



# Biden's confused China policy

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President Joe Biden's China policy is a paradox of his own making. On the one hand, the president has insisted that the United States will compete with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when necessary, and has described that competition in stark terms: democracy versus authoritarianism. On the other, Biden has identified climate change as "the number one issue facing humanity" — one that demands a global response from the world's leading polluters, including Beijing.

By all accounts, this approach is more difficult than anything Biden's predecessors attempted. Instead of picking a side between engagement (which was the policy of most American presidents, from Nixon to Obama) and confrontation (which defined the final year of Trump's term), Biden is in theory splitting the difference and crafting a policy that selects the best of both worlds. In reality, however, such a gambit is liable to become hopelessly entangled in contradictions.

Take, for instance, the administration's latest foray into human rights restrictions on China for its abuses against its Uyghur Muslim minority. Last month, the White House decided to effectively slap an import ban on Hoshine Silicon Industry, the world's largest producer of metallurgical-grade silicon and a giant in the solar industry, over its use of Uyghur forced labor.

That's all fine and good. But the administration is simultaneously letting several other companies guilty of the same practice off the hook. According to a recent report from Sheffield Hallam University, "widespread adoption of state-sponsored labor programs in the Uyghur Region means that it is nearly impossible to avoid forced-labor-tainted raw materials if they are being sourced in [Xinjiang] under the current regime." In other words, all of the firms active in Xinjiang are likely complicit.

That's hardly news to the Biden administration, which reportedly had a heated interagency fight play out between its national security and climate change teams over the issue. The latter's argument, that a full ban on solar imports from Xinjiang could threaten Biden's most important policy priority, appeared to carry the day.

Even so, Biden's willingness to take the initiative ahead of U.S. allies and partners was a silver lining of sorts. Perhaps, some speculated, his action signaled a growing appetite to confront the CCP alone when necessary, just as the Trump administration did throughout 2019 and 2020.

Senior administration officials, however, have promptly poured cold water on that possibility. As one unnamed Biden official told the *Wall Street Journal*, "Our focus is on making sure that we're moving from unilateral action, which has been what has defined U.S. policy over the last four years, to really working with our partners."

The message is clear: the Biden administration is liable to think twice about sanctioning foreign entities if doing so either threatens the climate agenda or irritates key allies. Left-wing organizations, meanwhile, have been quick to push Biden in precisely this direction. Last week, over 40 progressive groups pleaded with the president to "eschew the dominant antagonistic approach to U.S.-China relations and instead prioritize... cooperation with China to address the existential threat that is the climate crisis."

All of which highlights the problem that is now facing the president: how to confront the CCP's human rights abuses when his base wants him to do the exact opposite. Biden's recent remarks suggest he may try to square that circle with symbolic sanctions that check the box without rocking the boat.

Doing so, however, risks ignoring the CCP's weaknesses, especially with regard to Xinjiang. With some creative sanctions, Washington could cut off half of the CCP's Belt and Road Initiative trade routes for their links to the ongoing Uyghur genocide. But progressives seem content to leave such leverage on the table in the name of another climate deal with Beijing.

The whole episode is a good example of how Biden's China policy risks getting tied up in knots. While transnational issues like climate change demand diplomacy and multilateral responses, great power competition depends principally upon American strength and consistency. By pulling its punches against other Xinjiang offenders, the Administration has sent a clear signal that climate, not human rights, is its priority.

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