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BIDEN VS TRUMP ON CHINA POLICY: SIMILAR SUBSTANCE, BUT STYLE MATTERS

By
Eric Feinberg

Having examined several key aspects of the US-China relationship that will likely see more continuity than change under President Joe Biden's administration, I will now examine some areas of expected divergence.

To begin with the most obvious point, former President Donald Trump and Biden have different profiles and personalities along almost every conceivable dimension. Whereas Trump was inexperienced, Biden has been operating at the top levels of US foreign policy for almost a half-century, including as a leader on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Whereas Trump preferred to fly by the seat of his pants, Biden prefers meticulous preparation in consultation with experienced advisors. Whereas Trump had a fraught relationship with many US allies and partners, Biden has already demonstrated a core commitment to leading a more consultative strategic policy. And where Trump often relied on superficialities in his personal relationships with foreign leaders—think of the exchanges of letters with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un or the attempts at flattery with Russian President Vladimir Putin—Biden actually gets to know them and develops genuine rapport, the importance of which should not be underestimated in the world of diplomacy. This applies not only to Biden's deep relationships with many US allies and partners, but his long association with more adversarial competitors like Chinese President Xi Jinping as well.

Biden, who has known Xi for almost a decade, had dozens of hours of private meetings with him, traveled thousands of miles with him, and will almost certainly have more cordial and candid personal interactions with the Chinese leader, which may contribute to a better read of his intentions and more effective bilateral communication. Following their first exchange on Feb. 10,

Chinese state media said it showed “in-depth communication” and remarked that it was a “very positive” sign that the call lasted for more than two hours.

Another key difference will be greater interagency coordination within the US government, as many inexperienced officials and Trump loyalists have been replaced with policy experts. Longtime State Department official James Dobbins noted that during the Trump administration “many outsiders were recruited, far more than normal, but few had even a modicum of relevant experience. Those who did, for instance the individuals charged with the Iranian and North Korean nuclear portfolios, could never overcome the obstacle posed by flawed presidential policy.”

By contrast, most of Biden’s senior foreign policy officials have deep experience in government, as well as (in Dobbins’ words) a “reputation for competence and collegiality.” National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, for example, had earlier served as a top aide to Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry. Secretary of State Antony Blinken first joined the NSC under the Clinton administration in 1994, serving in a succession of senior foreign policy positions ever since. And the officials operating at lower levels of the ladder within the various key bureaucracies—the undersecretaries, deputy secretaries, ambassadors, and so forth—are similarly versed in their areas of responsibility. Expertise on China in particular is impressive, with well-known experts like Rush Doshi, Michael Chase, and Laura Rosenberger given prominent posts at the Defense Department and NSC. All of which should contribute to fewer unforced errors in the new administration; if and when President Biden takes a phone call from the president of Taiwan, for example, as President-elect Trump did in December 2016, few in the China-watching community will be scratching their heads and questioning whether it was a considered decision or one made on the fly.

A final key difference between the old and new administrations will be a greater emphasis by Biden on coalition-building, a necessary element of any China policy yet one that was constantly neglected by virtue of personal style during the Trump years. Given the current size and projected growth trajectory of the Chinese economy, Washington does not have sufficient leverage to compel any changes in Beijing unilaterally; buy-in from our allies and partners will be necessary for there to be any hope on that front. Nevertheless, Trump repeatedly picked unnecessary fights with key Indo-Pacific allies over isolated matters such as South Korean alliance contributions and US-Japanese trade negotiations, stoking resentment and concerns about Washington’s reliability. Having served as a senior Korea analyst for the US military during the first several years of the Trump administration, I can testify to how much hair was pulled out by policymakers during these sorts of diplomatic scuffles, and the costs to our reputation were real and severe.

Given enough time, though, Biden may be able to heal some of this damage and restore at least some confidence in American leadership among our traditional allies. Biden will likely also seek to expand this counter-China effort to newer partners like India, capitalizing on preexisting border tensions between Beijing and New Delhi. There is also increasing US pressure on NATO

allies to become more engaged on the China portfolio, as witnessed in recent years as Washington lobbied various European nations to block installation of Huawei communications infrastructure or risk compromising intelligence cooperation. Somewhat surprisingly, Europe has begun to show positive signs in this direction. Earlier this month, France deployed two naval vessels, including a nuclear attack submarine to the South China Sea to show solidarity with the US, Australia, and Japan, and the UK has made similar moves in the recent past. China analysts continue watching to see if these initial moves are followed up over time with a more sustained campaign.

In short, the new Biden administration will offer sharp changes for the US on a range of domestic and foreign policy issues, and China will see some changes as well as outlined above. In keeping with the thesis of my earlier article, however, it is important to put these changes in perspective and note how they are generally more stylistic than substantive. In aggregate, our China policy will almost certainly be one of the areas that experiences the least modification in the Biden White House. The former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping famously called for his nation to “hide its strength and bide its time” rather than make a blatant dash for superpower status. But as Secretary Blinken remarked during his confirmation hearings last month,

what we’ve seen in recent years, particularly since the rise of Xi Jinping as the leader, has been that the hiding and biding has gone away. They are much more assertive in making clear that they seek to become in effect the leading country in the world, the country that sets the norms, that sets the standards, and to put forward a model they hope other countries and people will ascribe to.

As this realization has become less and less debatable, it has driven China hands from different ideological persuasions to set aside their disagreements and come together to focus on this emerging and systemic global challenge. Given that US-China relations will arguably be the most important strategic issue of our time, preserving this consensus will be essential, especially in an age where so little else in Washington is bipartisan any longer.

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