



The risk of China appeasement — redux

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When it comes to China, President Joe Biden has proven himself something of a wild card. During the Democratic primaries, then-candidate Biden publicly dismissed China as a threat to the U.S., pointing mainly to its economic challenges and geographic limitations. After securing his party's nomination, however, his tone shifted. In a statement on China's abuses in Hong Kong last spring, Biden characterized Xi as an "autocrat." Later, he characterized Uyghur oppression in Xinjiang as genocide, and detailed how he would push back against Beijing's authoritarianism in Tibet.

Given the broader context of Chinese foreign policy, Biden's apparent shift is prudent — and at least partially aligns with the assessments of the previous administration. Beijing's responsibility for and response to COVID-19 had, in the judgment of Trump administration officials, exposed the failure of America's decades-long gambit to change the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through engagement. Contrary to the hopes of Republicans and Democrats alike, the liberal international order has not catechized the Chinese government into a responsible stakeholder. If anything, the CCP has corrupted these institutions, and the nations that defend them, to serve its own interests. From stonewalling pandemic investigations to infiltrating civil societies around the globe, China appears far more intent on changing Western nations than being changed by them.

This illiberal bent, combined with China's economic heft and growing military capability, portends dark days ahead for the U.S.-backed liberal international order. The hostilities along the Sino-Indian border, China's grey zone tactics in the South China Sea, and Xi Jinping's intentions to subsume Taiwan foreshadow a future that challenges America's commitments and security.

Even so, two interrelated factors could complicate Biden's recent rhetoric and strengthen Beijing's hand: the president-elect's policy priorities, and his advisors' mixed perceptions of China.

In no uncertain terms, Biden has identified climate change as an overriding priority. It is "the number one issue facing humanity," he has said. "And it's the number one issue for me." This assessment would seem to prioritize cooperation with polluting countries like China, as President Obama did in his second term. Those climate negotiations coincided with protests in Hong Kong over Beijing's interference in the city's elections and had the potential to scuttle the climate talks. In a joint presser with Xi in November 2014, Obama went out of his way to disassociate the U.S. from events in Hong Kong and notably refrained from offering tangible support for the city's autonomy. The signal was unmistakable: Progress on climate was a higher-order priority than preserving the city's political freedom.

Indeed, climate change was one of Obama's many foreign policy equities that superseded concerns about China. Paramount among them was the Iran nuclear deal. Then-Secretary of State John Kerry spearheaded negotiations that culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) half a decade ago, and worked hard to win Beijing's support for the effort on the UN Security Council. That backing came at a cost. Instead of punishing China for its massive theft of U.S. intellectual property, Obama struck an agreement with Xi in 2015 to stem the tide of China's theft of U.S. trade secrets and technology for commercial advantage. Beijing promptly violated this gentleman's agreement. Likewise, instead of countering the CCP's territorial ambitions in the South China Sea, Obama extracted a guarantee from Xi that China would refrain from militarizing the Spratly Islands. The promise was only good for one year.

If anything, Obama's China policy was a case study of the tension between transnational threats and great power competition. Common threats, by definition, demand cooperative responses in the form of diplomacy. These calculations limited Obama's willingness to speak out strongly against Beijing's human rights abuses and hamstrung his administration's ability to defend key American interests. Biden's cross-cutting priorities with Beijing, as well as his appointment of John Kerry as a cabinet-level climate czar, suggest that these tensions could emerge again.

Lest anyone dismiss these concerns as reading the past into the present, consider President Biden's remarks last month, in his first major foreign policy address at the State Department: "We'll confront China's economic abuses; counter its aggressive, coercive action; to push back on China's attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance. But we are ready to work with Beijing when it's in America's interest to do so."

To be sure, the appointment of prominent China hawks like former Obama defense official Kurt Campbell and longtime Biden aide Ely Ratner to high-level roles in his administration suggest that Biden is entirely serious about competing with Beijing. Yet at other times, experts in Biden's orbit have articulated a vision for "coexistence" with China that walks a middle ground between containment and accommodation — perhaps raising more questions than it answers.

This uncertainty should serve notice to Republicans at multiple levels. First, and perhaps most obviously, if the tendency toward engagement prevails, Biden could easily reverse or recalibrate many of the Trump administration's signature China policies through executive orders. But before conservative politicians rush headlong into what may be premature opposition, they should recall that former President Trump fell into the same appeasement trap with Xi. Trump's initial response to the 2019 Hong Kong protests was a mirror image of Obama's: praising Xi and evading comment. This tendency to elevate "win-win" outcomes with Beijing at the expense of countering the CCP is a historically bipartisan problem, and one exacerbated by opportunistic partisanship.

At the same time, Biden officials should recognize the trap that lays before them. Take John Kerry's Pollyannaish remarks to NPR two months ago: "[The Chinese] were a partner on climate as we competed with them at other things during the Obama administration. We've been there, done that. But if we don't work as a primary extraordinary effort on climate, we're all cooked." More recently, Kerry insisted on Jan. 27 that the Biden administration would never condition its competitive agenda with China on climate gains. The very next day, however, China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, poured cold water on Kerry's claims: "China-U.S. cooperation in specific areas is not just 'a flower in a greenhouse.' It is bound to be closely related to the overall China-U.S. relations. China hopes the U.S. can create favorable conditions for China-U.S. coordination and cooperation in important areas."

This isn't to say that there aren't reasonable areas for cooperation with Beijing, or that Washington can't "walk and chew gum at the same time." But playing both sides of the cooperate-compete ledger is a tough business — one that the CCP is already preparing to exploit. If President Biden is unwilling to make clear which side he cares about more, it's abundantly clear that Beijing is ready to choose for him.

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