

*Terry Su*

## **Biden's real reason for wanting to meet Xi at the Apec summit**

- Joe Biden may well hope a meeting with Xi Jinping can boost his 2024 re-election campaign, given his poll numbers currently inspire little confidence
- China would be wise to take account of the fact the White House could have a new occupant this time next year

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3240879/bidens-real-reason-wanting-meet-xi-apec-summit>



It seems the much-touted meeting between US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping is set to go ahead at this year's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum summit in San Francisco, which takes place next week.

The US side has announced that the two sides have agreed “in principle” for the leaders to meet. In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin sounded less unequivocal, saying “the two sides have agreed to work together for the meeting between the two presidents in San Francisco”.

The world is now expecting the meeting to materialise. It is clear that Beijing is inclined to agree to Washington's request for their top leaders to catch up, even though the US does not appear to be letting up in the confrontational part of its "competition, collaboration and confrontation" policy towards China. Recall US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's statement that America's relationship with China will be "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be".

US actions of late include lengthening the sanctions list against Chinese companies, patrols in the Taiwan Strait and support for the Philippines' moves against China in disputed waters of the South China Sea. The latest move has seen a group of lawmakers in the US Congress proposing to sanction Hong Kong officials and legal figures.

This hardly seems to be an atmosphere conducive to a fruitful summit, even with the recent efforts towards collaboration, such as increased flights between the two countries, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen's reiteration that there cannot be decoupling with China and Vice-Premier He Lifeng's hastily announced visit to the US this week.

Biden is likely to be eager to meet Xi mostly out of consideration for his re-election campaign. The sight of the two shaking hands could portray him as a president capable of coping with a world full of complications and extraordinary risks.

It might be fine for Xi to attend the meeting regardless of its limited prospects for success. China could continue to play the game of reconciliation by being seen as a responsible stakeholder and avoiding an opportunity to take advantage of the US' current predicament in having to deal with challenging contingencies in Ukraine and Gaza – all while prioritising its rivalry with China.

Even so, Beijing might have to take into account the chances of Biden losing next year's election, in part because of unfolding developments in the Middle East. Events there are growing increasingly untenable for the US and its interests.

Israel, having ruthlessly carried out its military operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, has made itself a target for a global wave of anger and indignation, given the growing number of Palestinian deaths – which is now put at more than 10,000 by the Gaza Health Ministry. That compares to the 1,400 Israeli deaths in Hamas' attack on October 7 – and Gaza becoming "a graveyard for children", according to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres.

Calls by the US for prudence and restraint have gone unheeded in Tel Aviv. Blinken – who is almost a full-time Middle East affairs envoy these days – called for a humanitarian pause last week, but Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu squarely rejected the idea and insisted on Hamas surrendering Israeli hostages first.

The official US position is opposed to a ceasefire in Gaza on the grounds that Israel has the right to self-defence. This stance shows the rest of the world that the US will stand behind Israel no matter the cost – a decision that appears to be backfiring both at home and abroad.

Israel has tried to justify its actions by drawing comparisons to the US dropping atomic bombs on Japan during World War II and military operations in Iraq during the global "war

on terror”, all in an attempt to downplay the collateral damage in the form of widespread destruction and Palestinian casualties.

However, this public relations campaign has paled in comparison to the sight of protests around the world in support of the Palestinian people and their hopes for an end to the violence and the return of their land.

This global rejection of the US position bodes ill for Biden’s hopes of re-election. The events in Gaza are eroding some of his support among the Democratic voter base, and this is being felt even among his supporters in Washington’s corridors of power.

Pramila Jayapal, a Democratic representative from Washington state, is among the latest to speak out about the electorate’s mood. She said she felt the 2024 election was in “great trouble” for Biden amid polling that showed him trailing former president Donald Trump in several states. She also said of the war in Gaza: “These young people – Muslim-Americans, Arab-Americans, but also young people – see this conflict as a moral conflict and a moral crisis.”

There is no harm in hoping for better US-China relations coming from Biden and Xi’s meeting in San Francisco. However, we should not ignore the possibility of the US president having to move out of the White House a year from now.

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