



Will Biden's Real China Strategy Please Stand Up?

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From the outset of the Biden administration, there has been widespread speculation about the future of America's China policy. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Trump administration's rejection of longstanding conventional wisdom surrounding the need for "engagement" with Beijing, President Joe Biden has inherited a China policy fundamentally different in style and substance from the preceding four decades of U.S.-China relations.

While the administration was quick to pivot away from Trumpian bluster and unilateral confrontation, it has also sought to avoid the pitfalls of unmitigated engagement. From the beginning of his presidency, Biden and his advisers have characterized China policy in dualistic language of cooperating where possible and competing when necessary. In theory, this dualism aligns with the president's broader agenda. After all, if climate change is truly Biden's top policy priority, and if he wants to bring Iran back into the 2015 nuclear deal, he will need buy-in from Beijing on both fronts.

In reality, however, balancing between cooperation and competition could well prove impossible. To the president's credit, he has given more than lip service to confronting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). His first multilateral summit as president was not at the United Nations, the G7 or NATO. Rather, it was the Quad, a multilateral forum comprised of Washington, Tokyo, Delhi and Canberra that implicitly balances against Beijing's regional belligerence. The summit's output was impressive: a critical- and emerging-technology working group, and a plan to jointly fund, produce and distribute a COVID-19 vaccine throughout Southeast Asia. Moreover, the State Department has taken pains to call out China's human rights abuses in Tibet and Hong Kong, and appears intent on burnishing Taiwan's diplomatic credentials. Perhaps most significantly, Kurt Campbell, Biden's top Indo-Pacific aide, has conditioned improved relations with China on Beijing's willingness to end its economic coercion of Australia.

Even so, in an apparent effort to maintain this delicate balancing act, senior Biden officials recently found themselves in a dilemma of their own making, and gave the appearance of making a major concession to Beijing.

At issue was America's response to the CCP's atrocities targeting Uighurs and other ethno-religious minorities in the western Xinjiang territory. On the Trump administration's final day in office, then-secretary of state Mike Pompeo took the rare step of issuing atrocity determinations of genocide and crimes against humanity for China's barbaric treatment of its Uighur Muslims, which range from coercive birth control measures and forced labor to mass imprisonment and family separation.

In his confirmation hearing that same day, Antony Blinken affirmed the atrocity determinations, saying without reservation, "That would be my judgment as well." Even so, a subtle yet consequential nuance differentiated Pompeo's and Blinken's statements—one that resulted last week in the Biden administration's first China hiccup.

When Pompeo announced the genocide determination, he clarified three separate times that the atrocities were "ongoing." The timing of atrocities—whether they occurred in the past or continue in the present—has little legal relevance, as the Genocide Convention of 1948 obligates parties to punish the perpetrators of genocide, regardless of whether the atrocities have ceased.

However, the distinction carries enormous political significance. If the CCP's atrocities are past and not present, then the urgency of preventing and punishing the genocide takes a massive hit. More to the point, if Chinese government officials are no longer committing acts of genocide, it would substantially ease the awkward optics of pushing a cooperative agenda. It would also, by the same token, increase diplomatic latitude to negotiate on, say, climate change and Iran policy.

So, when Secretary of State Blinken, as well as a State Department spokesman, repeatedly characterized China's genocidal behavior with past-tense verbiage, people noticed. After officials stonewalled inquiries from reporters, policymakers on Capitol Hill leaned on the State Department to discern whether they were, in fact, assessing the atrocities as merely a past issue. Thankfully, the State Department and White House both clarified that, in the president's view, the genocide is ongoing.

While the strange episode concluded happily, it was wholly unnecessary. No credible research has emerged anywhere suggesting that the CCP's human rights abuses in Xinjiang have ceased or abated; if anything, the opposite appears to be the case. In a groundbreaking report published by the Newlines Institute, dozens of human rights experts found that China has not only violated all five counts of the Genocide Convention, but that the atrocities are ongoing today.

By vacillating on what should have been, on the merits, an easy answer, the Biden administration turned the spotlight away from Xi Jinping's campaign of carnage and instead highlighted its own indecision. Doing so called into question Washington's resolve to take meaningful steps beyond tough rhetoric and press conferences to prevent and punish China's genocide.

This isn't to say that one snafu eclipses the smart, competitive steps Biden has already taken in the Indo-Pacific; far from it. But as long as the president insists on a policy of dualism toward the CCP, we should expect to see more awkward episodes like this over the next four years. They should not be dismissed as meaningless or negligible. Such incidents only lend leverage to Beijing—leverage it has four decades of experience exacting from U.S. presidents.

So, will President Biden's real China strategy please stand up?

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