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Biden-Xi summit: An impotent gesture before the danger of war

US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping held their first formal summit, conducted as a three-and-half-hour virtual meeting, on Monday evening. The event, staged as Washington has brought the threat of war between the two countries to historically unprecedented levels, resolved nothing.

The discussion never moved beyond stiff, translated formalities, as Biden, in the Roosevelt Room of the White House, and Xi, from the East Hall in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, spoke at each other. The tensions between the two powers were so sharp, and Washington in particular so intransigent, that the summit ended without any major announcements or even a joint statement, the clearest indication of the historic failure of a summit.

The summit was an impotent, ritualized gesture, mouthing phrases of restraint and conducting diplomatic maneuvers as the two powers stumble headlong towards war. The ruling classes in the United States and China are being driven towards conflict by the inherent contradictions of capitalism. Capitalist economy is an integrated global whole, but the capitalist class exercises its rule through the nation-state. The drive to war expresses the struggle by rival capitalist nations to redivide the global economy by military means.



US President Joe Biden meets virtually with Chinese President Xi Jinping from the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, November 15, 2021. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

For over a decade, Washington has systematically tightened the screws on Beijing, seeking by military threats and economic sanctions to contain China's rise and subordinate it to the interests of US capitalism. Both the "pivot to Asia" of the Obama administration and the trade war measures of the Trump administration pursued this common end.

Over the past year, the Biden administration has brought these simmering tensions to the brink of open conflict. Washington has deliberately targeted the most sensitive aspect of Chinese foreign relations: Beijing's claim to Taiwan. Biden publicly declared that the United States was committed to the defense of Taiwan against mainland China, and Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen confirmed that Washington had deployed troops to the island to stage training drills with Taiwanese forces. These moves have effectively undermined what had been a core principle of geopolitical stability over the past half-century—the One China policy.

Taiwan is crucial to the economic and geostrategic interests of the rising bourgeoisie in China, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime that represents its interests has made clear that it is a red line. Xi told Biden that the moves by "the Taiwan authorities to look for US support for their independence agenda as well as the intention of some Americans to use Taiwan to contain China" were "extremely dangerous and are just like playing with fire." "Whoever plays with fire," he warned ominously, "will get burnt."

The capitalist class in China has its own global economic interests. These interests impinge and intrude upon the established interests of the major imperialist powers, particularly those of the United States. The CCP seeks, by means of diplomacy, investment and military deployment, to expand and strengthen the bourgeois class in China.

The soaring death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic, skyrocketing inflation and the explosive emergence of open class struggle in the United States have only added fuel to the geopolitical recklessness of Washington. Looking to find a means of deflecting and suppressing the class struggle, American capitalism targets China.

In the November-December issue of *Foreign Affairs*, John Mearsheimer, a prominent scholar of international relations, highlights how far advanced is the danger of a global war. He writes: “Cold War II is already here, and when one compares the two cold wars, it becomes apparent that the US-China rivalry is more likely to lead to a shooting war than the US-Soviet rivalry was.” He adds, “Not only is a great-power war more likely in the new cold war, but so is nuclear use.”

There is an awareness in both Washington and Beijing of the deadly stakes involved, but neither party can back down. They are driven toward confrontation. The ritualized formalities of Monday’s summit express the fundamental incapacity of the capitalist classes to peacefully redivide the world. The shifting economic reaches of Washington and Beijing push them toward war.

US imperialism is the aggressor in this growing conflict. Biden lectured Xi, blaming China for climate change and criticizing the “human rights” record of Beijing in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet.

Biden’s hypocrisy is staggering. Just this weekend, the *New York Times* revealed that US forces had carried out a major war crime in Syria, incinerating at least 80 unarmed women and children and burying the bodies beneath rubble to hide the crime. Washington is covered in blood. When Biden expresses concern for human rights, it is only to provide a pretext for even greater crimes.

Speaking of the pandemic, Xi appealed to Biden that the “response to any major disease must be based on science,” and stated that “politicizing diseases does no good, but only harm.” Over 780,000 people have died of COVID-19 in the United States, a nation of 330 million people; less than 5,000 have died in China, a nation of 1.4 billion. Where Beijing has pursued a scientific policy of elimination, the Trump and Biden administrations, in a calculated, criminal fashion, have prioritized profit over human lives and the result is mass murder.

Xi’s opposition to “politicizing diseases” was a veiled reference to the Wuhan lab lie, the baseless claim circulated by the American media, particularly the *Washington Post*, and treated as credible by the Biden White House, that COVID-19 originated in a lab in Wuhan and that China is responsible for the pandemic.

The abject failure of the Biden-Xi summit, unable to produce even a summary document, expresses above all the belligerence of Washington. CNN quoted a senior Biden administration official, who, summarizing the event, said: “I don’t think the purpose was particularly to ease tensions, or that that was the result. We want to make sure the competition is responsibly managed, that we have ways to do that. The President’s been quite clear he’s going to engage in that stiff competition.”

Where Xi spoke to Biden of “cooperation,” Biden responded with “competition,” and called for the establishment of “common sense guardrails” to “ensure that the competition between our countries does not veer into conflict, whether intended or unintended.”

The CCP bureaucracy, of which Xi Jinping is the head, has no answer to the danger of war. The Stalinist CCP usurped the leadership of the Chinese revolution and, when its nationalist perspective reached a dead end, oversaw the restoration of capitalism. It suppressed the Chinese working class and profited off of the sale of the workers’ labor power to international finance capital. It represents the interests of the Chinese bourgeoisie, which is seeking a role on the world stage.

Sections of the regime tied to the military publish saber-rattling editorials in the *Global Times*, threatening armed conflict over Taiwan. The government deliberately cultivates a sense of nationalism, preparing the ideological grounds for mass mobilization and war. Other sections fearful of war hope vainly for a new rapprochement with Washington.

US imperialism has no grand plan, no winning strategy in its drive to great power conflict with China. It has no solution to the pandemic, or to inflation. It has no answer to the growth of class conflict, but repression and war.

Biden spoke of establishing “guardrails” to avoid the danger of “veering” into conflict, but war will not be a departure from the current trajectory of the US and China. It is the end to which they are being driven by the objective logic of capitalism.

The working class can and must stop this reckless drive toward global war. Chinese and American workers have the same interests, which can be defended only through a shared international socialist strategy to put an end to capitalism and the threat of imperialist war. This is the perspective of Trotskyism, which is organized in the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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