

# The Biden Administration and China: Reset or crisis continued, por Robert Matthews

## Description

The election of Pres. Joseph R Biden occurred at a time when the global power and influence of the US has diminished considerably from its position after WWII. The dramatic shift—and even a certain crisis of confidence in the US— owes much to the gradual but systemic erosion over the past several decades of its international economic and military role, along with emergence more recently of serious international rivals in both regards. In addition, the proximate factor of former President Donald J. Trump's go-it-alone, America first, neo-isolationism has done its part to accelerate a diplomatic deterioration.

The Trump administration undermined U.S. alliances, disparaged free trade, crippled the diplomatic corps and most important, disdained any pretense of a US role in preserving the international order of the past 70 years. So far, Biden, while maintaining a certain conventional toughness and questioning the military engagement policies of previous administrations, is also ending the counterproductive bombast, bullying and gratuitous threats of Trump and Secretary of State (Foreign Minister/Ministro de Exteriores) Michael Pompeo during the previous government.

To his credit Biden has assembled a solid team of economic, foreign policy, and national security advisers who are experienced professionals and well versed on China— a welcome change from the mediocre appointments and fragmented bureaucracy of the Department of State under Trump.

In the rubble of the Trump years the Biden administration faces a number of critical foreign policy challenges. Among the most critical tests is the US relationship with China. Trump delivered a gift to Beijing with his approach to foreign policy: the havoc his presidency wrought within the United States and abroad with its allies, which China exploited. Beijing profited by default, not so much because of the benefits it offered but because of Washington's startling abandonment of its international responsibilities.

In addition to the diplomatic disarray Biden faces, he inherits a highly confrontational relationship with Beijing. The past four years of China policy have highlighted Washington's inconsistent and sometimes erratic behavior, oscillating between sycophancy and reckless hostility, and recurring often to clumsy pressure tactics, name-calling and gratuitous insults. The results have not just been meager; they have been injurious to US interests as China has used Washington's belligerence to rally the public to its hyper-nationalism and to appear before the world as the victim.

Owing to Trump's neglect of regional alliances like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Biden must also deal with the shattered confidence in the US among Asian nations. This was particularly counterproductive in containing China in its sphere of influence. In the meantime the economic ties between China and the SE Asian nations grow ever stronger – as indeed is happening globally— even in Latin America. Washington has its work cut out for itself in convincing these countries of the advantages and benefits of shifting trade and economic development toward the US.

To reset relations in Asia Biden needs to be careful to avoid threatening China with the appearance of encirclement, which China is wary of, much like Russia's attitude toward the expansion of NATO in the former states of the USSR. In the near term observers do not look for dramatic pivots in regional policies on either side.

Human rights will be a prominent issue in a way that it was largely invisible in the Trump years. Already Beijing's abuse of its Uighur population has been characterized by the administration as genocidal.

## OBSTACLES TO REPAIRING THE RELATIONSHIP

It is not as likely as once thought that the US and the West can manage a gradual and peaceful transition to a cooperative

rather than an antagonistic China. Biden now seems prepared to follow Trump's rejection of previous administrations' versions of "strategic engagement" with China, with its the pretense of bilateral cooperation, and recognize it as a "strategic rival" in open competition of the US. Thus, at this point there appears to be limited space for improving relations with China. (This is also the case with its other major antagonist, Russia).

Biden may well also be hamstrung by a Republican Party, dominated by the far-right and looking to exploit the country's deep polarization to undermine his presidency. This may make it difficult for him to achieve the necessary consensus for a successful bipartisan strategy on China.

Yet there is some optimism that tensions can be held in check. Early on Beijing has commented positively on the Biden government for seeming to offer a welcome initial pivot away from military and geopolitical issues to climate change, global trade, the Covid pandemic and cooperation to address public health matters.

## CONFLICT ZONES

The two flashpoints that could upset all calculations are the South China Sea and Taiwan. Some feel, even more than Taiwan, China's military build-up in the trading corridor of the South China Sea, where a third of international trade passes, where Beijing has territorial disputes with Vietnam, and where there have been past confrontations with the US, runs the highest risk of becoming a dangerous stand-off with the Biden administration. Like the US in its historic defense of the Caribbean Basin, China sees this area as the cornerstone of its international ambitions. The Biden administration, for its part, will likely protect the sea's trade routes and continue to maintain its traditional prominence in this region.

The U.S. will likely continue trying to limit China in the area through multilateral military exercises, occasional sanctions on Chinese enterprises and diplomatic rebukes. However, the belief that Taiwan constitutes a legitimate island territory of China and more so than other areas upon which it has encroached is a deeply held conviction.

## TAIWAN

More than any other geopolitical issue between the US and China, the specter of armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait casts the longest shadow. Many U.S. defense officials believe that China may make military moves to take control of Taiwan sooner rather than later, perhaps within the next six years. Such an event, not imminent and in any case unpredictable in its details, would likely spread swiftly to affect Asian and global political, military and economic relations. Therefore, it is incumbent on Washington to take prudent deterrent measures over this time period to affect Beijing's decision calculus.

While Trump eroded the "One China" policy, Biden officials is returning to some version of it; for example, the administration will not be formalizing diplomatic encounters, including high-level visits to the island, between Washington and Taipei any time soon. Yet, unofficial relations may be used to good effect as a deterrent to China's ambitions regarding Taiwan.

Taiwan's economic ties and defense ties with the US will continue to be a major bulwark against the challenge from China and any aggressive diplomatic and military behavior. Biden is also likely to continue to strengthen the capabilities of the U.S. military and endeavor to sustain American global technological leadership.

In order to deter Beijing effectively from attacking Taiwan Washington needs to engage in the formidable task of creating a coalition of allies in a coordinated economic, political, and military response to Chinese aggression. The reality is that most countries are loathe to confront China militarily or jeopardize their economic ties in order to ally with the US over Taiwan. Thus, Biden must convince the Chinese that there is a military risk as well as a risk to their sedulously cultivated international status in any armed conflict with Taiwan.

In return, Washington must also unequivocally reinstate the "one China" policy abandoned by the Trump administration—ending the diplomatic foot playing and norm-breaking visits with Taipei officials in which Trump engaged. In the end avoiding conflict and crafting a coherent response to China rests on Washington's jettisoning any version of a "Cold War ideology" with its attendant razor-edge brinksmanship and military confrontations which reprise the attitudes and behavior of the era of US-USSR rivalry. It is hoped that this will reinforce Beijing's general desire to de-escalate immediate tensions, recommit to bilateral arrangements and avoid military and economic crises.

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## APARTADOSTEMATICOXEOGRAFICOS

China e o mundo chinés

## ETIQUETAS

China Galicia USA internacional

## IDIOMA

Inglés

## INVESTIGACION

Relacións Internacionais

### Date Created

Decembro 16, 2021

### Meta Fields

**Autoria :**

3769

**Datapublicacion :**

20211216

**Subtítulo :**

Artigo extraído do Libro Homenaxe a Xulio Ríos Paredes "Unha vida de compromiso para unha Galicia universal"