
US-China Relations in the post-Trump Phase

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Abstract

The Biden Administration is in process of working out its strategy on China, which it recognizes as a global rival seeking to displace the US in the international system. It is also under pressure from Republicans and Trump era policies to take hawkish positions, and continue or enhance trade and technology restrictions, and reduce Chinese access to US systems, including universities. Biden team, however, does not want to forgo the potential advantages from cooperation in select areas. It also wants to coordinate positions with allies and partners, to enhance effectiveness. But many of its allies value the trade, technology and investment partnerships with China, and have a perspective on security issues different from the US. Others do not see the same challenge from “authoritarianism” to their internal governance systems. The dialectics of US effort, driven by its interests and domestic compulsions, allied and partner willingness, and Chinese countervailing advocacy and influence operations will determine the specifics and effectiveness of the US China policy over the next four years.

Keywords

China Policy, Biden Administration, Trump Era

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Green Shoots of the New Administration

On 10 February, US President Joseph R. Biden spoke, for the first time after his 20 January inauguration, with President Xi Jinping of China. This was after he had already spoken with several US allies in Europe (UK, France, Germany), Asia (Australia, Japan, RoK) and Prime Minister of India. According to a White House release, “President Biden affirmed his priorities of protecting the American people’s security, prosperity, health, and way of life, and preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific...underscored his fundamental concerns about Beijing’s coercive and unfair economic practices, crackdown in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and increasingly assertive actions in the region, including toward Taiwan”.¹ Suggesting options for some agenda for cooperation, the note added: “the two leaders also exchanged views on countering the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shared challenges of global health security, climate change, and preventing weapons proliferation”.

Earlier, on 4 February, 2021, deliberately choosing the Department of State for his first visit to any cabinet agency, to signal “America is back”, Biden had asserted that “American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States”.² In a subsequent interview to CBS, aired on February 7, he said that he was not

going to handle relations with China “the way Trump did...but there is going to be extreme competition...We’re going to focus on international rules of the road”.³

Each formulation was clearly and deliberately chosen and projected to show that the incoming Administration would press China on issues of human rights, democratic values, Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong

Following Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken’s 5 February telephone call with Yang Jiechi, Chinese Communist Party’s Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, spokesperson of the State Department said that “Secretary Blinken stressed the United States will continue to stand up for human rights and democratic values, including in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, and pressed China to join the international community in condemning the military coup in Burma. The Secretary reaffirmed that the United States will work together with its allies and partners in defense of our shared values and interests to hold the PRC accountable for its efforts to threaten stability in the Indo-Pacific, including across the Taiwan Strait, and its undermining of the rules-based international system.”⁴ Each formulation: support for human rights and

democracy, defense of shared values, stability in the Indo- Pacific, rules based international system, was clearly and deliberately chosen and projected to show, to both domestic and international audiences, that the incoming Administration would press China on these issues, as it worked out its approach to a “free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific”.⁵ Blinken also himself tweeted after the call, highlighting that he had raised the issues of concern.⁶

Earlier, on January 23, within three days of inauguration, the Spokesman had said that “the United States notes with concern the pattern of ongoing PRC attempts to intimidate its neighbors, including Taiwan”, and urged “Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic and economic pressure”.⁷ This was in response to reports of Chinese military postures and movements in the Taiwan straits.

The Biden Administration clearly feels itself under pressure to be seen as taking a tough line on China.

During their confirmation hearings on January 19, Blinken, Defense Secretary Austin and Treasury Secretary Yellen, had all sought to lay out the Biden administration’s approach to relations with China. Austin had said that China was “the pacing challenge” for the United States, and expressed support for the “Indo- Pacific” strategy and the Quad grouping (with Japan, Australia and India), activated during the Trump presidency.⁸ Blinken said

that he agreed with the substance of the previous administration’s policies on China, including characterization of Chinese actions in Xinjiang as “genocide”, although there may appear differences in tactics and strategy.⁹ Yellen said that US needed to take on China’s “abusive, unfair and illegal practices”, and accused it of “dumping products, erecting trade barriers, giving illegal subsidies...stealing intellectual property, engaging in practices that give it an unfair technological advantage, including forced technology transfers... low labor and environmental standards”.¹⁰

Before Biden’s call with Xi, a senior US official was cited in the media as indicating that US would maintain the technology access restrictions on China.¹¹ The Taiwan Representative in Washington DC was received for a meeting in the State Department on February 11, and the East Asia and Pacific Bureau tweeted: “the US is deepening ties with Taiwan, a leading democracy and important economic and security partner”.¹²

The Biden Administration clearly feels itself under pressure to be seen as taking a tough line on China. President Trump had, during his campaign over 2015- 16, and Presidential tenure over 2017-2020, built up a narrative critical of Chinese economic, trade and intellectual property practices, and unilateral military assertions in the Indo- Pacific. A hard line on China could be a campaign issue in the 2022 mid- term Congressional elections, and the 2024 Presidential one. Competition with

China could also provide the peg for some bipartisan support in congress for Administration's preferred economic, technology or infrastructure spending measures.

The US now sees China as a geopolitical rival competing for economic, technological and military space in Asia first and elsewhere subsequently

At the same time, the Administration has also sought holds on Court proceedings regarding the Trump ban on some Chinese Apps, including TikTok and WeChat. The nominee for Commerce Secretary, Gina Raimondo, refused to specifically commit, during her confirmation hearing, to keep Huawei on the entity blacklist, and her approval was put on hold by Republican Senator Ted Cruz. In a subsequent response Raimondo conveyed that the information she had seen so far did not suggest that Huawei should be removed from the list. Administration has said that it is reviewing the grounds for several of the late term Trump decisions on China, but leaks have indicated that negotiating advantage provided by the current tariff and technology restrictions would not be unilaterally given up. At the same time, it was reported that the Administration had withdrawn the Trump era rule requiring educational institutions to report their hosting of the Chinese government sponsored Confucius Institutes.¹³

The new team is clearly working its way through the strategy to be adopted in the global rivalry with China. For now, there seem to be similarities to the EU characterization of China (in its 2019 'EU- China – A strategic outlook' document) variously as “a negotiating partner, with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance”.¹⁴ In addition, the US now sees China as a geopolitical rival competing for economic, technological and military space in Asia first and elsewhere subsequently.

During his visit to the Pentagon on 10 February, Biden said, “we need to meet the growing challenges posed by China to keep the peace and defend our interests in the Indo-Pacific and globally”.¹⁵

He also referred to a new Department of Defense wide China task force Secretary Austin had set up “to look at our strategy and operational concepts, technology, and force posture, and so much more... drawing on civilian and military experts...to provide...recommendations...on key priorities and decision points... (to) chart a strong path forward on China-related matters”.¹⁶

The reputed columnist David Ignatius wrote in Washington Post of February 12 that the Administration, supported by Blinken and Sullivan, is exploring a plan for “techno-democracies” to work together to prevent

dominance of global technology by an authoritarian China. The goal would be to “set the rules and shape the norms that govern the use of technology”,¹⁷ and this would be accompanied by continued pressure on allies and partners against using Huawei for 5 G and denying China access to West’s most advanced technologies. Another proposal was to set up an International Technology Finance Corporation to support technology development in the West or fostered by the West.

It could be argued that we are seeing the germination of ideas for new multilateral structures or modification of rules in existing ones, such as WTO, to respond to the challenge from China.

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The Trump Years

Trump had eventually thrown the gauntlet to China. China was recognized as a major global rival in the National Security Strategy of December 2017. It said: “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its State-driven

economic model, and reorder the region in its favor”.¹⁸ It went on to list the entire litany of economic and geostrategic grievances against China, including its efforts to enhance its adversarial influence in Europe, Africa and the Western Hemisphere. The US National Defense Strategy of January 2018 had spoken in similar vein. This had been after some flip flops in the earlier part of 2017. On 2 December, 2016, as President elect, Trump had spoken by phone with the Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, first such conversation at that level since 1979. The chill that followed in US-China relations thawed a bit when “First Daughter” Ivanka Trump visited the Chinese embassy in Washington DC on 1 February 2017 for the Spring Festival celebrations. Trump then had an orchestrated phone call with Xi on 9 February, after which it was put out by the White House that President Trump agreed, at the request of President Xi, to honour our “one China policy”.¹⁹ Chinese President Xi was invited to the Trump Florida resort at Mar-a-Lago in April, and he visited China in November. The aim then was to get some cooperation on North Korea, and some concessions on trade that Trump could sell domestically as a major win. This approach had been supported by sections of the business and policy communities invested in the China relationship. Post December, however, there was broadly a ‘whole-of-government’ approach with the Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, National Security Adviser, Attorney General, FBI Director, and a

host of subordinate officials coming out with a series of coordinated policy pronouncements critical of China. Exceptions to this were Treasury Secretary Mnuchin and Adviser to President Kushner, who were seen as continuing to focus on advantages from cooperation. Former US National security Adviser John Bolton wrote in his memoir of White House years that Trump, in a meeting with Xi, on the margins of a G 20 summit in June 2019 in Osaka, asked him to buy more farm produce from US to help him electorally.²⁰

China's authoritarian system under President Xi was described as a challenge to US espoused democratic values.

There was also a 'whole-of-society' approach with the Administration's messages directed at US business, universities, Governors, think tanks, entertainment industry, to recognize the dangers emanating from China and not give in to blandishments, or short term financial or profit needs. China's authoritarian system under President Xi was described as a challenge to US espoused democratic values, its predatory economic and forced technology transfer practices were described as challenge to US technological leadership, its unilateral military assertions in East and South China Sea and elsewhere were assessed as challenge to a rules based international order. A series of measures were adopted to deny technology and

financing access targeting Chinese technology companies, those linked to its military, those involved in internationally illegal construction activity in South China Sea, constraints placed on operation of Chinese media and Confucian Institutes in the US, its Consulate in Houston was closed, sanctions placed on Chinese officials involved in crackdown and human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and higher-level government contacts authorized with Taiwan.

The pre- Trump Years

The Obama-Biden Administration, over 2009-16, had also vacillated on China, initially calling for "strategic reassurance", but eventually gravitating to "pivot" and "rebalance", recognizing the growing economic, technological and military challenge, including because of Chinese unilateral assertions in East and South China seas, and militarization of certain features. Eventually, even the "rebalance" could not be done with any impact, since US remained preoccupied in Europe on account of Russian actions in Ukraine, and in West Asia because of the continuing instabilities in Iraq and Syria, and tensions between Iran on one hand and Israel as well as Saudi Arabia, UAE on the other. US also did not challenge effectively Chinese militarization of some South China sea features, and limited itself to occasional "freedom of navigation" sailings challenging Chinese sovereignty claims.

Search for Strategy

Despite broad convergence in US system now about the challenge from China, there are, nevertheless, differences among US policy makers about the specifics of strategies to be adopted. Unlike the approach to the Soviet Union, “containment” is ruled out because of deep Chinese interlinkage with the Western and global economy. In an article he had co-authored in September/ October 2019 issue of Foreign Affairs, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan had argued that while the “era of engagement with China has come to an unceremonious close... each will need to be prepared to live with the other as a major power...coexistence will involve elements of competition and cooperation”.²¹

The Biden team has also signalled that it would want to work out a common front with its allies and partners on China, so that the strategy could be more effective. This will not be easy. Its European allies, including Germany and France, are canvassing against a solid anti-China front, hoping to keep opportunities open for their business interests. Speaking at an Atlantic Council event on 4 February, Macron argued for “strategic autonomy” for Europe in its China decisions.²² The EU, at French and German prodding, finalized a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China in December 2020, despite US NSA designate Sullivan tweeting at the time that the new administration would “welcome early consultations with our European partners on

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our common concerns about China’s economic practices”.²³ No doubt, the Trump years have left a lingering impact on European assessment about US reliability. Western countries and their allies have also, so far, not shown a united front against Chinese selective targeting of Norway, Sweden, Australia, RoK, Japan, at various times, through coercive economic measures. US and European business have not cut down on investments in China over 2020, despite the pandemic, and various measures adopted by the Trump administration.

US-China relations have a come a long way since the initial outreach in 1971 as part of US attempt to sharpen the Sino-Soviet split to alter the global balance in its favour. In the India-Pakistan conflict that year, the US sided fully with Pakistan, despite the genocide in East Pakistan/ Bangladesh, also as a signal to China that it stands with its friends and allies. US approach for a long time was guided by the expectation that “integrating China into the international mainstream” would lead to political and economic liberalization. Vice President Mondale, during a visit to China in 1979, said that “rise of China is in US interest”. President Reagan, in a National Security

Decision Directive (NSDD 120) issued in 1984, before visit of Chinese Premier Zhao Zhiyang said that “US seeks a strong, secure and stable China that can be an increasing force for peace, both in Asia and the world”. US facilitated China’s entry into WTO in 2001, and funding from multilateral development institutions. Reagan had also authorized sale of military equipment, cooperation to boost China’s civil nuclear program, loosened control on exports of technology, and helped establish research efforts in many cutting- edge areas. More than 70,000 US companies are present in China today and generate revenue in China of more than \$550 billion. Chinese students in US universities number around 400,000 which is a third of all foreign students.

The search is on for a new balance between cooperation, competition and confrontation.

China will also seek to influence the outcome of ongoing debate in Washington. Speaking to the influential US National Committee on US-China relations on February 2, Yang Jiechi said “solidarity and enhanced coordination and cooperation are the only way...to tackle global challenges effectively...Trump administration adopted misguided policies”. He argued that attempts at “decoupling” and a “new Cold War” go against trend of the times, and “a new type of international relations characterized by

mutual respect, fairness, justice and win- win cooperation” should be established, and efforts made “for building a community with a shared future for mankind”.²⁴

US, under Biden, has to work out an approach to China, mindful of the existing multifaceted interlinkages, advantages from cooperation, and yet the challenge to US pre-eminence from the Chinese political system and technological progress. Many of its allies, while concerned about China, do not see the same security threat, want to hedge, and avoid taking clear sides. In an article in Foreign Affairs in its July/ August 2020 issue, the Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong wrote: “Asia-Pacific countries do not wish to be forced to choose between the United States and China”.²⁵ Many US allies in the region, while concerned at growing Chinese military capacities, do not share the US concerns on authoritarian models of governance. The specifics of the new administration’s China policy will, therefore, only congeal over time, and in responses to emergent challenges, factoring in US domestic politics and responses of its allies and partners. The era of “engagement” is, however, over. The search is on for a new balance between cooperation, competition and confrontation. Architectures of security and other multilateral frameworks would be sought to be structured or rules modified to influence the new game in an era of flux, uncertainty, across the board competition, multipolarity, and intense great

power rivalry. China will play its own hand, too, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), New Development Bank, Forum on China Africa Cooperation, the 1+17 process with group of central and east European countries, and other outreach in Latin America and West Asia.

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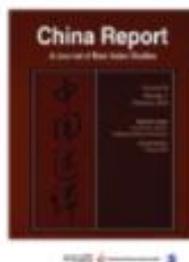
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