

Biden and Xi agree to keep human control over decisions to use nuclear weapons

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Lima, Peru

MR. SULLIVAN: (In progress) — which will go into some detail on various issues that they covered.

And so, I'm going to be brief in my opening comments, because you all can read that scintillating Word document.

You know, this was an opportunity for them to take stock of their relationship after four years of President Biden stewarding it along with President Xi Jinping. And President Biden reflected on the fact that he has worked hard to responsibly manage the competition so that it doesn't veer into conflict and so that he maintains space also for the U.S. and China to work together on matters of mutual interest.

He reflected on the fact that keeping open lines of communication is vital to the responsible management of this relationship, and that includes the leader-to-leader communication that has really anchored the relationship over the last four years, but also communication at all levels.

And he really emphasized the importance of sustaining military-to-military communication through this transition period and beyond, because that is how we will most effectively avert any potential mistake and miscalculation of crisis.

He spoke about areas where we actually have made progress, where our interests align, from counternarcotics to climate, AI. The two leaders took an important step forward today with respect to AI safety and risk. They agreed, and it will be reflected in the readout, on the need to maintain human control over the decision to use nuclear weapons, which is the first time the U.S. and the PRC has made this statement. It's an important statement about the intersection of artificial intelligence and nuclear doctrine, and it is a reflection of how, even with competition between the U.S. and the PRC, we can work on a responsible basis to manage risk in vital areas.

The two leaders, of course, also spoke about areas of difference and areas of friction in the relationship, including U.S. concerns over the PRC's support for Russia's defense industrial base. And in this context, President Biden reiterated his grave concern over the fact that the DPRK has deployed a significant number of troops to western Russia to participate in the battle against Ukraine, in the war against Ukraine.

President Biden also spoke to President Xi about cross-Strait issues and the U.S.'s commitment to sustain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. They had the chance to go back and forth on that.

They talked about economics and national security. They talked about the respective concerns of both sides about the policies of the other. But President Biden really reiterated his concern about unfair non-market economic practices that are harming American workers and businesses.

They also covered the South China Sea, and President Biden reiterated his view that international law must be respected, along with freedom of navigation and lawful, unimpeded commerce in the South China Sea.

They touched on a number of other issues as well. I would just sum up the meeting by saying that it was — like all of these meetings are, it was candid, it was constructive, it was wide ranging. There was a give and take, a back and forth.

The two leaders set aside the notes, particularly in the closing section of the meeting, for them to each be able to reflect upon the fact that they've known each other for quite a long time now, that they have worked together closely, that they obviously haven't always seen eye to eye but they've always been straight with one another, and that they both remain committed to try to responsibly manage this relationship during this last critical transition period and, of course, over the course of the past more than 10 years that the two leaders have been dealing with

each other, both as vice president and now as president.

So, with that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

Q Can you talk about how the President addressed North Korea's support for Russia and the invasion of Ukraine when it came to this meeting?

Secondly, also, China has expressed opposition to turning the Kenyan-led mission in Haiti to a U.N. peacekeeping mission. Does the U.S. have more confidence now that they could have China's support for a U.N.-led peacekeeping mission?

MR. SULLIVAN: President Biden pointed out that the PRC's publicly stated position with respect to the war in Ukraine is there should be no escalation or no broadening of the conflict, and the introduction of DPRK troops runs fourscore against that.

And he also pointed out that the PRC does have influence and capacity and should use it to try to prevent a further escalation or further expansion of the conflict through the introduction of even more DPRK forces.

You know, one of the points the President really registered was: Countries around the world look to the United States when the U.S. has influence, whether it's in Asia or Europe. And similarly, countries look to the PRC as well. So, it's not a sufficient answer to simply say, "Well, that's up to these other countries. There's nothing we can really do about it."

So that is the nature of the back and forth on that. And President Biden really underscored his view that this is a deeply dangerous development, both in the European view, the introduction of a foreign army, and on the Korean Peninsula, with deepening cooperation between Russia and the DPRK likely to enhance the possibility of provocative behavior by the DPRK, provocative behavior that we have warned about, whether it comes in the form of direct provocations against the ROK, or whether it comes in the form of something like further missile tests or even a seventh nuclear test, which is something that we remain constantly vigilant about.

The President did touch upon Haiti in his remarks. The PRC did not indicate a change of position on that topic in today's meeting. We remain convinced that for stability in Haiti, which matters to a lot of innocent people, that the U.N. needs to step up with a peacekeeping mission, the transition of this multinational security support force into a peacekeeping mission. We're going to keep working until we secure consensus of the Security Council (inaudible).

Q There was a reference that Chinese leader Xi Jinping made (inaudible) small yard, high fences, alluding to the export controls. Can you talk a little bit more about his concerns about export controls and the degree to which that came up?

MR. SULLIVAN: President Xi himself in his opening remarks, and the PRC at all levels, has not been shy, both publicly and privately, about raising their objections for U.S. export controls, particularly when it comes to advanced semiconductors and advanced semiconductor manufacturing equipment. Equally, we have not been shy about saying that for very high semiconductors and semiconductor manufacturing equipment with national security applications, we are going to restrict that so that it is not used against us or our allies. And we've made no bones about that, and President Biden made no bones about it again today.

We have equally said that this is not a broad-based decoupling of our economic or technology trade with China. It is high-end, high-level capabilities, a very small fraction of the overall trade that we have with China, and it is squarely focused on the national security concerns we have about these particular forms of both semiconductors and manufacturing equipment.

So, there was nothing surprising about President Xi raising his concerns about that. Equally, there was nothing surprising about President Biden reinforcing the rationale for why we have pursued a small yard, high fence policy, a policy we believe that has protected America's national security and enhanced our innovation edge, and we will continue to support that until the end of this term, and we will continue to advocate to the next team that they carry forward with this policy.

Q Can you talk a little bit more about the AI nuclear agreement and how imminent of a threat does this impose? And, kind of, can you put a little more meat on the bone on what that agreement is going to look like?

MR. SULLIVAN: The way that I would put this is you need to start somewhere, basic principles, and build from there when it comes to trying to develop a common basis for reducing nuclear risk. And a good place to start is

with the straightforward proposition that there should be human control over the decision to use nuclear weapons.

But the fact that the U.S. and the PRC have done this — and, you know, it will be stated as an agreement in our readout today — indicates that we are now building a foundation for being able to work on nuclear risk reduction together, the U.S. and the PRC, and work on AI safety and risk together, which is something that President Biden and President Xi agreed to do out of the Woodside Summit last year.

I'm not saying someone was imminently going to hand over the control of nuclear weapons to artificial intelligence, so I'm not — I think your question was about whether there's an imminent risk. I don't believe there is an imminent risk of that. But there is a long-term strategic risk of two significant nuclear powers and two countries with significant AI capability not being able to reach a meeting of the minds on basically anything in those spaces, and that is a risk we are trying to address. Today is a step in that direction.

Q Jake, so just hours before their meeting, President Xi presented himself as a defender of multilateralism and (inaudible). Obviously, China is a member RCEP. The U.S. (inaudible) about TPP — we're not joining TPP, and (inaudible) leaders are concerned about a future U.S. administration that's more protectionist and isolationist, particularly the fact that President-elect Trump has threatened more power, not just from China but also the rest of the world. Can you share your response?

MR. SULLIVAN: Look, I'm not going to comment on a future administration's policies that have neither been formulated nor articulated. So, I'm not going to speculate about that.

What I will say is that we have laid out in clear terms our concerns about non-market economic practices that the PRC has undertaken that don't just harm American workers, but actually undermine an open Internet and fair and level playing field in the international economic order. And it's not just the United States that has raised those concerns. Countries on multiple continents have begun to take countermeasures against what they perceive to be PRC overcapacity in critical sectors.

So, we believe that we have been able to build the case effectively over time that some of the approaches that China has taken in this area are harmful to the cause of a level playing field, not helpful to the cause of a level playing field. And we've tried to protect ourselves through targeted tariffs, and we've worked with other countries who have taken similar measures, similar steps, and not just traditional allies of the United States, but multiple countries around the world.

So, I think the world will be able to judge for itself both the PRC's approach to trade and the U.S.'s approach to trade over time. What I can say is that we have been clear about both the steps we have taken and also clear about our concerns about PRC overcapacity and what it could do to distort the global economy in ways that are unhealthy. And that was part of the conversation that the two leaders had today.

Q Jake, obviously both of the leaders (inaudible) public statements made reference to this moment of transition for the United States. I'm wondering if you can characterize how much you have said privately to leaders about this. Is there a moment, for instance, for the President to warn the Chinese about not seeking to take advantage of this moment of transition?

And I'm also wondering when President Biden met with President-elect Trump, was there an opportunity for him to convey a message (inaudible) to President Xi privately? Did President Xi ask President Biden to convey a message to President Trump?

MR. SULLIVAN: To your last question, the answer is no. President Biden was not a conduit for messages going in either direction. President Biden noted the obvious facts that there will be a new administration on January 20th, and he did reinforce the point that these next two months are a time of transition in the United States and a time where stability in the U.S.-China relationship is essential. And he reinforced that with respect to the geopolitical backdrop — cross-Strait relations, South China Sea, et cetera — and with respect to the economic backdrop. So that was a feature of the conversation in terms of what President Biden laid out.

I'm not going to characterize what President Xi had to say. I'll leave that to the Chinese side to do. But what I would say from President Biden's perspective: He wasn't projecting ahead to what was going to happen after January 20th. He was really focused on the fact that there is a transition unfolding, that President Biden is determined for that transition to be smooth and for him to pass the relationship off, and he would like to pass it off on stable terms to the new administration, and reinforce the point that the two leaders have an obligation to direct their (inaudible) to make that happen.

Q Jake, I'm wondering if you can — if there was any discussion about the wrongfully detained Americans in China. I know (inaudible) progress on that front.

MR. SULLIVAN: So, we've made important progress on that with the release of David Lin. They discussed the issue today. I will not go further than that.

I don't have any announcements to make, but they had an important discussion on the subject today, and we'll continue working every day until our very last to try to secure the release of the unjustly detained Americans being held in China.

Q On the PRC's support for Russia's war machine, one of your colleagues told us in advance of this trip that it's probably not going to stop and will be a task also for the new administration. Does that mean (inaudible) sanctions that you were looking at are off the table now for the next two months?

MR. SULLIVAN: I do not have any announcements with respect to further sanctions today. No announcements of new sanctions and no categorical statements of taking things off the table.

Q Kind of back to the AI nuclear (inaudible) in September or August, October, China refused to sign on to the deal that came out of Seoul that said no AI use in nuclear launches. So if that (inaudible) right, has Beijing's stance changed, and how did it get there?

And you used the specific phrase, "further work on nuclear risk reduction." Is that a reference to arms control (inaudible)?

MR. SULLIVAN: Arms control speaks to how many weapons do you have and where they deploy. Nuclear risk reduction is the whole family of practices around trying to avoid mistake and miscalculation. And, by the way, I'm not projecting that there will be further steps. What I'm suggesting is that responsible nuclear powers have an obligation to work towards further steps. Whether the PRC chooses to do that or not will be up to them. But this is an important step both on AI safety and on nuclear risk reduction.

And I can't speak to their decision-making. You'd have to go to them on it. What I will say is we think we've generated something meaningful today. It is not the end of the line, but it's the start of something that we hope can be carried forward.

Q So, you obviously negotiated this ahead of time. Has their position moved, and has the negotiation (inaudible)?

MR. SULLIVAN: I guess the way that I would put it is: We did not have this agreement at Woodside. We had this agreement today. And I'll leave it to you to fill in the gaps.

Q So, the President just met with Prime Minister Ishiba yesterday. At the same time, Prime Minister Ishiba was trying to meet next President Trump after G20, but it's not going to happen because Trump said no. Do you feel like Prime Minister Ishiba —

MR. SULLIVAN: Wait, I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand. You say he's —

Q Prime Minister Ishiba was trying to meet President Trump — next President Trump after G20.

MR. SULLIVAN: Oh, after. I thought you said at the G20. After the G20.

Q But Trump said no. Do you feel like Prime Minister Ishiba was (inaudible) something behind the back? Because President Biden is the president. What do you feel came of that?

MR. SULLIVAN: I do not feel that the Prime Minister seeking to engage with the President-elect is doing anything behind the back of President Biden. I don't. I think we have seen multiple leaders make telephone calls to the President-elect, just like in 2020 multiple leaders called President-elect Biden when he was elected. That's pretty typical diplomatic practice.

So, as far as I'm concerned, there's nothing untoward about that. And President Biden and the Prime Minister had a very good discussion. Yesterday was their first in-person meeting, and we feel very good about the state of the relationship, state of the alliance, and the state of the personal dynamic between the two leaders.

Q Jake, you mentioned that at the end of meeting that they put notes aside and had some exchange. Can you describe a little bit more about that exchange? Was that a farewell message between the two of them? Or what

did they talk about there?

MR. SULLIVAN: I won't share too much because, you know, it was between the two of them. And it was a reflection on having spent a lot of time together over the course of a decade, in pretty high-pressure situations managing a relationship of very high consequence.

I would just say one point the President made was to reinforce something he said publicly quite a bit, which is that what has made the relationship between the two of them function effectively is that they're able to be very straight with one another, even when they disagree. And that level of candor, directness, even bluntness at times, has been critical in helping see us through some choppy waters at times, and has been critical in helping us build the foundation to effectively and responsibly manage the competition.

So it was in the nature of that kind of reflection that President Biden offered. And I make it a habit not to share what President Xi says in response to that, but they had a bit of a back and forth along those lines, you know, that was quite descriptive, I guess.

Q Jake, do you guys have any assurances on — you know, obviously, you have two months left. I mean, even the agreement on AI, like, do you have any assurances or confidence that Trump is going to implement that or any other things that were discussed today?

MR. SULLIVAN: No, obviously not. I mean, we don't — the incoming administration is not in the business of providing us assurances about anything, and they'll make their own decisions as they go forward. But this is a feature of every transition throughout all of time, which is: It's our job to do all that we can to set the new administration up as effectively as possible, and then they will decide how they'll take things forward.

I think there's a lot that we're doing, both with respect to the U.S.-China relationship, but also with respect to our alliances, with respect to other partners here at APEC and the G20 that will be carried forward in the natural course of things. Everything doesn't get thrown out. And so, can't make predictions or speculate. Certainly have gotten no assurances of any kind, but we'll keep doing our work until January 20th.

Q Thanks, Jake. Why did President Biden go to President Xi's hotel for this meeting? (Inaudible.)

MR. SULLIVAN: Because in the quite scientific execution of U.S.-China presidential meetings, we do this thing called "my turn, your turn." (Laughter.) And the last meeting the two of them had was at Woodside, in America, where Xi came not just to President Biden's venue, but to his country. So it was his turn; therefore, we go to his hotel. And the time before was Bali; the President went, et cetera. So it's highly sophisticated statecraft — (laughter) — that I know is hard, really, to get your head around, but it's, basically, we go back and forth in terms of who hosts.

Q President Biden (inaudible) hotel (inaudible)?

MR. SULLIVAN: President Xi was the host of the meeting. So, they chose the hotel. It was his —

Q In Bali?

MR. SULLIVAN: In Bali. He was the host, yeah. And then President Biden was the host at Woodside, and now President Xi was the host.

Q On that note, do you think President Trump should go to the 2026 APEC Summit in Beijing?

MR. SULLIVAN: I have no advice for the president-elect with respect to travel taking place nearly two years from now.

Q Jake, from what we saw in the opening remarks, what was notable (inaudible) was a little bit of the tone from President Xi to make a wise choice — "make the wise choice." It was one of those messages that had been (inaudible).

I think a lot of us are making the analysis that he's warning that we're headed towards another valley in the U.S.-China relationship. Is that a fair analysis to make? And how do we avoid a valley when we're talking about 60 percent tariffs?

MR. SULLIVAN: Look, I would have to go back and look at PRC public comments, including the President's public comments, with formulas like that. But he — the Chinese side makes those forms of public warnings to American officials regardless of political stripe and regardless of administration. Now, it may take on a different

meaning or valence because of the moment we're in. And I'm not obviously blind or deaf to that. But I'm answering the question the way I am because I can't, obviously, put myself in the head of President Xi, what he was intending, the extent to which it was meant in the spirit that you just described.

I would just say that, broadly speaking, the message of "choose wisely, not wrongly" is a pretty standard, fair PRC statement that they've made repeatedly over the course of these past four years, the four years before that, and so on. And that's especially been true where the relationship has taken on a more competitive dynamic.

Look, I'm not going to speculate about 60 percent tariffs, because, as I said before, the administration has neither formulated nor articulated its policy. So I'd be getting way ahead of you, me, and anyone else by speaking to that.

Q Could you characterize the overall atmosphere of the meeting? Because (inaudible), and you guys always described it (inaudible) but this is the last one. So could you give us a little more —

MR. SULLIVAN: I think it was similar to the last two, because this — you know, in the end, they had the chance for a more personal reflection, but they conducted a lot of business in areas both where we are making some progress and in areas where there are profound differences between the U.S. and the PRC. And the two sides did not shy away from the more direct and difficult conversations where the two sides don't agree.

So I don't think the atmosphere was markedly different from the atmosphere at either Woodside or Bali.

Yeah, last question.

Q I'm just wondering if President Biden and President Xi have (inaudible) relationship after the past (inaudible), and how was it effective in the Biden diplomacy relationship with China? And do you have any concerns that his personal relationship (inaudible)?

MR. SULLIVAN: Those of you have interviewed me before and have asked me for anecdotes always find I come up wanting. (Laughter.) So, I'm terrible at examples and illustrations and stories.

What I will say is that leader-level engagement and direction is vital to the responsible management of the competition between the U.S. and China. The tone gets set from the top. The teams get their direction from the top. And the execution of the day-to-day management of the relationship is derived from understandings reached between the leaders.

And the fact that President Biden and President Xi have been able to establish a relationship of candor and directness on issues where they find a common way forward and on issues where they share deep disagreements, I think has been critical to us coming through a number of very difficult points in time in the relationship and, you know, achieving a measure of sustained, responsible management.

Now, that doesn't mean this is going to — this has been easy or everything is great. We have difficulties. We have challenges. It is a highly competitive relationship. It is a complex relationship. But I think the personal dynamic has helped us manage it very effectively. And I certainly feel that acutely as someone who's trying to carry out President Biden's direction working with my counterpart and with others on the Chinese side.

So, now we got to keep going for the next two months, and then we'll see what happens after that.

Thank you, guys.

Q (Inaudible) the two leaders? (Inaudible.)

MR. SULLIVAN: I think it was (inaudible). (Laughter.) No. I don't. I don't. They had a moment together at the end, of the two shaking hands on the way out. I (inaudible).

Q Jake, do you have any other detail on the most recent Chinese hack and how that came up?

MR. SULLIVAN: And more detail on it?

Q Yeah. Like what the conversation was.

MR. SULLIVAN: So, the issue of the hack of American telecommunications providers did come up. I'm not going to speak publicly about what was said privately. And the President made very clear where the U.S. stands on it.

And as we develop further information, we will absolutely be sharing it with you guys, as we just did most recently

with the CISA-FBI statement, and you can expect more of those in the weeks ahead.

Thanks, everybody.