

## **To Win Over Allies, U.S. Must Moderate Anti-China Agenda**

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One of the few issues upon which American liberals and conservatives appear to agree is China. During the presidential campaign the Trump and Biden campaigns accused each other of being soft on Beijing. Criticisms once separately voiced by different groups, such as trade, security, and human rights, seemed to merge into a single but overwhelming political campaign against the People's Republic of China.

However, the Trump administration's unilateral campaign has fallen short. American analysts increasingly understand that the key to addressing Beijing's behavior is forging an international coalition. For instance, efforts to force the PRC to improve its treatment of human rights and hold it responsible for COVID-19 were unsuccessful.

Although America is wealthier than China, President Trump also found that it wasn't easy to win a trade war, which hurt American consumers, manufacturers, and exporters. His efforts were largely ineffective. The Phase One pact signed a year ago has not been fulfilled and Phase Two negotiations were dropped.

It would have made far more sense for Washington to have approached the European Union and worked out a common agenda, and then jointly confronted the PRC. Instead, Trump launched a trade war against the Europeans and Canada as well. His childish insults repelled even like-minded leaders. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo did no better. His demand that the Europeans join in calling COVID-19 the "Wuhan Virus" led to cancellation of a planned communique.

With the inauguration of the most pro-Atlanticist president perhaps in American history, many observers expect Joe Biden to set repairing the U.S.-European relationship as his first foreign priority. One issue to be addressed likely will be China. After all, during the campaign he spoke of building "coalitions of like-minded partners and allies," of whom none are more important than Europe.

However, addressing the PRC might not be as easy as many have assumed. First, Europe does not share Washington's security concerns. Beijing does not even threaten the U.S. militarily—no one imagines a Chinese attack on America. The issue between the two nations is relative influence in the East Asia-Pacific and status of disputed territories, none of which the U.S. claims.

Europe's interest in these issues is purely academic. The likelihood of NATO's European members, other than, perhaps, the United Kingdom, getting involved militarily in Asia is barely above zero. France recently sent a warship through the Taiwan Strait for symbolic effect but has no interest in using it.

Europeans have little more interest getting involved in a broader political fight. Although there is great anger toward Beijing in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Europeans have no desire to cause offense simply for offense's sake. Even when they do speak out, they want to make their criticism count.

Economics seemed to be a more promising area for cooperation between the U.S. and Europe. But the EU and China have just concluded an investment treaty. Although there is serious opposition to ratification in the European Parliament, most analysts expect the pact to be approved. Fudan University's Wu Xinbo argued: "it will also thwart the U.S. plan to join hands with Europe and isolate China from the future of globalization."

Some Europeans contend that the measure is merely an attempt to enjoy similar access as America to the Chinese market. However, the negotiations have been ongoing for years and need not have been completed before Biden's inauguration. Europe has sent a clear message to Washington.

Europe sees little benefit in following an America that appears to be careening toward a new cold war and perhaps even hot one with the PRC. As my Cato Institute colleague, Ted Galen Carpenter, recently pointed out, polls find that a vast majority of Europeans would prefer to take a neutral position between the U.S. and China. They identify more with America but care much less about the issues dividing Beijing and Washington.

Moreover, there is little reason for Europe, whether EU or individual countries, to trust whatever administration happens to be in charge. Trump posed a unique challenge, but any president is going to emphasize America's perspective. And these days that is likely to be combative toward the PRC.

Washington still should seek to coordinate with Europe in dealing with Beijing. However, the U.S. should set more realistic objectives. To attract continental support proposals must strive for positive goals, such as advancing America's and Europe's interests, rather than negative aims, like inflicting damage to China.

The impact of the new investment pact is limited, but so much more could be done in terms of economics. Trade remains a serious challenge. Greater openness, non-discriminatory access, limits on IP theft and commercial espionage, and restrictions on subsidies all warrant a joint approach.

Regarding human rights, Washington needs to recognize its relative impotence. Little can be done to force Beijing to act. However, with its allies the U.S. could prioritize issues, addressing those considered to be the most serious issues, such as Xinjiang's reeducation camps and religious liberty.

On security, the focus should be to encourage peaceful resolution of territorial disputes. The allies should agree on joint responses, such as trade and investment penalties, to Chinese military threats and actions. All parties should be aware of each other's perspectives, which would allow a more reasoned dialogue and reduce the likelihood of conflict.

America's overall objective should be to ensure that the PRC and allies remain in contact, whenever possible maintaining cooperative and civil relations despite potentially serious differences. No magic elixir will make China into America or Europe. However, better cooperation between the U.S. and Europe could improve relations with the PRC while pushing back against dangerous or malign actions by Beijing.

Ultimately, an isolated regime in China would be more dangerous for its own people as well as those outside its borders. An isolated Washington would more likely exacerbate the ongoing slide toward a Sino-American cold war.

The U.S. can learn from Europe: Beijing is a challenge, not an enemy. To peacefully yet effectively confront the PRC when necessary, Washington would benefit from greater coordination with Europe. Together they could promote a productive if restrained relationship with China in the coming decades.