

On China, Biden Falls Into Trump's Xenophobia Trap

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Donald Trump's oft-displayed ignorance of the most rudimentary matters of policy and law shouldn't blind us to his genuine political skills. He might not understand the Constitution or know how to govern, but he has an uncanny mastery of negative partisanship. He has repeatedly demonstrated the ability to combine brazen corruption and unabashed incompetence while still retaining the loyalty of the Republican base. All he has to do is remind them that Democrats are even worse.

In 2016, Trump successfully pinned the label "Crooked Hillary" on his rival. The sequel to "Crooked Hillary" is going to be "Beijing Biden," a nickname that the Trump campaign is already promoting on social media as part of an effort to tie the former vice president to the Chinese regime. As *The Washington Post* reports, "President Trump's campaign is preparing to launch a broad effort aimed at linking Joe Biden to China, after concluding that it would be more politically effective than defending or promoting Trump's response to the coronavirus pandemic."

Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*, Trump campaign spokesman Tim Murtaugh claimed that internal polls showed that "Joe Biden's softness on China is a major vulnerability." Biden, Murtaugh added, "doesn't view China as an economic competitor, he was critical of the president's life-saving China travel restrictions, he has resisted holding China accountable for the virus outbreak, and his son Hunter entered business with a state-owned Chinese bank after he accompanied his then-vice president father on an Air Force 2 trip to Beijing."

Last week, America First Action, a pro-Trump Super PAC, released a series of ads along these lines, with a special emphasis on Biden's historic friendliness to good trade relations with China. "Stop China, Stop Joe Biden," the ads implored.

On Friday, Biden's presidential campaign responded with an ad that correctly chides Trump for his botched response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Then the ad added, "So now, Trump and his allies are launching negative attacks against Joe Biden to hide the truth. Here are the facts: Joe Biden warned the nation in January that Trump had left us unprepared for an epidemic." The ad goes on to say, "When Trump rolled over for the Chinese, he took their word for it. Trump praised the Chinese 15 times in January and February as the coronavirus spread across the world."

The use of the phrase "the Chinese" is troubling, since it fails to acknowledge the distinction between the Chinese people and the government of the People's Republic of China. For that matter, it eludes the reality of Chinese people living outside the PRC, in Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States.

Some political pundits, especially those in the MSNBC resistance liberal camp, loved the ad. “This is the most devastating political ad I’ve seen in years,” Joe Scarborough tweeted. “It reveals the truth about Trump and China, and that truth is ugly.” Scarborough’s colleague Joy Reid agreed, tweeting, “This @JoeBiden ad is going to make @realDonaldTrump very, very angry.”

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Yet, even if the ad can be commended for forcefully responding to Trump’s attack, it was hard to ignore the undercurrent of xenophobia. Cecillia Wang, deputy legal director of the ACLU, tweeted, “Wow @JoeBiden. Already trying to out-Trump Trump. This kind of fearmongering is causing violent attacks on Asian Americans. If you are trying to reform your past history of racist policymaking, like your 1994 crime bill, you had better do some homework. This ain’t it.”

In an e-mail, Emma Ashford, a research fellow in defense and foreign policy at the Cato Institute, noted that the ad implied a hawkish foreign policy, with Biden promising to stand up to the Chinese government.

“First, I think politically this does Joe Biden no favors, as it effectively buys into Trump’s narrative on the virus,” Ashford informed me. “Clearly, they’re trying to criticize Trump here, but they’re buying his argument more broadly, arguing that this was a foreign virus, and he should have dealt with China more strictly, rather than the alternate narrative that pandemics are a known threat, and Trump undermined our ability to respond effectively. It still pins much of the blame on China.”

The ad, Ashford argues, is “bad for the future of Democrats’ foreign policy. It’s going to be very difficult to make progress on cutting the defense budget, ‘ending endless war,’ or other progressive priorities in foreign policy if a Biden administration effectively adopts the Trump administration’s model of confrontation with China.”

To effectively answer Trump, Biden needs to walk a difficult tightrope: He must address criticisms of his past robust support for trade with China and explain how he has changed in light of new realities, while criticizing Trump’s currying favor with the authoritarian Chinese regime. All of this has to be combined with an explicit rebuke to xenophobia.

This nuanced position on China isn’t impossible—it’s very close to what Bernie Sanders ran on. Sanders has the advantage of being a longtime critic of trade agreements that allow offshoring to China without asking for protection of labor rights and environmental standards. Lacking that history and, in fact, being an avid free-trader, Biden has made the mistake of over-compensating by going full-blast in criticizing China. This is the likely source of the xenophobia of the ad, which can charitably be seen as inadvertent.

Biden has fallen into Trump’s trap. Trump is using China as a wedge issue to divide different Democratic voting blocs. Trump doesn’t need to win these voters for himself. He just has to make sure they are discouraged enough to stay home in November. By highlighting Biden’s longtime support of unbridled trade with China, Trump is hoping to dampen pro-Biden enthusiasm among blue-collar workers in the Midwest.

Biden's strategy of responding to this attack with xenophobia will only further fragment his base. It might win back some of those blue-collar voters, but at the risk of alienating Asian Americans (a group that has been strongly trending towards the Democrats). Biden is also antagonizing progressives with the Yellow Peril undercurrent of the ad, as well as those who fear ramping up military tensions with a rising world power.

A more nimble approach to the China question is still possible. Biden could try to adopt Bernie Sanders's approach to trade and also reaffirm the distinction between the Chinese people and their government. But this would require an ability to convey a nuanced message, a talent that Biden hasn't shown yet during this election cycle. Biden's campaign would do well to figure out how to make their case in a nuanced way, since China as a hot-button issue is going to continue to dominate the election.