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U.S., China Talks Gain Momentum, Paving Way for Xi-Biden Summit

Governments discuss Washington visits by a senior Chinese economic-policy official and the foreign minister

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President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping last met during the Group of 20 summit meeting last year in Indonesia. PHOTO: ALEX BRANDON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Beijing and Washington are paving the way for Chinese leader Xi Jinping to visit the U.S., moving ahead with high-level official exchanges and taking other steps to improve the tone of their turbulent relations.

Both sides are discussing a trip to Washington by Xi's top economic-policy aide, Vice Premier He Lifeng, according to people briefed on the matter. He would be the most-senior official to travel to the U.S. since President Biden took office. Meantime, planning is also under way for Foreign Minister Wang Yi to visit Washington in October to prepare for a Xi summit with Biden, the people said.

China facilitated the transfer this week of an American soldier from North Korean custody, U.S. officials said. National security adviser Jake Sullivan had raised the soldier's case in a meeting 10 days ago with Wang, the officials said.

The latest developments push forward the momentum both governments have been trying to create after months of across-the-board tensions and suggest an increased likelihood that Xi will attend a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders to be held in San Francisco in November. Beyond that gathering, Beijing is seeking a separate high-profile summit with Biden, something both governments see as a potential boost to the months of tentative efforts to stabilize ties.

The two leaders last met in November 2022 ahead of a summit of the Group of 20 major economies in Bali, Indonesia, where they instructed officials to resume stalled talks on global priorities.

Progress in relations remains tentative, with deep-seated suspicion and entrenched differences on most issues. Disagreements could boil over and scuttle a summit or visits by other senior Chinese officials. In a new worry, U.S. officials are concerned a government shutdown would further delay planning for the meetings or the summit.

Beijing is continuing to build its alignment with Moscow to counter Washington and its allies. Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet with Xi in October in Beijing when it hosts a high-level forum on Xi's signature Belt and Road infrastructure program, a massive initiative aimed at expanding China's influence across Asia, Africa and Latin America. The forum will be held on Oct. 17 and 18, people familiar with the matter said.

"Both sides will continue taking actions they believe are justified and that the other could interpret as provocative," said Ryan Hass, director of the China Center at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington and a former adviser on China and Asia under the Obama administration. "If these visits by senior Chinese officials materialize, the odds of a leader-level meeting will continue to rise."

China has in recent weeks played hard-to-get to try to extract leverage. Chinese officials have criticized the U.S. administration for refusing to invite China's handpicked governor of Hong Kong—who has enforced a national security crackdown on the territory—to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, as has been past custom.

This year's APEC meeting "should be a major stage to promote cooperation, not a battleground to provoke confrontation," Wang, the foreign minister, said at a briefing in Beijing on Tuesday. "As the host, the United States should realize its responsibilities, show due openness, fairness, tolerance and responsibility and create better conditions for the smooth holding of the meeting."

The Chinese Embassy said the two governments "are in touch about bilateral engagement and exchange." The Treasury Department declined to comment. State Department spokesman Matt Miller, when asked Wednesday about prospects for a Biden-Xi summit, declined to assess the likelihood but said "there's no substitute for leader-to-leader communication."

High-level U.S.-China contacts were disrupted early this year by an alleged Chinese spy balloon discovered floating over the U.S. and sharp differences over Russia's war in Ukraine. The push to restore them is being driven by a shared desire for stability in the relationship.

The Biden administration has pressed to steady matters with Beijing partly to prevent tensions from spiraling into conflict, especially over Taiwan, but also to show allies and others that it can manage a working relationship with Beijing.

Xi also wants to show to the Chinese public that he has got China's most important bilateral relations under control, especially at a time of a deepening economic malaise, according to people close to Beijing.

In particular, the people said, the Chinese leader wants to see if restoring economic discussions with Washington may help slow down the pace of U.S. restrictions on high-technology transfers to China.

"Beijing is quite eager to stave off any further escalation of bilateral tensions, particularly over the next year as the U.S. election season heats up," Eswar Prasad, former head of the International Monetary Fund's China division.

Last week, both governments said that two working groups were established to discuss economic and financial issues, a result of Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen's trip to Beijing in July. The groups will hold regular meetings at the vice-minister level, with officials reporting back to Yellen and He, the Chinese Vice Premier.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo also announced during her August trip to China that both sides will establish a working group to discuss trade and investment issues, as well as export controls.

The creation of these new mechanisms mark a resumption of regular economic dialogue between the world's two biggest economies, which had been frozen since the height of the U.S.-China trade war in 2018. Former President Donald Trump and his advisers considered such dialogues useless in trying to get China to change its economic and trade practices.

The newly-established working groups are less extensive than the previous dialogue mechanisms set up by both countries, which brought together many senior Chinese and American officials to talk about a wider range of topics.

Wang, the foreign minister, recently skipped the annual United Nations meeting of government leaders in New York. U.S. officials originally expected him to attend and perhaps come to Washington for summit preparations, as laid out by Chinese Foreign Ministry officials this summer. Instead, Wang held a surprise two-day discussion with Sullivan, the national security adviser, on the Mediterranean island nation of Malta.

China sent Vice President Han Zheng, who holds a largely ceremonial role, to the U.N. where he discussed a possible Xi-Biden summit with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, according to the State Department.

Another positive cue from Beijing: China's state media on Sept. 19 published a letter from Xi to two U.S. Flying Tigers veterans who fought for China during World War II, extolling the "profound friendship" China and the U.S. had forged in their fight against Japan.

"China and the United States, as two major countries, bear more important responsibilities for world peace, stability and development," Xi wrote in a reply to a letter from the Flying Tigers veterans.

—Gordon Lubold contributed to this article.

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