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Xi and Biden at G20: Key Outcomes and Assessment

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US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping met at G20 for the first time after almost half a decade, from 15–16 November 2022 in Bali, Indonesia. During the meeting, the two leaders exchanged views and discussed several global security issues threatening peace and stability in the region and the world.

The article examines the key outcomes of this high-profile meeting, particularly on some pressing issues, such as the Taiwan Strait, North Korea’s nuclear programme, and the Russia-Ukraine War.

Taiwan Strait

Taiwan was integral to the discussion between the world’s two most powerful leaders as it confronts China’s national security and the US’s strategic interest. The US raised its concern about Taiwan’s security, as China has increasingly threatened to reclaim Taiwan by force. China considers Taiwan a renegade province and thus addresses it as an internal affair.

It was a strategic ambiguity when the US declared its respect for the ‘One China Policy’ while constantly supporting Taiwan’s independence. Indeed, Taiwan remains an important player serving the US’s national interests. First, Taiwan is located at a strategic location where the US could carry out the pre-emptive containment of China. As reported by Reuters, the US declared its robust support and military assistance in shielding Taiwan if China’s invasion occurs. Taiwan is one of the US’s main strategic interests in its led-regional order, so the US could lead military deterrence and mobilise support from Japan, South Korea, and other like-minded states to back up Taiwan against China.

Second, Taiwan’s projected weapon manufacturing station is critical to the US. According to American officials, as reported by CNBC, the US is considering equipping Taiwan with a huge storeroom of arms after China’s military drills around the island. Weapons manufacturing in Taiwan could support the US in arms distribution in the region, including to some Southeast Asian states which have maritime disputes with China.

Lastly, Taiwan’s admission to the Chip 4.0 alliance framework is another advantage for the US’s engagement. The Council on Foreign Relations mentioned that the technological modernisation and diversification of Chip 4.0 was part of ensuring security commitment for Taiwan and its allies. Furthermore, it is a commitment to uplifting the US-South Korea alliance while including Japan and Taiwan in the framework.

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North Korea's Nuclear Programme

With North Korea's frequent unstoppable missile testing so far in 2022, Xi and Biden, during the meeting, mentioned North Korea's nuclear programme, a prolonged regional security threat. Stating that China's decision to pressure this nuclear-aspiring state has been unenforceable, Biden alerted Xi that, in case of an ineffective response to North Korea's armaments desire, the US would act without prior announcement. The US's consideration of a pre-emptive military strike against North Korea put regional security at risk. Biden made such a statement to his Chinese counterpart after China's continual abstention from condemning North Korea's missile launches. North Korea's nuclear programme poses security threats not only to the US and China but also to the world.

The US's consideration of military options could indicate the imminent use of atomic weapons to neutralise North Korea's nuclear threat. Meanwhile, it warned China not to back North Korea in developing its nuclear programme. Nevertheless, North Korea will unlikely give up its nuclear programme. Therefore, any effective resolution to prevent the nuclear war from happening will require cooperation between these two great powers.

Russia-Ukraine war

The war between Russia and Ukraine was also on the agenda in the discussion between Biden and Xi. The two leaders assured each other to prevent the war from escalating to nuclear war. According to the White House's statement, both states declared, "Nuclear war should never be fought."

Their assurances indicated their intention to maintain their reputation as responsible great powers which prohibit the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). They also expressed their intention to open line communication for a further physical meeting in Beijing. Particularly, President Xi affirmed the prohibition of major power states from clashing, which would worsen the Russia-Ukraine war, and he encouraged peaceful settlement of the conflict.

In conclusion, the evolving events have caused various geopolitical risks while both powers maintain strong individual positions towards the three sensitive issues: the Taiwan Strait, North Korea's nuclear programme, and the war in Ukraine. On the issue of the Taiwan Strait, China remains firm in its 'One China Policy' and prevents external actors from interfering in its domestic affairs. Meanwhile, denuclearisation in North Korea will require the superpowers to take responsibility for preventing nuclear proliferation. The Russia-Ukraine war might not find any solution soon. However, nuclear war is prohibited at all costs. The analysis of these three issues shows that US-China ties are developing unpredictably towards the next level of competition. Any military incident between the two great powers could have serious ramifications for Southeast Asia regarding instability, arms race, nuclear threats, and humanitarian problems.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.