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US Presidential Election 2020

How Will Biden Respond to China?

By Tan See Seng

SYNOPSIS

Should Joe Biden become the next president of America, what might his China policy look like? A Biden approach to Xi Jinping's China could have three possible dimensions.

COMMENTARY

AGAINST A challenging backdrop of coronavirus pandemic, economic recession and racial turmoil, America is bracing itself for a possibly tumultuous presidential election on 3 November 2020. Despite Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's lead in most polls against President Donald Trump, it remains unclear at this juncture which of the two will be in the White House come January 2021.

Should Biden become the 46th president of the United States, what might his administration's approach to China look like? Despite the propensity for newly-minted US presidents to adopt policies distinct from those of their immediate predecessors from the opposing party, the fact is that where China policy is concerned, the fundamentals have rarely differed between Democratic and Republican administrations.

Biden's China Strategy: Three Possible Dimensions

That changed from July 2018 onwards, however, when President Trump imposed sweeping tariffs on Chinese imports, curbed Chinese investments in the US and pressured allies to eschew Chinese technology – steps that broke with a decades-long broad policy aimed at fostering closer ties between the two big powers.

Trump's hardline stance against China has led some observers – including the US' top counterintelligence official William Evanina in a statement issued last month – to suggest, fairly or otherwise, that Beijing will be happy to see Trump leave office. But lest we think a Biden presidency will dramatically change things, it bears reminding Biden has long maintained that America needs to “get tough” with China.

That said, despite sharing Trump's perspective on China, Biden and his national security advisors advocate a different approach to China. There are at least three noteworthy dimensions to what could conceivably emerge as Biden's China strategy.

Keeping China A Responsible Stakeholder

Biden has argued the need to preserve the liberal international order and reinstate America to the top of that order – the very things he believes the Trump presidency has assiduously undermined. In January 2017, just three days before leaving office as vice president, Biden urged his fellow world leaders to “act urgently to defend the liberal international order” in the face of sustained challenges to globalisation by the forces of protectionism and populism.

President Xi Jinping has continually portrayed China as the defender of globalisation at international fora like APEC and the World Economic Forum. But much as Biden welcomes Xi's advocacy, the preservation of the liberal international order for Biden involves keeping China in check so far as its motives and conduct are concerned.

“If China has its way, it will keep robbing the US of our technology and intellectual property [or] forcing American companies to give it away in order to do business in China,” as Biden argued in a July 2019 speech in New York. Acknowledging areas of converging interests and potential cooperation with Beijing in that same speech, Biden also insisted that the “most effective way” to deal with “China's abusive behaviour” is to “build a united front of friends and partners” to check and challenge China.

In 2005, the then US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick memorably urged China to become a “responsible stakeholder.” Biden does not quite use Zoellick's language, but the gist of his thinking seems to revolve around the perceived need to collectively ensure that China behaves as one.

Checking China: Through International Collaboration

Which leads to the second dimension of Biden's putative China strategy: Biden's America cannot and does not want to manage China on its own. Creating and maintaining such a united front of friends and partners involves bolstering America's system of alliances and security partnerships which Trump initially dismissed, only to reverse course.

In 2018, Trump came up with initiatives like the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) – due to the belated recognition that the US needs friends and partners if it hopes to promote and protect its interests beyond its shores. Echoing this, Biden noted in his July 2019 speech referenced earlier: “America's security, prosperity, and way of life require the strongest possible network of partners and allies working alongside us.”

Biden has taken pains to address why he believes collaboration and partnership help rather than hinder America. “Working cooperatively with other nations that share our values and goals does not make the United States a chump,” he wrote earlier this year in *Foreign Affairs*. “It makes us more secure and more successful. We amplify our own strength, extend our presence around the globe, and magnify our impact while sharing global responsibilities with willing partners.”

Biden argued that his foreign policy agenda “will place America back at the head of the table,” working with Washington’s allies and partners in mobilising collective action in response to contemporary global threats.

Needless to say, Biden’s assumption that the world will automatically welcome US leadership could well be misplaced, not least in the wake of the profound sense of abandonment, frustration and disappointment felt among America’s friends and partners as a consequence of Trump’s policies. A President Biden will have his hands full trying to restore the world’s trust and confidence in America.

Balancing China: Militarily and Technologically

Finally, there is a deep sense among US strategic thinkers that American deterrence has eroded to the point that rival powers like China, with its growing assertiveness and military strength, could be tempted to risk war with America. No less an authority on US defence matters than Michele Flournoy, touted by many as a shoo-in for the defence secretary post should Biden win the presidency, has urged the reestablishment of American deterrence.

Writing with the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) warfighting capabilities in mind, Flournoy argued in June 2020 in *Foreign Affairs* that the US has to invest significantly in “new capabilities that will ultimately determine military success – such as resilient battlefield networks, artificial intelligence to support faster decision-making, fleets of unmanned systems, and hypersonic and long-range precision missiles”.

Echoing Biden’s call to strengthen America’s alliances and partnerships, Flournoy advised the need for clear-eyed assessments of “what each US ally and partner can contribute to deterrence and developing multiyear security cooperation plans for each”. She also called for the urgent development of new “game-changing” ways in which the US military will fight and the need for dedicated support from the US Congress.

Making Sense of Xi’s China

Ultimately, there is perhaps no better way to craft a China policy – or any policy, for that matter – than to begin with a frank appraisal of one’s flawed assumptions about China. Writing in early 2018 in *Foreign Affairs*, two seasoned US foreign policy hands, Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner – the latter a Biden campaign advisor – conceded that nothing hitherto has worked to sway China to march to America’s drumbeat:

Neither the use of “carrots” like diplomatic and commercial engagement has led to political liberalisation in China, nor reliance on “sticks” like US military power and regional balancing has convinced China to shun its revisionist conduct. Nor has the

liberal international order that Joe Biden aspires to preserve worked “to lure or bind China” as successfully as Washington has hoped for.

For all intents and purposes, China has pursued its own course and frustrated American expectations along the way.

Whether the American electorate delivers a Biden or Trump presidency on 3 November, making sense of Xi’s China is of paramount importance if America wishes to get its China policy right. Based on what Biden and his foreign policy advisors have said and written, the chance for a reset arguably lies with a Biden presidency rather than the current one.

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