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Biden, Xi Open to Nuclear-Arms Talks, White House Says

A dialogue, if it happens, would be one of the few concrete outcomes from president's meeting with Chinese leader



President Biden speaking during his virtual meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, on screen, in the White House on Monday.

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By [Alex Leary](#), [Lingling Wei](#) and [Michael R. Gordon](#)

Updated Nov. 17, 2021 10:09 am ET

President Biden and President Xi Jinping of China have agreed to explore talks on arms control, a top White House official said, a day after the two used a virtual meeting to emphasize the need to avoid conflict on regional security and economic matters.

“The two leaders agreed that we would look to begin to carry forward discussions on strategic stability,” White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Tuesday.

Mr. Sullivan made clear the discussion was tentative. “It is now incumbent on us

to think about the most productive way to carry it forward from here,” he said in response to a question about China’s growing military prowess during an event at the Brookings Institution think tank.

Nuclear-arms talks, should they materialize, would be one of the few concrete outcomes from Monday night’s meeting, which ran more than three hours and saw Messrs. Biden and Xi holding firm to their positions on a range of issues, including Taiwan. The overall benefit of the meeting, experts said, was keeping lines of communication open.

“This high-level meeting at a minimum paves the way for more intensive technical discussions about economic and geopolitical issues in which there remains a possibly unbridgeable gulf between the two sides,” said Eswar Prasad, a professor of trade policy at Cornell University.

Mr. Biden raised the issue and his counterpart indicated that high-ranking officials could be made available, according to an official with knowledge of the conversation. The morning after this article appeared, a National Security Council spokesman said, “What we are seeking—and what Jake Sullivan spoke about—are conversations with empowered interlocutors to have serious and substantive conversations on guardrails to reduce risk or the chance of miscalculation and to address potentially destabilizing dynamics.”

A Chinese official briefed on the talks said the two sides haven’t decided on the format of such talks. One option is a new “Track II” dialogue between nongovernmental experts on both sides, the Chinese official said.

Such back-channel diplomacy is often used to assist officials to manage and resolve conflicts by exploring solutions without the strictures of formal negotiations.

The Chinese statement on the virtual meeting didn’t mention a new security dialogue. However, Mr. Xi indicated his willingness to address security issues.

“China and the United States can use the dialogue channels and mechanism platforms of the two countries’ diplomatic security...teams to promote pragmatic cooperation and solve specific problems,” Mr. Xi said, according to a statement from China’s official Xinhua News Agency.

For years, the Chinese have argued that their nuclear deterrent paled in comparison with those of the U.S. and Russia. But China's nuclear forces are poised to grow substantially over the next decade.

According to [a recent Pentagon assessment of China's military power](#), Beijing could have about 700 nuclear warheads in the next six years, and 1,000 by 2030.

The Trump administration invited China to begin a two-way "strategic security dialogue" in 2019 and sought the following year to draw Beijing into [three-way arms-control talks with the Russians](#). But China rebuffed those invitations and its nuclear forces aren't limited by any arms-control treaties.

In October, the Biden administration underscored it was also interested in starting some sort of strategic dialogue with the Chinese. That proposal followed [an August test of a hypersonic missile](#) that provoked concern at the Pentagon.

Mr. Sullivan on Tuesday said future talks with the Chinese would "cut across security, technology and diplomacy." But he left unclear what the specific agenda of future stability talks with the Chinese might be. He indicated that talks would be different from the more formal discussions the U.S. is holding with Russia on the future arms-control agenda following the lapse in five years of the New START nuclear-arms treaty.

In contrast with China, the U.S. has had decades of experience in negotiating over nuclear issues with the Russians.

"It is good that the president raised the need for a regular nuclear risk-reduction dialogue, but such a process will not likely get off the ground unless the U.S. makes this one of its highest bilateral goals," said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, a private group that supports arms-control agreements.

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Appeared in the November 17, 2021, print edition as 'Biden, Xi Open To Nuclear Talks.'

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