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## CHINA POLICY FROM TRUMP TO BIDEN: MORE CONTINUITY THAN CHANGE


By
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Media coverage of President Joe Biden's first months in office has concentrated on the many areas where he has broken sharply with his predecessor. In the first 72 hours alone, executive orders were signed stopping the American withdrawal from the World Health Organization, rejoining the Paris climate accord, canceling the Keystone XL pipeline, reversing the "Muslim ban," and halting construction on the southern border wall. One area that looks increasingly like it will exhibit greater continuity than change, however, is US policy toward China, which has emerged as a near-peer competitor on the world stage far sooner than most anticipated. In fact, while chasms remain between Democratic and Republican perspectives on many foreign policy issues—Israel, Iran, Russia, etc.—there seems to be uncommon convergence on the challenge posed by China, at least substantively if not stylistically.

The hardened approach among Democratic policymakers has been driven by disillusionment with China from the Obama years. In a recent BBC interview, Evan Medeiros, who served as President Obama's China director on the National Security Council, conceded that he and other Obama-era China experts had misjudged how adversarial Chinese leader Xi Jinping would be in comparison to his predecessor:

"It's important to keep in mind that the first Chinese leader that we had to deal with, Hu Jintao, was a very, very different leader than Xi Jinping: he was far less ambitious, he was far less aggressive, and he was far less willing to accept and tolerate risk and friction externally. So, when I look back at our China policy, I wish that we had recognized quicker how different

Xi Jinping was from Hu Jintao and recognized how he was going to take China politically, economically, and strategically in a different direction."

As President Biden continues looking to former Obama officials to fill national security roles in his administration, the China hands will be carrying this realization with them and appear resolved not to underestimate Beijing again. Following his first conversation with Xi since taking office, Biden warned, "if we don't get moving, [China is] going to eat our lunch."

This article will examine some expected areas of continuity with President Trump's China policy, and a subsequent article will look at some other areas of expected divergence.

In reading the tea leaves on areas of expected continuity, a major one will be an enduring recognition within the administration that a coordinated, whole-of-government effort is necessary to effectively counter China. If China is seeking to erode American influence across a variety of domains, then America cannot respond in a disjointed fashion but must ensure that the full array of cabinet departments and the Intelligence Community are all on the same page and are fully leveraging their resources and authorities. To that end, Axios reported last month that "virtually every team in the [Biden] National Security Council, from technology to global health to international economics, will incorporate China into their work," calling it as "a concrete example of the 'whole-of-government' approach toward China that officials from both the Biden and Trump administrations have supported." Moreover, the Indo-Pacific team led by Biden's Asia tsar Kurt Campbell, a former senior Obama administration official with deep expertise on East Asia, "will be the largest regional NSC directorate, a sign of how this NSC is prioritizing China and broader Indo-Pacific issues." In many ways, this incipient US approach mimics the way Beijing approaches foreign policy, coordinating all elements of the country's "comprehensive national power"—military forces, economic power, natural resources, scientific expertise, and so forth—to obtain maximum leverage over other countries rather than treating each as a separate domain.

Another expected area of continuity will be a readiness—eagerness, even—to publicly criticize the Chinese government, something earlier administrations had often eschewed out of an omnipresent concern that it might damage bilateral relations. There have been several high-profile examples already in the last month or two.

During his confirmation hearings, now-Secretary of State Antony Blinken concurred with the Trump administration's assessment that China's ongoing repression of its Muslim Uyghur population constituted a genocide, emboldening other countries such as Canada to follow suit. In a call to China's top diplomat in early February, Blinken again criticized Beijing for its ongoing human rights violations in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, and for its reluctance to condemn the Feb. 1 coup d'état in Myanmar. Following China's Feb. 11 banning of the BBC for its critical coverage of COVID-19 and Uyghur concentration camps, the State Department condemned the move as "part of a wider campaign to suppress free media in China." We can expect such

sweeping criticism to continue as the Biden team seeks to fulfill its commitment to hold the line against the Chinese and begin to reinvigorate Washington's advocacy for democracy and human rights abroad, especially as new polling reveals historic levels of bipartisan unfavorability among the American people for Beijing.

Perhaps the most significant area of continuity will be on military policy. Late last year, the Defense Department's annual China Military Power Report said Beijing "has marshalled the resources, technology, and political will over the past two decades to strengthen and modernize the [People's Liberation Army] in nearly every respect," and that "China is already ahead of the United States in certain areas." The PLA has made dramatic improvements in its ability to conduct joint operations, has substantially expanded its overseas footprint, and has developed a suite of advanced missiles that make it significantly riskier for the US to operate close to China's shores. The Pentagon report also said the PLA Navy had surpassed the US Navy as the largest in the world, with over 300 ships and submarines in operation and many more in production.

All indications are that the Biden team understands the scale of this military threat in the Indo-Pacific and will prioritize the region accordingly. In early February, two US carrier strike groups held simultaneous drills in Chinese-claimed waters of the South China Sea—the first such major exercise in seven months and the first of the new administration—and a destroyer separately conducted a so-called "freedom of navigation operation," or FONOP, through the Taiwan Strait. These symbolic moves will be followed up by more concrete measures in the coming months and years, like insulating the US Indo-Pacific Command from expected defense budget cuts; in early March, Politico reported that INDOPACOM had asked Congress for almost $50 billion in additional funding this year and was expected to get a favorable response. Biden will also place substantial emphasis on rehabilitating relationships with key military allies in the region, including Australia, South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, and is reportedly already planning a virtual summit with the Quad later this month. It is less clear whether Washington will maintain the same high level of engagement with Taiwan that was seen during the latter Trump years, as that has been particularly inflammatory to Beijing and the strategic benefits to the US have been unclear.

A final example of continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations will probably be on broad economic policy vis-à-vis China. Some of the more contested Trump policies, such as his unpredictable application of trade tariffs, will almost certainly fall by the wayside, but an emphasis on combatting unfair Chinese trade practices and applying sanctions where necessary will remain, as well as an acute awareness of Beijing's malign cyber activities. Chinese economic and industrial espionage over the past two decades has been responsible for the theft of key strategic technologies with military applications and has cost the US economy hundreds of billions of dollars, according to a 2018 analysis by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Once upon a time, American corporations may have been willing to swallow the costs of such activities in the belief that access to

Chinese markets would eventually compensate for the losses, but that tradeoff has become less and less tenable as the mirage of eventual full market access has proven elusive.

None of this is to say that Biden's China policy will be indistinguishable from Trump's, but for all the reasons outlined above, differences will tend to be more stylistic than substantive. The subsequent article in this series will take a look at some of these areas of expected divergence between the Trump and Biden administrations and their implications for the US-China relationship going forward.

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