

# **‘They’re Going To Eat Our Lunch,’ Biden Warns After Call With China’s Xi**



President Biden announced a task force on China issues during his first trip as president to the Pentagon on Wednesday. - Alex Brandon/Pool/Getty Images

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President Biden said he spoke for “two straight hours” with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Wednesday night — an opening conversation that provided insight about how the new administration plans to tackle the vast economic and security challenges posed by Beijing.

Biden raised some of the thorniest bilateral issues but also talked about potential areas for cooperation, the White House said. The call comes after Biden and top administration officials did rounds of calls with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, signaling that the United States will depart from the Trump administration's go-it-alone approach to China.

And immediately following the call, Biden used it to make a pitch to Congress for his \$700 billion plan to invest in infrastructure, manufacturing, electric vehicles, artificial intelligence, and other sectors — a demonstration of how his administration wants to connect foreign policy to domestic policy.

“We don't get moving, they're going to eat our lunch,” Biden said, referring to Chinese investments in rail and automotive technology. Biden has said he will propose his new investment package after Congress deals with his current request for \$1.9 trillion in COVID-19 aid.

Biden also indicated in the call with Xi that he plans to return to a traditional U.S. emphasis on human rights and democracy issues in his foreign policy, broaching several issues sensitive for China.

“President Biden underscored his fundamental concerns about Beijing's coercive and unfair economic practices, the crackdown in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and increasingly assertive actions in the region, including toward Taiwan,” the White House said in a statement after the call.

Biden also told Xi that he was willing to work with China on areas of mutual interest, like addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and nuclear proliferation.

### **Roller coaster relationship**

Biden and Xi are not strangers, having met and spoken many times during the Obama administration. Biden often recounts how he has “traveled 17,000 miles” with Xi. The call took place on Thursday in China, falling on Lunar New Year's Eve, one of the most important holidays of the year in the country. It is a time when families traditionally gather to celebrate the end of winter and the start of spring on the lunisolar calendar.

The U.S.-China relationship has been on a roller coaster in recent years. President

Donald Trump, who tried to pressure China into changing its trade policy using tariffs, at first courted Xi and claimed to have “great chemistry” with him. But that friendship soured after the coronavirus pandemic, which Trump blamed on China. The two leaders had their final conversation in March 2020.

In a readout of the call in official Chinese media, Xi was quoted as saying cooperation between the two countries was the “only correct choice,” urging the resumption of dialogue, which had been mostly severed during Trump’s final months in office.

“China-U.S. confrontation will definitely be a disaster for both countries and the world,” Xi was quoted as saying. “The two countries should work together, meet each other halfway... focus on cooperation, manage differences, and promote the healthy and stable development of China-U.S. relations.”

Xi told Biden that the two sides would have different views sometimes, but that “the key is to respect each other, treat each other as equals, and properly manage and handle them in a constructive manner.” He said that Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang were internal matters and that the U.S. should “respect China’s core interests and act cautiously.”

### **Some merit in Trump approach**

The Biden administration doesn’t plan to reverse all of Trump’s China policy, senior U.S. officials told reporters ahead of the leaders’ call.

“We looked at what the Trump administration did over four years and found merit in the basic proposition of an intense strategic competition with China and the need for us to engage in that vigorously, systematically across every instrument of our government and every instrument of our power,” one official said.

But Biden’s team took issue with “the way in which the Trump administration went about that competition” particularly by eschewing traditional alliances and the traditional U.S. foreign policy focus on human rights and democracy.

Biden plans to build on the Trump administration’s partnership with Japan, India, and Australia under what’s known as the “Quad” — the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, officials said.

Biden plans to keep Trump’s tariffs in place pending further review, officials said.

“We believe that we have to very carefully, in consultation with allies and partners, in consultation with the Congress, work through the sources of leverage we have on the economic front and move out with a sharper, more effective trade strategy towards China off the baseline of the existing tariffs,” one of the officials said.

### **Cooperation or concessions?**

Biden’s emphasis on the connection between foreign policy and domestic policy — and on working with Beijing on issues like climate change — has made some hawks nervous that his administration could pursue a softer policy to China.

“We tried that approach for many years, and I think most recently we tried that approach under the late Bush years and under the Obama years,” said Dan Blumenthal, who was a senior defense official for the George W. Bush administration and afterward wrote *The China Nightmare: The Grand Ambitions of a Decaying State*.

“China doesn’t really want to cooperate with us. China doesn’t want to doesn’t want to help out,” Blumenthal said, explaining China tends to get the United States to make concessions in exchange for movement on other goals.

Evan Medeiros, a senior Asia official in the Obama administration’s National Security Council, said the challenge for Biden will be to strike a balance between confrontation, competition, and cooperation.

“It’s not easy. Oftentimes, it’s difficult to do simultaneously. In other words, you can’t confront them over Taiwan or the South China Sea and then turn around the next day and ask them to do more on climate change,” said Medeiros, now at Georgetown University.

He said China often needs “a little prompting” on issues.

“It’s also the Chinese sitting back and waiting to see how much the rest of the world will pay them to do things that they should already do anyway. The Chinese are great negotiators in that regard,” he said.

### **Pentagon visit**

Biden also singled out China during his first trip as president to the Pentagon,

which came just hours ahead of his call with Xi. In his remarks at the Defense Department, Biden focused on what he called “the China challenge” during brief remarks.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will take recommendations from a new task force of civilian and military experts at the Pentagon on “our strategy and operational concepts, technology, and force posture, and so much more,” Biden said. The group will do its work over the next few months, and Biden emphasized the resulting strategy will need bipartisan cooperation from the U.S. Congress as well as from allies and regional partners.

U.S. officials told reporters ahead of the Biden-Xi call that allies and partners in the region had raised fresh concerns about China’s aggressive military approach.

“We’re seeing a pattern of behavior that is creating concern among friends,” one official said, citing aggression toward Taiwan and increased military activity in the South China Sea.

Partners also expressed concern about the commitment of the United States to the region after the “America First” policy of Trump — “whether the United States will have their back,” the official said.

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*Amy Cheng contributed to this report from Beijing.*

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