

Between Biden and Beijing

Ted Galen Carpenter

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President-elect Joe Biden has a reputation going back decades as a staunch globalist who favors close, cooperative relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Nevertheless, he faces daunting obstacles if he wishes to repair bilateral relations that have become frayed during Donald Trump's presidency. Some of those obstacles are personal in nature, involving a simmering scandal about the behavior of his son, Hunter, and other members of the Biden family. Allegations are circulating that the Biden clan has engaged in a sophisticated campaign of influence-peddling with respect to several countries, including China. One allegation is especially serious: that Joe Biden agreed to accept a covert financial stake in a Chinese investment firm with close ties to the PRC government.

In addition to such personal factors that might inhibit the new president from pursuing a policy of rapprochement with Beijing, he must deal with some troubling political realities. U.S. public opinion has swung sharply against the PRC over the past year, reflecting widespread anger at Beijing's actions in response to the corona virus and the tightening of controls over Hong Kong. Pressure also is mounting from multiple sources to "decouple" the U.S.-and Chinese economies and to show stronger support for Taiwan.

Hawks in the Republican Party and their allies in right-wing media outlets are waging a vigorous campaign to generate popular support for a hardline policy to "contain" China. They have strong incentives to paint Biden as an appeaser, a PRC dupe, or even worse, as a willing agent of the Communist government, for two reasons. First, given the nature of public opinion in the United States, that message appears to be a political winner that throws Biden and the Democratic Party on the defensive. Second, many Republicans, smarting at the multiyear effort by Democrats to paint President Trump and other GOP leaders as puppets of Vladimir Putin, are thirsting for revenge.

The combination of such factors will be extremely difficult for Biden to overcome, even if he fervently wishes to do so. Indeed, the danger is that he will be pressured to adopt a hard line toward Beijing to shield himself from allegations of corruption or disloyalty. Trump has pursued a surprisingly confrontational policy toward Russia—in part to overcome the smears that he was a traitor. The consequences of a similar response from Biden with respect to the PRC could be most unfortunate for both countries.

Biden's personal vulnerability increased in October 2020 when the New York Post published two articles alleging financial improprieties on the part of the Biden family. Both of the articles were based on files found in a computer that Hunter Biden supposedly had left at a repair shop and failed to pick up. The first story included evidence that then-Vice President Joe Biden was far more involved in his son's questionable dealings with the Ukraine energy company Burisma than he had contended. That apparent greater involvement raised new questions about the former vice president's role in demanding that the Ukraine government fire prosecutor Viktor Shokin.

The subsequent Post article presented email evidence that Hunter Biden had been given a 20 percent stake in a Chinese investment fund at a massive discount from its actual value. Worse, one of the documents asserted that although Hunter's stake was 20 percent, an additional 10 percent was set aside under his supervision "for the big guy." Tony Bobulinski, Hunter's former business partner, later not only confirmed that the incriminating e-mail was genuine, he stated flatly that "the big guy" referred to Joe Biden.

Mainstream media outlets went to extraordinary lengths to bury both stories, with Facebook and Twitter even blocking access. A press that was overwhelmingly hostile to Trump's re-election had little tolerance for embarrassing disclosures that might sink the Biden campaign and facilitate the hated president's continued tenure. But with Trump about to leave office, that incentive now becomes much weaker, and interest in the allegations may no longer be confined to right-wing media players like Fox News, National Review, and the Wall Street Journal or perennial iconoclasts like independent, muckraking journalist Glenn Greenwald. Further scrutiny of the Biden family's foreign financial connections could cause serious difficulties for the new president.

Perhaps even more damaging to the prospects of the Biden administration making conciliatory overtures to Beijing is the ability of congressional Republicans to mobilize anti-PRC public sentiment. Even during the presidential campaign, Biden and his handlers felt the pressure. Their response was to try to "out hawk" Trump and the Republican Party on China policy. One television spot brazenly depicted President Trump as a stooge for Beijing. "Everyone knew they lied about the virus — China," the narrator declared, against the backdrop of a fluttering Chinese flag. Yet "President Trump gave China his trust." A subsequent ad sought to portray Biden as tougher than Trump toward China. It accused the president of "rolling over for the Chinese" during the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak.

Perhaps that stance will prove to have been merely political posturing during a difficult election contest. Both China and the United States would suffer from efforts to decouple their economies, much less from security strategies that increased the danger of a military confrontation. A Biden administration has important incentives and justifications for trying to restore the more cooperative status quo that existed before Donald Trump became president. However, there are major obstacles to achieving that goal, and Joe Biden is not well-positioned to take on the task.

Ted Galen Carpenter is senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.