

Joe Biden and US-PRC relations

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The beginnings of a new political chapter in the US has turned the world's attention towards a future with a Joe Biden-led America.

During a November 13 [phone call](#) with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, the President-elect said that he looked forward to working with Australia on 'many common challenges', citing COVID-19 and global health, climate change, global economic recovery, strengthening democracy, and maintaining a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

While the [People's Republic of China (PRC)] was not explicitly mentioned, it will figure prominently in how Biden's foreign policy agenda is addressed.

Campaign trail flexing

On the campaign trail, Biden had adopted a muscular stance on the PRC, [calling](#) President Xi Jinping a 'thug' in presidential debates and [stressing](#) that the PRC, Russia and Iran would 'pay a price if I'm elected' for '[interfering] in American elections'. Indeed, Biden's campaign went further than Trump administration policy when it [described](#) Beijing's treatment of Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang as 'genocide'.

However, with the presidential race over, Biden signalled that the caustic campaign period rhetoric would be modulated, proclaiming in his [victory speech](#) that it was 'time to put away the harsh rhetoric'. While this was directed towards efforts to unify a bitterly divided domestic sphere, analysts seem to widely agree that it equally applies to the PRC. A Biden presidency will see less incendiary rhetorical flourishes than the Trump era.

But despite the employment of more benign language, strategic competition with the PRC is here to stay. While Biden had [maintained](#) in May 2019 that the PRC was 'not competition for us', he had over the course of the presidential campaign – [according](#) to one of his advisors – been 'reprogrammed' on the PRC. Ely Ratner, a China policy advisor to Biden, [said](#) there is a recognition with respect to the PRC that, 'There's a technology competition, a military competition, an economic competition, an ideological competition and a diplomatic competition'.

Biden's PRC policy vision

Geopolitical and domestic realities will continue to dictate American policy towards the PRC, as they had under Trump. Propelled by a new bipartisan political consensus on the PRC, a middle America that is near united in its distrust of the PRC and the belief that it is responsible for the hollowing out of industrial centres, a campaign platform that centralised 'Made in America', and an aim to frame US strategy using the narrative of American exceptionalism, Biden will continue on the trajectory accelerated by Trump.

That said, Biden's foreign policy strategy will employ different tactics. Trump-era isolationist and unilateral approaches will likely give way to a more collegial and coordinated methodology. Multilateralism will be given its due, there will be an attempt to give allies and partners the traditional respect and consideration expected, and mercurial behaviour will be forsaken.

The governing maxim for Biden's PRC policy will be tackling competition while avoiding outright military confrontation. This is in line with the [2020 Democratic Party Platform](#), which stated that the party 'believe[s] the China challenge is not primarily a military one' and that 'Democrats will pursue [their China strategy] without resorting to self-defeating, unilateral tariff wars or falling into the trap of a new Cold War'. To ensure that the PRC challenge is met head-on, Biden has [undertaken](#) to place a premium on engaging with partners and allies 'to build a united front...to confront China's abusive behaviours and human rights violations, even as we seek to cooperate on issues where our interests converge, such as climate change, non-proliferation, and global health security'.

Constraints on US PRC policy

It is likely that this coordinated, multilateral approach will be subject to a number of constraints.

First is the general mood of the [American public](#). The new president will have to contend with a domestic population tired of the US playing world police officer, not to mention a tangled web of domestic matters requiring immediate attention, with COVID-19 and the economic downturn topping the list.

Second is the ongoing debate and differences in opinion among factions and forces within the Democratic Party. While there was a semblance of party unity during the presidential campaign, division is coming to the fore once again. Brookings senior fellow Thomas Wright, for example, [points out](#) fierce intra-Democratic debate amongst centrists on key points with respect to the PRC, such as the notion of limited economic decoupling and the extent to which the PRC challenge necessitates changes to domestic policy. Thus there is a risk that, as Biden once observed in 1987, the Democrats may again be 'immobilised by complexity' in the enactment of foreign policy.

Third is that Biden's foreign policy initiatives will also naturally require buy-in from partners and allies who have been disillusioned by Trump's disregard, if not outright contempt, for them. To regain and rebuild trust and confidence in American leadership at this stage, the Biden team will have to exert robust efforts in re-establishing lost credibility. It will also have to contend with hesitation from some countries, especially those more geographically proximate to the PRC, to participate in initiatives that deliberately exclude the PRC. Singapore Prime Minister [Lee Hsien Loong](#), for example, said on November 17, 'We all want to work together with the US...we would like to cooperate within the region...[but] I think not very many countries would like to join basically a coalition against those who have been excluded, chief of whom will be China'.

Indeed, in a 2020 [survey](#) of Southeast Asian elites by the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, when respondents were asked, 'If ASEAN were forced to align itself with [either the US or the PRC], which should it choose?', a slim majority of total respondents (53.6 per cent) favoured the US. But when respondents were broken down by nationality, the majority of respondents from seven of the 10 ASEAN member countries opted to align their country with the PRC over the US (Laos, Brunei, Myanmar, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia).

Implications for Australia

Australia, which has had to work with an impetuous and unpredictable American leadership over the last four years, should expect a smoother working relationship with a Biden-led US. Some comfort will be drawn from the expressed American resolve to prioritise working within multilateral institutions and nurturing and revitalising relationships, without the Trump-style bare-knuckle exactions. While a major reset in US-PRC relations is doubtful, there is some hope that the new US leadership will change the atmospherics with the PRC, thereby allowing for a subtle recalibration. Already with reference to its relationship with the US, PRC Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng on November 5 [expressed](#) some optimism, stating that while there were 'disagreements between the two countries', they also had 'broad common interests and space'.

That said, Australia might also be asked to do more in terms of participating in US-led initiatives geared towards containing the PRC, especially in light of American intent, [articulated](#) by Secretary of State nominee and longtime Biden advisor, Tony Blinken: '[W]e have to start by putting ourselves in a position of strength from which to engage China so that the relationship moves forward more on our terms than on theirs'.

This will place Australia in an even more difficult position as its relationship with the PRC continues to deteriorate. Perhaps in anticipation of this, Prime Minister Morrison had used a public [address](#) on November 23 to send a message to both the US and the PRC: 'Greater latitude will be required from the world's largest powers to accommodate the individual interests of their partners and allies. We all need a bit more room to move'. He stated, 'Stark choices are in no-one's interests'.

That this request will resonate with the two great powers is doubtful. Competition will only continue to intensify between the US and the PRC, and each is unlikely to concede the initiative, although some of the immediate heat may be taken out of the relationship. Australia will need persistence to grapple with fundamental questions in its foreign policy. A Biden administration may have bought more time in which to do this, but has by no means diminished the need for it.

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