

Jake Sullivan to make first China visit as US national security adviser

White House expects foreign minister Wang Yi to ask about November election



Jake Sullivan, pictured, has met Wang Yi several times over the past 16 months as part of efforts to reduce the odds of the US-China relationship veering into conflict © Olivier Matthys/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington and Joe Leahy in Beijing AUGUST 23 2024

Jake Sullivan will make his first visit to China as US national security adviser next week for talks with foreign minister Wang Yi as part of the “strategic channel” created by the two superpowers to stabilise relations.

Sullivan will hold talks with Wang on Tuesday and Wednesday, according to a US official. They [last met in Bangkok](#) in January, two months after President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping held a summit in San Francisco.

His visit is part of a broader effort to stabilise the [relationship](#) between the two superpowers, which hit a new low last year after a Chinese spy balloon flew over North America. But tensions remain high over issues ranging from the South China Sea and Taiwan to disagreements over the US export controls on technology and China’s support for Russia.

Sullivan is the first national security adviser to visit China since Susan Rice, who served in the administration of President Barack Obama and last travelled there in 2016.

The White House expects Wang to ask about the US election, which has taken a surprise turn since his last meeting with [Sullivan](#), with vice-president Kamala Harris replacing Biden as the Democratic nominee.

The race between Harris and Donald Trump remains tight, with the former president threatening swingeing tariffs against Beijing if he is elected.

Over the past 16 months, Sullivan and Wang have held four unannounced meetings — in Vienna, Malta, Washington and Bangkok — in attempts to reduce the odds of the increasingly competitive relationship veering into conflict, particularly over Taiwan.

The US official said Sullivan and Wang would discuss issues ranging from Taiwan and technology-related national security policies to US concerns about China’s support for Russia. The US will also raise concerns about aggressive Chinese actions towards the Philippines, a US ally, in the South China Sea.

“It’s partly about maintaining stability during a period of high political activity in the United States and . . . general geopolitical uncertainty,” said the official.

He said Wang would probably ask, “what does a baton pass from Biden to Harris look like” if she wins November’s election, and added that Sullivan would say he expected “more continuity than change in China policy” under Harris.

The official said Sullivan and Wang would also discuss the possibility of Biden and Xi having a final engagement before the US president left office in January, adding that an in-person meeting was “not off the cards”.

“We haven’t proposed anything, but the notion that they would see each other one last time before the president leaves office . . . is not out of the question,” said the official, who noted that both leaders were likely to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and G20 in November.

A second US official said the Sullivan-Wang channel was less about convincing China to change its policies and producing “deliverables” and more about ensuring that the two countries managed their rivalry.

“It really is about clearing up misperceptions and avoiding this competition from veering into conflict,” the official added.

The official said Sullivan would voice concern about China’s “increased military, diplomatic and economic pressure against Taiwan” and “continue to urge Beijing to engage in meaningful dialogue with Taipei.”

Biden and Xi agreed to set up the channel when they met in Bali, Indonesia, in late 2022. They also agreed to have a series of reciprocal visits by top officials. But the plans were derailed when a Chinese spy balloon flew over North America a few months later.

For Beijing, Sullivan's visit marks the latest step in efforts to return the relationship from the brink of an uneasy equilibrium after disruptions caused by the trade war during the Trump presidency, the pandemic, the Ukraine war and the balloon incident.

China needs a more stable international environment as it relies on its export engine to steer its economy through the fallout from a deep property slump.

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