

Issue

Brief

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From Trump to Biden, Continuity and Change in the US's China Policy

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Abstract

A year and a half since United States (US) President Joe Biden took the helm, both sides of the country's political divide continue to debate whether the incumbent's China policy is distinct from that of the Trump administration. The Republicans claim that Biden's China policy has not veered away from Trump's; the Democrats, meanwhile, argue that it is different. This brief weighs in on the debate, and finds that despite the Biden administration's efforts to draw its own roadmap for the US's China policy, domestic factors, fraught US-China relations, and global events are compelling largely continuity.

The Donald Trump presidency will likely be remembered as the time when the United States (US) confronted China on various fronts. It is said that Trump had “taken a sledgehammer” to US-China relations—¹ a fundamental departure from the four-decade-old approach of the US that sought to persuade China to come to the fold of the liberal order.²

For one, Trump waged a tariff war with China that involved four rounds of tariff hikes that raised the average duties on Chinese goods to from 3.1 percent to 21 percent between 2018 and 2020.³ These targeted tariffs were meant to slow China’s growth, specifically in sectors where China, according to an August 2017 investigation by the US Trade Representative, was engaging in unfair trade practices.⁴

This strategy found support both domestically and overseas. After the first round of the trade agreement signed⁵ between the US and China in 2020, while the tariffs remained in place, the US agreed to reduce the rate of some of the tariffs on two conditions. First, that China will reform its economic and trade regime in the areas of intellectual property, technology transfer, agriculture, financial services, and currency and foreign exchange. Second, that China will buy US goods and agricultural products worth US\$200 billion more than what it did before the trade war began. The government’s assessment later found that China bought only 60 percent of that amount.⁶ Biden, therefore, faced a political compulsion to keep the tariffs on certain Chinese goods.

In many ways, the Biden administration’s China policy—and not only with regards to tariffs—is torn between the need to be stern, and the desire to distance itself from the Trumpian rationales for such policies. While Trump’s China policy was framed almost entirely by the logic of ‘Making America Great Again’ (MAGA)—i.e., the prioritisation of domestic issues—Biden’s is reckoned to be largely coming from the perspective of strategic competition. In the run-up to the mid-term elections in November this year, the subject of China is likely to loom large in US domestic debates even amidst the Ukraine crisis. Following House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022, the US Congress took a united, tough stance on China; indeed, the Republicans and Democrats in Congress appear to be competing for one-upmanship in this regard.⁷

Two main planks support Biden's China policy: the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance⁸ released in March 2021, and his administration's approach as stated in a speech by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in May 2022.⁹ These statements mark a different approach to dealing with China. The speech by Blinken, for example, pictured a non-confrontational United States; he said the country is "... not looking for conflict or a new Cold War. To the contrary, we're determined to avoid both." The three pillars of the China strategy are "Invest, Align and Compete,"¹⁰ toning down its earlier stance of "adversarial when it must be."¹¹

There are two important elements in this strategy: focus on building a strong internal economy that can compete with China; and approaching the China problem through a coordinated and multilateral strategy.

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A rapidly rising China is challenging the US in various areas including technology and military production, and overall global influence. China has pushed the US to scramble for retaining its edge through new partnerships in the region. Amidst an active war in Eastern Europe between Ukraine and Russia, the Biden administration has engaged countries of the Indo-Pacific region and brought out its Indo-Pacific policy.

Biden's approach in dealing with China will be influenced by the team that he works with. In the Beltway, Biden's team responsible for China has been perceptively divided into two camps: "competitors" and "engagers".¹² The "competitors" believe that the US needs to compete with China and unless it takes immediate and necessary steps, it will lag behind. Those who fall in this camp include Secretary of State Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, Kurt Campbell who is the National Security Council's (NSC) Indo-Pacific coordinator, and NSC's senior director for China and Taiwan, Laura Rosenberger. Meanwhile, the "engagers" such as Tim Ryan, Representative from Ohio, Andrew Yang, who has since left the Democratic Party, and Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, advocate engagement with China on certain issues. Most analysts agree that President Biden listens more to the "competitors".¹³

Given the current compulsions of the US and the nature of China's growth and expansion, competition would seem inevitable for any US president. Any strategy needs to find bipartisan support in Congress. While maintaining a position of strength, the US under Biden is seeking to leverage both its own bilateral partnerships, and multilateral institutions to compete with China. This approach relies on providing reassurances to its allies of support from Washington in times of need, and getting the US back in international partnerships and agreements from which the Trump administration had withdrawn.

On his first day in office, Biden signed 17 Executive Orders, proclamations, and memorandums to undo certain decisions of the Trump administration and to project stronger political resolve upfront in his presidential term. Among his earliest policy decisions were to bolster the government's pandemic response,

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reverse Trump's environmental agenda,^a promote diversity and inclusiveness, and boost economic recovery.¹⁴ Perhaps among the most important steps were related to support of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme¹⁵ which allowed people who were brought to the US as children, without legal documents, to temporarily get work visas and be protected from deportation; rejoining the Paris climate accord; and ending Trump's travel ban on some Muslim and African countries.

Trump's China policy ran parallel to apparent attempts to isolate the United States from its partners and allies. Today, restoring the trust of its allies in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and West Asia is a priority for the Biden administration; of precedence is strengthening the Indo-Pacific alliance. Biden's decision to reverse Trump's policies and reassure allies in the Pacific theatre was as much meant to strengthen the alliance system as it was to deal with the growing China problem.

Indeed, Trump's policies had not only alienated US partners abroad but also created rifts even between factions within the Democratic Party. The Democrats under the Biden administration face the challenge of appearing tough on China in equal measure as the Republicans did in the previous administration. As such, reassuring US allies and partners abroad of unwavering US support has become a priority. Biden's effort to persuade allies like Australia, Japan, Germany, France, Britain, South Korea, and even the Baltic States to form a coordinated strategy vis-à-vis China preceded his call¹⁶ with the Chinese President Xi Jinping on 10 February 2021.

That call was seen by both sides as an opportunity to reset the US-China relationship. Despite having no substantive outcome, the call paved the way for a meeting between diplomatic officials from both sides in Anchorage, Alaska.¹⁷ However, a day before the meeting, the Biden administration moved to sanction 24 Chinese Communist Party officials for their crackdown on democratic protests in Hong Kong.¹⁸ The Biden administration harped on certain universal values that they said should be preserved in Hong Kong, despite the risk of a backslide in its relationship with China. Although the Anchorage meeting ended up with a trade of barbs between the two sides, who were left wanting of a better restart to the bilateral relationship, the US showed "deep concerns with actions by China, including in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan,

a On the promise of promoting business, President Trump had led a deregulatory environment agenda whereby he brought new environment legislations but eliminated twice as much. It is estimated that as many as 125 environment safeguards were rolled back by Trump, weakening environmental protection. His steps to remove the US from the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement was seen as the biggest blow to global US climate leadership.

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cyber-attacks on the United States, and economic coercion.”¹⁹ The exchange of accusatory statements between China and the US gave a clue that bilateral ties would remain tenuous under the Biden administration.

Earlier, as the Biden administration assumed office in January 2021, China imposed sanctions on 28 officials from the Trump government, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. China took these retaliatory steps even as it maintained that it wanted to improve relations with the US.²⁰ The subsequent meeting between China's climate envoy Xie Zhenhua and the US counterpart John Kerry at the 2022 World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos in May 2022 showed some promise for future cooperation.²¹ In November 2021 they pledged at COP26 to cooperate on climate,²² and before that they released the US-China Joint statement in April 2021 addressing the climate crisis.²³

However, in June 2021, the Biden administration banned US imports of solar panel material from Hoshine Silicon Industry Co.–China's main silicon company. An additional five entities, including one that imports a critical solar panel material, were banned by the US Commerce Department separately over allegations that they use forced labour in China's Xinjiang region.²⁴ This has prompted concerns about the potential shortage in the supply of solar panel that could, in turn, lead to a deficit in Biden's clean-energy goals.²⁵

Compounding the challenge for Biden in maintaining a policy of cooperation/confrontation towards China was the Covid-19 pandemic. When he took the presidency, amongst Biden's imperatives was to frame and implement a sound pandemic response, one that was better than Trump's: to reduce fatalities, provide immediate and adequate healthcare facilities and equipment, reimpose mandatory mask orders, and fix accountability for the spread of the virus. China became a crucial part of this strategy when the White House promised to “rebuild and expand defenses to predict, prevent, and mitigate pandemic threats, including those coming from China.”²⁶

Fortunately for Biden, the beginning of his term as president coincided with an overall decline in fatalities in the US. The rapid spike in Covid-19 cases had earlier negatively affected Trump's vote share and helped Biden win.²⁷ This allowed Biden to adjust to a China strategy that would push Beijing against the wall on the issue of accountability for the spread of the virus. To that end, Biden pledged to work with international partners, “to press the PRC to fully share information and to cooperate with the World Health Organization's Phase II evidence-based, expert-led determination into the origins of COVID-19.”²⁸

Key Elements of Biden's China Policy

Trade

Trump started a trade war with China in 2018 by imposing tariffs on the import of certain commodities that led to US\$35 billion in export losses for China in the US market in 2019; the US was then met with reciprocal tariffs, causing reduction in imports from China worth US\$15 billion in the same year.²⁹ Indeed, Trump had come to office with the promise of rewriting US-China economic relations. He held China responsible for loss of manufacturing bases in the US, and accused it of unfair trade practices and intellectual property theft. One of Trump's campaign documents, "Reforming the U.S.-China Trade Relationship to Make America Great Again", promised a shift in the country's economic relationship with China to benefit the US.³⁰

Biden has previously ignored calls by the business community to ease trade tensions with China.³¹ As the two countries approach the fourth year of trade war, there are indications that the Biden administration might remove some of the Trump-era tariffs—and bring new ones—though there is no clarity on this yet. China has urged the US to remove certain tariffs imposed during the Trump presidency and Biden may well oblige³² due to inflationary pressures that could threaten the electoral prospects of the Democratic Party in the mid-term elections.³³ Moreover, as per a US-China Business Council report in January 2021,³⁴ scaling back tariffs could benefit the US economy and create more jobs.

Perhaps compounding the impacts of the trade war is the Biden administration's stated attention to the human rights issues related to Beijing's treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Biden is seeking to link his administration's seriousness on trade and accountability with ethical standards in manufacturing and supply chains. For instance, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) took effect on 21 June 2022, meant to "block any company seeking to import goods mined, produced, or manufactured, either in whole or in part, by Uyghurs and other persecuted ethnic groups—unless the company can provide conclusive evidence that no forced labour was used at any point in the international supply chain."³⁵

Key Elements of Biden's China Policy

The Chip war

A key aspect of Trump's tech war against China was the implementation of export control policies in the semiconductor sector. Biden assumed office at the height of the so-called 'chip war'.³⁶ The backdrop of this war is global in nature: As semiconductor chips become an indispensable part of modern lives—from the ubiquitous use in almost every electronic device such as mobile phones, computers, household appliances, industrial equipment, and electronic vehicles, to their use in the green transition^b—there is a global scramble to control raw material, production and distribution of semiconductor chips. Both the US and China find themselves at the heart of this competition.

Biden's strategy is to push legislative actions at home, and nurture international cooperation abroad, to gain a competitive edge over China which by most accounts is speeding ahead in the technological domain. In August 2022, Biden signed an Executive Order to implement the Chips and Sciences Act designed to strengthen chip manufacturing in the US and address supply chain issues.³⁷ The Biden administration has placed technological competition at the heart of its China policy, within a binary framework of “techno-democracies” versus “techno-autocracies”.³⁸

Successive supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic, and the war between Russia and Ukraine that erupted in February 2022, have heightened the competition in the global semiconductor sector. If for Trump, export control policies were a means of imposing restrictions on China, Biden has taken the view that problems in one sector could potentially impact the overall bilateral relationship. As such, the repercussions of the US's tech war with China in other areas of concern for the US—such as governance in China and suppression of people's rights—are hardly surprising.

What started under the Trump administration as a trade dispute has now entered the areas of 5G, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and semiconductors. For Washington, the Made in China 2025 programme³⁹ is at the heart of the tech-competition with China. The Biden administration's emphasis on the binary of 'techno-democracies vs. techno-autocracies' is meant to underscore the pitfalls of how technologies will be used in undemocratic states and autocracies like China.

^b The global chip industry poses the problem of carbon emissions. However, new types of microchips which can be used for different purposes like cars, laptops and electric lamps ensure less energy loss, filling the market gap, and thereby contributing to green transition.

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The Biden administration has pushed Congress for more funding to boost semiconductor manufacturing at home. The House of Representatives and the Senate together allocated US\$52 billion to fund the Chips for America Act. China, for its part, set a US\$29-billion semiconductor fund in 2019 and has spent US\$100 billion on the semiconductor industry since 2015.⁴⁰ It is clear that under Biden, the US is competing and adapting at the same time.

Indo-Pacific

In the Indo-Pacific, there are three challenges from China for the Biden administration. First, China continues to push for technological supremacy in the region. This could redefine regional competition in the Indo-Pacific in the next few decades, where the US itself is seeking to build a technological network through its multilateral linkages, most notably through its cooperation on critical and emerging technologies with Quad countries—i.e., Australia, India, Japan, and the US. Second, the contours of economic and strategic coercion of Australia by China could redefine how the US reorients its China strategy in the Pacific theatre. The Biden administration's scramble to consolidate its position in the Pacific theatre through the AUKUS deal—signed in April 2022 between Australia, the UK, and the US—is a clear attempt to form a long-term strategy in the region. Third, one of the most important challenges for the Biden administration remains in the form of the China threat on Taiwan. China has not only reiterated its position on Taiwan time and again but has also redrawn limits of Chinese sovereignty by its steps in Hong Kong to usher a firmer political, administrative and security control in Beijing's favour. Taiwan remains the most potent flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific that could redefine the future balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, as well as the limits of US might.

The Ukraine-Russia war has rekindled the Taiwan question for the US. Since the beginning of the war, the Biden administration has faced growing pressure on its capacity to convince its Indo-Pacific allies when all its attention was being redrawn to Europe. Increasing Chinese assertiveness towards Taiwan underscored questions around the US's willingness to get involved militarily in the Indo-Pacific, even as it dealt with a war in Europe. Additionally, there were concerns that an active front with Russia in Europe may not divert the US's strategic focus in the region nor cause it to relocate its resources from the Indo-Pacific to Europe.

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There is a recognition of the shifting balance of power across the Taiwan Strait in China's favour. To pre-empt these concerns, Biden has moved to change its strategy on Taiwan, even as the official position remains the same through its 'One China' policy. In April 2021, a new set of guidelines were brought in for engagement of US officials with their Taiwanese counterparts.⁴¹ The guidelines underscored the criticality of the Taiwan Relations Act, the three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances that guide the overall security assurance from the US to Taiwan.

In May this year, Biden's assurance that the US will defend Taiwan militarily against China⁴² marked an assertiveness in the US's Taiwan policy. Although the US government walked back on Biden's statement committing military defence of Taiwan, recent moves such as House Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 have sent reassurance to Taiwan. The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 "promotes the security of Taiwan, ensures regional stability, and deters People's Republic of China (PRC) aggression against Taiwan. It also threatens severe sanctions against the PRC for hostile action against Taiwan."⁴³

Approaching the Indo-Pacific from a multilateral perspective, the Biden administration has continued signalling stronger military resolve vis-à-vis China in the region. Its two primary ways are partnering with an umbrella of countries in the Indo-Pacific, and strengthening its Pacific alliance with its non-NATO allies. One such exercise in October 2021 involved⁴⁴ at least six different navies from the US, the UK, Japan, Netherlands, Canada, and New Zealand. The frequency of US forays closer to China's coasts went up under the Biden administration.

US carrier strike groups went into the South China Sea 10 times in 2021, compared to the six of 2020 and five in 2019.⁴⁵ However, Biden's long view of a competition/cooperation engagement with China requires a renewed multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific that would distribute stakes and responsibilities over a large group of like-minded countries. Biden's domestic political compulsions and external challenges in the form of China weigh substantively on the US's emerging outlook in the Indo-Pacific.

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Unlike Trump, Biden even wants the US to re-engage countries like Iran through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) despite lack of success in Central Asia in the wake of its withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁴⁶ As China has shown all signs of an early scramble⁴⁷ to fill the strategic vacuum in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, the Biden administration has sought to strengthen its strategic presence and capacities along with its partners and allies in the West as well as the Central Asian region.

“One of the most important challenges for the Biden administration in the Indo-Pacific is in the form of the China threat on Taiwan.”

Framing a sound China policy that balances competition and cooperation has become a more complicated task for the Biden administration. The Russia-Ukraine war may have even added a new strategic context to the US's global reorientation. The relatively dormant Eurasian front, which has been reactivated due to the ongoing war, could have long-term implications for the global strategy of the US, especially for its Indo-Pacific resolve.

The Ukraine war may have further eroded the possibility of a US-China reset under the Biden administration. The bonhomie between Russia and China will force the US to consolidate its trans-Atlantic ties and commitments with its Indo-Pacific partners. In turn, this would mean that the US will try to wean some countries in Europe away from China, given the far deeper integration of China in Europe through cooperation in trade, technology, and connectivity.

Biden has shown himself as the US president to command the largest spending, since the Second World War, in the areas of infrastructure, healthcare, education, and climate change. He could also be the president who would be facing a most compelling China threat. [ORF](#)

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