

Xi Jinping talks to Antony Blinken in a formal setting – which contrasts with his meetings with billionaire and philanthropist Bill Gates, center, just last weekend and with Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state during the previous US administration, way back in 2018.



VOW TO STABILIZE TIES AS XI HAILS 'PROGRESS'



Xi Jinping greets Antony Blinken at the Great Hall of the People. AFP

President Xi Jinping said China had "made progress" with the United States as he hosted Secretary of State Antony Blinken for talks in Beijing.

Blinken's visit is the highest-level trip by a US official to China in nearly five years, with ties between the world's two largest economies severely strained over Taiwan, espionage accusations and other concerns.

Xi, China's most powerful leader in decades, met Blinken at the capital's Great Hall of the People.

It had been hoped their roughly 30-minute meeting could help facilitate a summit between Xi and US President Joe Biden this year. The two leaders last met on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia in November, pledging more communication.

"The Chinese side has made our position clear and the two sides have agreed to follow through the common understandings President Biden and I had reached in Bali," Xi told Blinken.

"The two sides have also made progress on some specific issues," he added, without elaborating.

Xi told Blinken that China "hopes to see a sound and steady China-US relationship" and believes that the two countries "can overcome various difficulties."

He also urged the US not to "hurt China's legitimate rights and interests," a signal of potential flashpoints such as Taiwan.

The lack of regular and open communication channels between the world's top two economies has sent jitters globally.

But Xi's comments, and the diplomatic choreography of the visit, appeared to signal a will to make progress, analysts said. "China's messaging has been pretty positive," said Wu Xinbo, a professor and director at the Center for American Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai. "China showed that it still hopes to work with the US to stabilize and improve relations. I think that while China is not optimistic about Sino-US relations, it has not given up hope either."

Blinken later told reporters he agreed with China's leadership on the need to "stabilize" relations but that he was "clear-eyed" on vast disagreements.

Rejecting a major line of criticism from China, Blinken insisted that Biden was not seeking "economic containment" of Beijing through its sweeping

ban on exports of high-end semiconductors. "We want to see growth in every part of the world," Blinken said. "But it's not in our interest to provide technology to China that could be used against us. [Especially] at a time when it's engaged in a buildup of its nuclear weapons program in a very opaque way, when it's producing hypersonic missiles or when it's using technology for repressive purposes."

The meeting with Xi came after Blinken held more than 10 hours of talks over two days with other top officials, including China's foreign policy supremo Wang Yi, who issued a warning on issues relating to Taiwan, saying "China will not compromise or concede," according to state broadcaster CCTV.

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