighbors and makes China very clearly a peer (rather than "near-peer") competitor. China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea, on the border with India, around the Senkakus, and toward Taiwan makes clear that force is not off the table as a Chinese option—a position reinforced explicitly in the case of Taiwan. Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan need to make clear that, as an Indo-Pacific power, the United States remains firmly committed to supporting its allies, maintaining freedom of the seas, and supporting the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region, with the military capabilities necessary to support those commitments.

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Endnotes

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