Biden’s China Policy: Different Tone, Substance Unchanged

January 27, 2021

Amidst a confluence of domestic crises, US President Joseph R. Biden has an equally challenging external agenda to contend with, no more so than in Asia. In the wake of the previous four years of scattershot foreign policy under Donald J. Trump, among the most pressing issues facing the Biden administration is a reassessment of US-China policy at one of the most fraught junctures in bilateral relations.

Biden will rely heavily on trusted faces from the Obama administration to plot a deft course that seeks to manage China’s increasingly assertive global ambitions while offering succor to – and recognition of – the balancing act that erstwhile US allies and partners in the region face in the shadow of Beijing. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, a long-time Biden adviser, and newly appointed National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan have both articulated an Asia-Pacific strategy centered on multilateral engagement and the revitalization of the US regional alliance system.

While this approach will likely avoid the go-it-alone bellicosity that characterized China policy under Trump, the new administration’s posture towards China will, nonetheless, reflect an increasingly hawkish bipartisan consensus that views Beijing as the single greatest foreign policy challenge facing the US. In his Senate confirmation hearings on January 19, Blinken acknowledged as much: “Let me just say that I also believe that President Trump was right in taking a tougher approach to China…I disagree very much with the way that he went about it in a number of areas, but the basic principle was the right one, and I think that’s actually helpful to our foreign policy.”

Moreover, Blinken and Sullivan’s velvet-gloved veneer belies a framing of US-China competition that is, in some ways, more ideological than that of the Trump administration, which veered towards pugnaciousness in the absence of a values-driven foreign policy. Blinken and Sullivan’s diplomatic lexicon draws heavily on liberal internationalism’s championing of universal human rights. Both have spoken of the need for the US to partner with like-minded democracies and, in Sullivan’s words, to “choose a side between autocracy and democracy.”

Much of the hard work of translating the Biden administration’s vision of strategic competition with China will fall on the shoulders of Kurt Campbell, an Asia expert versed in both diplomacy and business who has been appointed to the new post of Indo-Pacific Coordinator at the National Security Council. Campbell will have his work cut out trying to assuage skeptical US allies, scarred by the unpredictability of Trumpian foreign policy, to turn their backs on any further Belt-and-Road-wrapped diplomatic and financial largesse proffered by Beijing. While advocating a “co-existence” view of US-China relations, Campbell has also advanced policy ideas that are likely to unsettle Beijing. These include the dispersal of US military forces across Southeast Asia and South Asia in addition to their long-established presence in Japan and South Korea. Adding to the administration’s seemingly more hawkish ranks are Ely Ratner who will be the principal adviser on China matters to the Pentagon and Katherine Tai, an experienced hand in US-China trade disputes, as US Trade Representative nominee.

While the Biden team has recognized that it must pursue selective cooperation with Beijing on issues such as climate change, on-the-ground realities in the Asia-Pacific coupled with domestic political considerations are likely to push the Biden administration in a more – not less – assertive direction than might have been expected in the wake of Trump’s confrontationist approach. Inevitably, the Biden White House will face accusations from conservative critics that it is comparatively “weak” on China and accompanying pressure to reinforce its diplomatic rhetoric with hard power. Senator Marco Rubio, a possible Republican aspirant for the White House in 2024, has already derided Biden’s foreign policy and national security team as “polite & orderly caretakers of America’s decline.” Such characterizations, which have been echoed by other conservative politicians, underscore the degree to which US policy towards China has become circumscribed to a narrow political band – one whose primary distinction is between notions of strategic competition and strategic confrontation.
In seeking to break with Trump in tone, if not substance, the Biden administration may find its values-based foreign policy vision a difficult sell in a region where illiberalism is aplenty and economic entanglement with China has become largely inescapable. While the choice between values and realpolitik is hardly a novel dilemma for US foreign policy strategists, the stakes it carries may never have been higher.

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Contact

Ben Rowse
Partner & Regional Head, Asia-Pacific
+81 3 5219 1256
browse@nardelloandco.com

Matthew Garland
Director
+852 3628 3950
mgarland@nardelloandco.com