

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

The President's News Conference in Woodside, California

November 15, 2023

The President. I didn't know there were this many people in town. Please have a seat. As you know, I just concluded several hours of meetings with President Xi, and I believe they were some of the most constructive and productive discussions we've had.

I've been meeting with President Xi since both of us were Vice President over 10 years ago. Our meetings have always been candid and straightforward. We haven't always agreed, but they've been straightforward. And today, built on the groundwork we laid over the past several months of high-level diplomacy between our teams, we've made some important progress, I believe.

First, I'm pleased to announce that after many years of being on hold, we are restarting cooperation between the United States and the P.R.C. on counternarcotics.

In 2019, you may remember, China took action to greatly reduce the amount of fentanyl shipped directly from China to the United States. But in the years since that time, the challenge has evolved from finished fentanyl to fentanyl chemical ingredients and pill presses, which are being shipped without controls. And by the way, some of these pills are being inserted in other drugs, like cocaine, and a lot of people are dying.

More people in the United States between the ages of 18 to 49 die from fentanyl than from guns, car accidents, or any other cause. Period.

So today, with this new understanding, we're taking action to significantly reduce the flow of precursor chemicals and pill presses from China to the Western Hemisphere. It's going to save lives, and I appreciate President Xi's commitment on this issue. President Xi and I tasked our teams to maintain a policy and law enforcement coordination going forward to make sure it works.

I also want to thank the bipartisan congressional delegation to China, led by Leader Schumer, in October for supporting efforts—this effort so strongly.

Secondly, and this is critically important, we're reassuming military-to-military contacts—direct contacts. As a lot of you press know who follow this, that's been cut off, and it's been worrisome. That's how accidents happen: misunderstandings. So we're back to direct, open, clear, direct communications on a direct basis.

Vital miscalculations on either side can—are—can cause real, real trouble with a country like China or any other major country. And so I think we made real progress there as well.

And thirdly, we're going to get our experts together to discuss risk and safety issues associated with artificial intelligence. As many of you who travel with me around the world almost everywhere I go—every major leader wants to talk about the impact of artificial intelligence.

These are tangible steps in the right direction to determine what's useful and what's not useful, what's dangerous and what's acceptable.

Moreover, there are evidence of cases that I've made all along: The United States will continue to compete vigorously with the P.R.C. But we'll manage that competition responsibly so it doesn't veer into conflict or accidental conflict. And where it's possible, where our interests are—coincide, we're going to work together, like we did on fentanyl.

That's what the world expects of us—the rest of the world expects, not just in—people in China and the United States, but the rest of the world expects that of us. And that's what the United States is going to be doing.

Today President Xi and I also exchanged views on a range of regional and global issues, including Russia's refusal and brutal war—to stop the war—and brutal war of aggression against Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza.

And as I always do, I raised areas where the United States has concerns about the P.R.C.'s actions, including detained and exit-banned U.S. citizens, human rights, and corrective—coercive activities in the South China Sea. We discussed all three of those things. I gave them names of individuals that we think are being held, and hopefully, we can get them released as well. No agreement on that. No agreement on that.

I also stressed the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits.

It's clear that we object to Beijing's nonmarket economic practices and disadvantaged—that disadvantage American businesses and workers and that we'll continue to address them. And I named what I thought a number of those were.

I welcome the positive steps we've taken today, and it's important for the world to see that we're implementing the approach in the best traditions of American diplomacy. We're talking to our competitors. And the key—and just talking, just being blunt with one another so there's no misunderstanding is a key element to maintaining global stability and delivering for the American people.

And, in the months ahead, we're going to continue to preserve and pursue high-level diplomacy with the P.R.C. in both directions to keep the lines of communication open, including between President Xi and me. He and I agreed that either one of us could pick up the phone, call directly, and we'd be heard immediately.

And that's—now I'd like to be able to take some questions, if I may. And I'm told that Demetri [Demetri Sevastopulo] of the Financial Times has the first question.

Q. Thank you. And, as an Irishman, I apologize for bringing the rain.

The President. Well, holy God, I wouldn't have called on you if I had known that. [*Laughter*] No, I'm teasing. Go ahead. Fire away, Demetri.

China-U.S. Relations/Taiwan

Q. President Biden, given that America is playing a key role in two major global crises—Ukraine and in Gaza—does that alter your previous commitment to defend Taiwan from any Chinese military action? And did Xi Jinping outline the conditions under which China would attack Taiwan?

The President. Look, I reiterate what I've said since I've become President and what every previous President of late has said: that we maintain an agreement that there is a "one China" policy and that—and I'm not going to change that. That's not going to change.

And so that's about the extent to which we discussed it.

Next question, sorry, was Bloomberg.

President Xi Jinping of China/Efforts To Combat Synthetic Opioids

Q. Good evening, Mr. President.

It appears, among other issues, that your agreement with President Xi over fentanyl would require—will require a lot of trust and verification to ensure success in curbing those drug flows. I'm wondering: After today and considering all that you've been through in the past year, would you say, Mr. President, that you trust President Xi?

And secondly, if I could, on Taiwan. You've—you and your administration officials have warned President Xi and China about interference in the upcoming election. I'm wondering what would the consequences be if they do, in fact, interfere in the election. Thank you.

The President. Well, I made—had that discussion with him too, made it clear: I didn't expect any interference, any at all. And we had that discussion as he was leaving.

Look, do I trust? You know, I—"trust but verify," as that old saying goes. That's where I am.

And you know, we're in a competitive relationship, China and the United States. But my responsibility is to make it—make this rational and manageable so it doesn't result in conflict.

That's what I'm all about, and that's what this is about: to find a place where we can come together and where we find mutual interests that—but most importantly, from my perspective, that are in the interests of the American people. That's what this is about, and that's exactly what we'll do.

You know, we're in a situation where we agreed that fentanyl and its precursors will be curbed substantially and the pill presses. That's a big movement. They're doing—and by the way, you know, I won't—I guess I shouldn't identify where it occurred. But, John, I know two people near where I live. Their kids, literally, as I said—strange as—they woke up dead. Someone had inserted in—whether the young man did or not—inserted, in a drug he was taking, fentanyl.

Again, I don't—I hope you don't have any experience with knowing anyone, but this is the largest killer of people in that age category.

And you know, I guess the other thing I think is most important is that since I—I've spent more time with President Xi than any world leader has, just because we were Vice Presidents. His President was President Hu; I'm not making a joke. President Hu and—and President Obama thought we should get to know one another. It wasn't appropriate for the President of United States to be walking—dealing with the Vice President.

So we met—if I'm not mistaken, I think it was 68 hours of just face to face—just us and a simultaneous interpreter. So I think I know the man. I know his modus operandi. He's been—we have disagreements. He has a different view than I have on a lot of things. But he's been straight. I don't mean that he's good, bad, or indifferent. He's just been straight.

And so, you know, we—as I said, the thing that I find most assuring is, he raised and I fully agreed that, either one of us have any concern, Mr. Ambassador—any concern about anything between our nations or happening in our region, we should pick up the phone and call one another, and we'll take the call. That's an important progress.

I'm embarrassed—I think it's CBS, but I can't remember who with CBS. I'm sorry.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Weijia Jiang with CBS.

The President. Sorry. [*Laughter*] I apologize.

China-U.S. Relations/Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

Q. You continue to stress the need to ensure competition with China does not veer into conflict or confrontation. In the past 2 years, there have been more than 180 incidents of Chinese aggression against U.S. aircraft in the Indo-Pacific and, of course, the ramped up military activity

in the South China Sea. If that does not count as veering into confrontation, then what does? And did you issue any warnings to Xi against continuing that behavior?

The President. Well, first of all, none of it did end up in a conflict, number one.

Number two, you may recall: I did a few little things like get the Quad together, allow Australia to have access to new submarines, moving in the direction of working with the Philippines. So our actions speak louder than our words. He fully understands.

Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza, Palestinian Territories/Hamas/Israeli Military Operations

Q. And because of the news of the day, sir, I do have a question about the IDF raid on the Al-Shifa Hospital, as it tries to contain and take out the Hamas operative that is there. This week, you also said that we must protect hospitals. So, when you weigh the target against the number of civilians inside the hospital, is the operation underway justified?

The President. Well, look, we did discuss this, by the way. But we can't let it get out of control.

Here's the situation: You have a circumstance where the first war crime is being committed by Hamas by having their headquarters, their military hidden under a hospital. And that's a fact. That's what's happened.

Israel did not go in with a large number of troops, did not raid, did not rush everything down. They've gone in, and they've gone in with their soldiers carrying weapons or guns. They were told—told—let me be precise. We've discussed the need for them to be incredibly careful. You have a circumstance where you know there is a fair number of Hamas terrorists. Hamas has already said publicly that they plan on attacking Israel again like they did before, do everything from cutting babies' heads off to burning women and children alive.

And so the idea that they're going to just stop and not do anything is not realistic. This is not the carpet bombing. This is a different thing. They're going through these tunnels; they're going in the hospital.

And if you notice, I was mildly preoccupied today. I apologize, I didn't see everything. But what I did see, whether—I haven't had it confirmed yet—I have asked my team to answer the question. But what happened is, they're also bringing in incubators. They're bringing in other—other means to help the people in the hospital, and they've given the doctors and—I'm told—the doctors and nurses and personnel an opportunity to get out of harm's way.

So this is a different story than I believe was occurring before, an indiscriminate bombing.

What do you got? Washington Post. I think that's right.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Oh, there you are. Sorry. I couldn't see you in the light.

Gaza Conflict/Israeli Military Operations/International Diplomatic Efforts

Q. That's okay. Mr. President, Israel's war in Gaza has killed more than 11,000 Palestinians in just over a month and created——

The President. I'm sorry, you're breaking up. I didn't—would you——

Q. Israel's war in Gaza has killed more than 11,000 Palestinians in just over a month and created a humanitarian disaster. Israeli officials have said this war could take months or even years. Have you communicated to Prime Minister Netanyahu any sort of deadline or timeframe

for how long you are willing to support Israel in this operation? Are you comfortable with the operation going on indefinitely? And is there any deal underway to free hostages? Thank you.

The President. Yes, no—working backwards forward. Look, I have been deeply involved in moving on the hostage negotiation, and I don't want to get ahead of myself here because I don't know what's happened in the last 4 hours.

But they're—I have—we've gotten great cooperation from the Qataris. I've spoken with them as well a number of times. I think the pause and that Israeli—that the Israelis have agreed to is down to—I'm getting into too much detail. I know, Mr. Secretary. I'm going to stop.

The—but I am mildly hopeful. I'm mildly hopeful.

With regard to when is this going to stop, I think it's going to stop when the—when Hamas no longer maintains the capacity to murder and abuse and just do horrific things to the Israelis. And they are in—and they still think they—at least as of this morning, they still thought they could.

I guess the best way for me to say it is that I take a look. The IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces, acknowledges they have an obligation to use as much caution as they can in going after their targets. It's not like they're rushing in the hospital, knocking down doors, and you know, pulling people aside and shooting people indiscriminately.

But Hamas, as I said, said they plan on attacking the Israelis again. And this is a terrible dilemma. So what do you do?

I think that Israel is also taking risks themselves about their folks being killed in one-to-one—going through these hospital rooms, hospital halls. But one thing has been established is that Hamas does have headquarters, weapons, materiel below this hospital and, I suspect, others. But how long it's going to last, I don't know.

Look, I made it clear to the Israelis that—and to Bibi and to his war cabinet that I think the only ultimate answer here is a two-state solution that's real. We've got to get to the point where there is an ability to be able to even talk without worrying about whether or not we're just dealing with—they're dealing with Hamas—that's going to engage in the same activities they did over the past—on the 7th.

So it's—but I can't tell—I'm not a fortuneteller. I can't tell you how long it's going to last. But I can tell you I don't think it ultimately ends until there's a two-state solution. I made it clear to the Israelis I think it's a big mistake to—for them to think they're going to occupy Gaza and maintain Gaza. I don't think that works.

And so we're going to—I think you're going to see efforts to bring along—well, I shouldn't go into it anymore, because that's things I've been negotiating with Arab countries and others about what the next steps are.

But anyway, thank you all very much. Appreciate it very much.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre. Thank you. This ends the press conference.

[*At this point, several reporters began asking questions at once.*]

Q. Do you still think of President Xi as a dictator, Mr. President?

Hamas Attacks Against Israel/Hostages Held by Hamas in Gaza

Q. Sir, on the hostages, you said, "We're coming for you." What did you mean when you said, "We're coming for you"?

The President. When Hamas—well, Hamas said they plan on doing the same thing again—what they did—what they did on the 7th. They're going to go in—they want to slaughter Israelis. They want to do it again. And they've said it out loud. They're not kidding about it. They're not backing off.

And so I just asked the rhetorical question, "I wonder what we would do if that were the case?"

Q. On the hostages, though, you said, "We're coming for you." What did you mean to the American hostages when you said—

The President. Oh—

Q. —"Hang tight. We're coming for you."

The President. What I meant was, I'm doing everything in my power to get you out—coming to help you to get you out. I don't mean sending military in to get them. Is that what you thought I might mean?

Q. I defer to you.

The President. No, no, no it's—it—I was not talking about a military. I was talking about we—you're on our mind every single day. Five to six times a day, I'm working on how I can be helpful in getting the hostages released and have a period of time where there's a pause long enough to let that happen.

And there is somewhere between 50 and 100 hostages there, we think.

Q. And, sir, one is a 3-year-old American child.

The President. You're darn right it is. That's why I'm not going to stop till we get her.

Thank you. Thank you.

[Several reporters asked questions at once.]

The President. Who can holler the loudest?

Gaza Conflict/Al-Shifa Hospital

Q. Can you just detail for us what kind of evidence the U.S. has seen that Hamas has a command center under Al-Shifa Hospital?

The President. No, I can't tell you. I won't tell you.

Q. Do you feel absolutely confident based on what you know—

The President. Yes.

Q. —that that is the truth?

The President. Yes.

President Xi Jinping of China

Q. And, Mr. President, after today, would you still refer to President Xi as a "dictator"? This is a term that you used earlier this year.

The President. Well, look, he is. I mean, he's a dictator in the sense that he is a guy who runs a country that—it's a communist country that is based on a form of government totally different than ours.

Anyway, we made progress.

Q. Have you told Iran to stop, Mr. President? Have you told Iran to stop attacking U.S. forces and widening the war?

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 5:20 p.m. at the Filoli estate. In his remarks, the President referred to former President Hu Jintao of China; U.S. Ambassador to China R. Nicholas Burns; Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken; and Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu of Israel. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on November 16.

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