

A Restart for U.S.-China Relations?

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The U.S. presidential campaign has mercifully ended. Joe Biden will enter the White House on January 20th. The change in administrations creates an opportunity to reset relations between Washington and Beijing.

Both sides should work to move off paths of violent collision and hostile confrontation to ones of careful competition and critical cooperation. Polls indicate that China's reputation in the West has tanked. While harder to measure, popular Chinese sentiments toward America especially, along with its closest allies, likely have dropped as well.

Certainly, warmth between the two governments has dissipated. Nevertheless, there is a vital difference between the two states treating each other with unrestrained animus or controlled dislike. The latter makes possible a peaceful and productive relationship, even if uneasy and difficult at times.

Although China is the most important international issue awaiting the new administration, the president's attention initially is likely to be diverted by domestic crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recovery, and domestic dissension.

As for international affairs, Iran might pose the most urgent challenge. With the relatively moderate Hassan Rouhani leaving office in August, Washington will have little time to repair the nuclear accord, as promised by Biden. Also topping the agenda will be restoring arms control with Russia and halting U.S.-backed carnage in Yemen.

Moreover, an issue both vital and complex like that of Washington's relations with Beijing will require serious review and will be shaped by those chosen to fill critical positions within the administration. Policy toward the People's Republic of China will be affected by subcabinet appointments at the State Department, the new Defense Department chief, Asia picks for the National Security Council, as well as choices for important trade and economic positions. Setting the administration's China course will be no easy task.

As the Biden administration considers policy, chooses relevant officials, and deals with other crises, the PRC should help set the stage for a more productive relationship. Unsurprisingly, contentious appeals to nationalism which might satisfy personal frustration and gratify public

anger also tend to degrade international relationships. It would be better to set aside perceived slights and wrongs in hopes of improving vital ties which risk going badly awry.

What might Beijing do while waiting for the Biden administration to fully engage?

1) High level officials should speak of a new relationship which accepts the inevitability of serious disagreement but bounds confrontational behavior while pursuing areas of cooperation out of necessity if not comity. Beijing also should note the importance of both sides being willing to compromise when the other nation's critical interests are at stake and state its willingness to respond to new administration overtures.

2) The PRC should use its rising clout with North Korea to counsel Kim Jong-un to forego the sort of provocations in which the regime normally delights. Creating a new crisis in Northeast Asia likely would postpone serious discussions over U.S.-China relations. China hawks would blame Beijing for the North's misbehavior. Such action would push the U.S. toward greater military investment against Pyongyang—which would dovetail with proposals for a military build-up elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific directed against the PRC.

3) Xi Jinping should develop inclusive economic ideas. U.S. trade with China has been a more controversial issue with Democrats than Republicans. Proactively indicating his willingness to seek a modus vivendi for controversies involving intellectual property, commercial espionage, forced technology transfer, and more would demonstrate his seriousness about improving the relationship. Doing so would not require Beijing to surrender substantively, but rather address seriously, central U.S. concerns.

4) China would be wise to minimize “wolf warrior” diplomacy and economic belligerence directed at close American friends. Washington has observed concerted attacks on Australia, in particular, leading some policymakers to urge greater American support for allies threatened by the PRC. These U.S. partners are more likely to push tougher policies in Washington. Moreover, Beijing's behavior reinforces the contention by “China hawks” that the PRC poses a serious menace to Asia and beyond.

5) Undoubtedly, U.S. and allied attacks on the Belt and Road Initiative look self-serving. Western-dominated financial institutions spent decades pouring money into Third World nations which was wantonly stolen and wasted, leaving poor peoples with large, unsustainable debts. Nevertheless, Beijing has paid a price for bad BRI projects and debts. The PRC should propose discussions, perhaps lodged within the G-20, over all manner of developing finance. Can the East and West cooperate to help meet the needs of developing states?

6) The coronavirus remains a global crisis and its genesis will remain a significant issue. Beijing could help address the political impact by indicating its willingness to participate in a wide-ranging review of how the problem developed so long as the study also covered how nations responded to the disease's spread. Moreover, responsibility for the investigation should be vested in individuals and organizations with no stake in the ongoing dispute between the U.S. and PRC. There is much to learn from an honest, open review, and Chinese willingness to cooperate would help the incoming Biden administration defuse accumulated antagonisms.

7) Territorial disputes in East Asian-Pacific waters are a growing flashpoint. The issue understandably matters more to Beijing than the U.S., which sits thousands of miles away. Nevertheless, the PRC should voice its respect for Washington's interest in freedom of navigation and commitment to peaceful resolution of regional disputes, while noting the necessity that other states exhibit a willingness to engage and negotiate. Thus, Beijing might indicate that it is open to proposals for creative and cooperative development that put off intractable sovereignty decisions while maintaining peaceful relations.

These are not the only issues, of course. Deescalating tit-for-tat retaliatory cycles over visas and media restrictions also is a must. But relations will not improve significantly without addressing more fundamental issues. The PRC could help create a more favorable environment in which to initiate far-ranging discussions over multiple issues of interest.

There presently is little trust or rapport between the U.S. and China. That is unlikely to change; the two governments nevertheless must find a way forward. The Xi government should help that process by using America's political transition to signal its interest in working together to address the toughest issues between the two nations.

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