

## FEATURE

Blinken visited China.  
Then Biden called Xi a dictator.  
So what comes next?



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*Where to from here?  
Peter Parks/AFP via Getty Images*

Secretary of State [Antony Blinken's recent visit to China](#) was considered a success by government officials. In such a complicated relationship, what does that even look like? We ask the man who should know.

### Who is he?

Nicholas Burns is the U.S. ambassador to China, having been confirmed by the Senate in December 2021.

- As an academic and diplomat, Burns has held various positions in the U.S. government for nearly 30 years.
- That includes working as a foreign service officer; working for the National Security Council; and being the U.S. ambassador to NATO, just to name a few.

### What's the big deal?

Burns' responsibilities include navigating and monitoring the intricacies of the China-U.S.

relationship, and his unique position offers insight into its future.

- He [sat down with NPR's Juana Summers on Tuesday night](#) to discuss the U.S.'s future relationship with China, especially following [Blinken's recent diplomatic visit](#).

- Coincidentally, around the time of our interview on Tuesday night, President Joe Biden made remarks at a fundraiser in California about [the spy balloon controversy in February](#), and referred to Chinese President Xi Jinping as a "dictator" — a line that Beijing vehemently rejected.

### What are people saying?

Here's what Biden said on Tuesday night:

China has real economic difficulties. And the reason why Xi Jinping got very upset in terms of when I shot that balloon down with two



*President Joe Biden meets with China's President Xi Jinping during a virtual summit in November 2021.  
Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images*



*Burns testifies before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing on his nomination to be Ambassador to China, on Capitol Hill in Washington in October 2021.  
Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images*

boxcars full of spy equipment in it, is he didn't know it was there. No, I'm serious.

That's what's a great embarrassment for dictators, when they didn't know what happened. That wasn't supposed to be going where it was. It was blown off course up through Alaska and then down through the United States. And he didn't know about it.

Unsurprisingly, China was furious. Here's how China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning responded, [as reported by Associated Press](#):

[President Biden's remarks] go totally against facts and seriously violate diplomatic protocol, and severely infringe on China's political dignity ... It is a blatant political provocation.

Here's what Burns told NPR about Blinken's recent visit, in an interview taped before Biden's comments came to light:

In any complicated relationship — and this is a very complicated and often quite difficult relationship between the United States and China — you need to have continuity. You need to have open channels. You need to have high level communication. And so the secretary spent two days here, 10 hours of conversations with the Chinese foreign minister, with Director Wang Yi, and then a very important meeting with President Xi Jinping.

Secretary Blinken was able to raise all the issues where we have disagreements with China, such as Taiwan and China's support for Russia in the Ukraine war. But he was also able to talk about issues where we have to cooperate, [like]

climate change being the most important because we're the two world's two largest carbon emitters.

I think secretary Blinken was able to give it some stability, and that's what we're going to take forward.

And this is Burns on where things go from here:

We're the two strongest economies in the world and the true two strongest military powers in the world. We're really the only true countries with complete global reach, if you think about the way we act in the world and the influence that we have in the world.

And so we are strategic rivals. I think that's built into the relationship. We have to recognize that. And our job is to make sure that as we conduct this competition in many ways, that [when] we talk about technological, economic, human rights, strategic [issues], we do so responsibly. We make sure that we're staying far clear of any conflict.

And President Biden talks about that a lot. He says, "We don't want a new Cold War. We don't want a conflict with China."

But the way I think to do that, is to maintain a position of strength in the Indo-Pacific, which we've done, and to be self-confident that when America speaks up for human rights values – that's a strength in the relationship.

#### So, what now?

□ The White House did not respond to NPR's requests to comment on the president's labeling of his Chinese counterpart. Analysts worry that this single word may yet again derail the intense diplomacy Blinken has been conducting.

□ Burns says this is a level of coordination and openness at a senior level that is "really fundamental to producing a more functional and more stable relationship between the U.S. and China."

□ Following Blinken's visit, China's foreign minister, Qin Gang, has been invited to Washington. If things go well, he is expected to come within the next few months.

□ Burns told NPR that other U.S. cabinet officials will be visiting China in the months to come. Again, assuming Beijing does not change its mind in light of Biden's remark on Xi.