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US Presidential Election 2020

The Biden Presidency: A Different China Policy?

By Zhang Baohui

SYNOPSIS

As Joe Biden fights to claim his presidency, analysts are already debating what changes in foreign policy he will introduce on China. Will he pursue a different China policy, shaped more by his personality? Or will he be constrained by the international system?

COMMENTARY

THE PROJECTED victory of Joe Biden in the United States presidential election raises the question of whether his China policy will significantly differ from that of the Trump administration. This question is important due to the major changes in the China policy of the US under Donald Trump. These changes have profoundly affected the dynamics of not only Sino-US ties but also international relations in the Asia Pacific region.

The Trump administration's emphasis on great power competition has drastically sharpened strategic rivalry between China and the US. Other countries in the region have faced increasing pressure to "choose sides". The critical question that many are asking now is what will the Biden administration's China policy be like?

Biden's China Policy in an Anarchic Order

In the study of international relations, the matter here fundamentally concerns the classic "*man vs. structure*" issue. Whether individual leaders matter in terms of foreign policies of state has been continuously debated by scholars. Also known as *agency vs. structure* debate, most IR scholars place great stress on the incentives and

constraints posed by the environment, be it domestic or international. They tend to see significant continuities in the foreign policies of states.

On the other hand, some argue that the tendency to overlook the roles of individual leaders is misguided, as their personalities and background experiences do affect their approaches to foreign policy. Therefore, whether leaders can make a difference in the foreign policy of states is a significant issue for the rest of the world to gauge Joe Biden's China policy.

Here, structural approaches to the study of international relations suggest that the anarchic order of the international system will impose significant constraints on Biden and his China policy will continue to emphasise strategic competition. The anarchic international system forces states, especially the great powers, to put a premium on their relative power and influences over rival great powers.

In fact, this is the key insight of *offensive realism*, famously coined by American political scientist John Mearsheimer. *Defensive realism*, which is another structural theory, also predicts continued rivalry between China and the US. The anarchic order causes the security dilemma between states due to mutual mistrust.

Continued Strategic Rivalry?

As power continues to shift between China and the US, they both tend to assume the worst about the other's intentions. While Beijing sees the US determined to thwart its rise, Washington sees China determined to undermine its global primacy.

In this context many have argued that strategic rivalry will continue under the Biden administration. It is now widely accepted that there is a strong consensus in the US regarding its China policy. A structural perspective on Biden's China policy will therefore predict that his administration will more or less continue a policy of strategic competition.

However, leaders do possess different ideas about the foreign policy challenges that confront their countries. According to constructivist IR theory, ideas matter. They shape leaders' understanding of the issues they face and ways to resolve these issues. Different leaders subscribe to different ideas, thereby leading to significant variations in their foreign policies and strategies.

Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" is often said to be the key factor in the rapid end of the Cold War in the late 1980s. No structural approaches to the study of international relations predicted this outcome.

Biden's Restrained or Selective Competition?

From this perspective, the Biden administration's China policy could see significant differences from that of the Trump administration. While his China policy may continue to reflect the competition logic, it would nonetheless show major differences at the operational level.

For example, while Biden does see China as the biggest competitor, he also argues

that the US needs to carefully manage its relations with Beijing in order to avoid scenarios such as military conflicts. In the trade area, he has indicated that while he would also pursue a more reciprocal trade relationship with China, he nonetheless considers the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration harming American consumers and companies.

As a typical liberal Democrat, Biden has also promised that his government would once again pay more attention to urgent global governance issues, ranging from COVID-19 to climate change. In this regard, his administration may seek China's cooperation on these issues.

The above indicate that under the Biden presidency Sino-US relations will see more restrained strategic competition, perhaps even selective cooperation.

The Biden presidency will therefore offer an interesting test of the agency vs. structure debate in international relations. In the coming year his administration's China policy will tell if leaders or the international system play greater roles in shaping the foreign policies of states.

Will Biden's China policy be significantly different from that of Trump's? The answer to this question will not only shed light on a classic debate in the study of international relations but also shape international politics in the next few years with Biden in the White House. How different will the US be under a Biden presidency?

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