

Biden's foreign policy team and East Asia: bland traditionalism, but with one big surprise

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The election of Joe Biden as America's 46th president led to widespread expectations that US foreign policy would revert to its normal pattern following four years of turmoil and disruption under Donald Trump. Restoration of the policy status quo would focus on re-establishing US global leadership, reviving America's commitment to international institutions and the concept of multilateralism, and repairing Washington's frayed ties with long-standing allies, especially in Europe and East Asia. For the most part, the foreign policy team that Biden has assembled, and the actions the new administration has taken, confirm that orientation and agenda. There have been a few notable exceptions, though, including one large one with respect to East Asia policy.

Three issues in that region stand out as major challenges for Washington. One is to determine just how close a partnership on both security and economic issues can be sustained and developed between the United States and its closest allies – Japan, South Korea and Australia. The second challenge is to formulate an effective policy to deal with North Korea and its continuing nuclear ambitions. The third and most difficult challenge is to manage the increasingly arduous economic and security relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Thus far, the Biden foreign policy team has produced almost no surprises regarding the first two sets of issues. However, both the President and his appointees have expressed surprisingly hardline views on China, especially with respect to security and human rights issues. Moreover, the administration's initial actions have been consistent with the uncompromising rhetoric. Observers who expected that President Biden's policies toward the PRC would constitute a sharp break from the Trump administration's approach have been unpleasantly surprised.

Biden's top-echelon appointees have well-established track records in favor of a conventional posture regarding both allied relations and dealing with North Korea. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, a long-time aide to Biden, and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan both fit that pattern thoroughly. In his Senate confirmation hearing, Blinken emphasized the importance of partnering with the allies. "We do have a big task ahead of us in restoring, revitalizing those relationships. I do think it starts... with [the US] showing up again," said Blinken. "Some of our allies and partners question the sustainability of our commitments based on the past few years." Even when he was just an adviser to Biden's presidential campaign, Sullivan stressed the importance of repairing Washington's relations with the allies in both Asia and Europe. Biden's choice for the top Asia policy adviser, Kurt M. Campbell, fits the same pattern, and globalists hailed his appointment as certain to "reassure" the allies. Two of Defense Secretary Lloyd

Austin's first calls were made to his counterparts in Japan and South Korea. In the course of his call to Japan's defense minister, Austin explicitly reiterated Washington's controversial position that the bilateral defense treaty covers the Senkaku islands.

The backgrounds and statements of Biden's policy advisers pointed to little or no innovation with regard to policy toward North Korea. Both Blinken and Sullivan have been firmly committed to the pre-Trump approach of seeking to isolate Pyongyang and insisting that Kim Jong-un's regime take concrete steps to renounce the country's nuclear weapons before constructive talks can take place. That approach, which also characterized the policy of the Obama-Biden administration, has never produced worthwhile results and represents a retreat even from the modest progress that Donald Trump's attempt at a breakthrough with Kim managed to make. Even Blinken's promise of a "full review" of US policy toward North Korea was ominous rather than reassuring. He told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the goal would be to "look at what options we have, and what can be effective in terms of *increasing pressure on North Korea* to come to the negotiating table." (Emphasis added)

One can expect Campbell to be fully on board with that approach. However, Wendy Sherman, Biden's choice for Deputy Secretary of State, is an old Asia policy hand, and during her time in Bill Clinton's administration she worked to ease tensions with Pyongyang, including helping to facilitate Madeleine Albright's December 2000 visit to the hermit kingdom. Her appointment offers a glimmer of hope (but only a glimmer) that the administration might embrace greater flexibility in its dealings with North Korea.

It is on policy toward China, though, that the Biden foreign policy team's statements and initial actions are the most surprising – and troubling. Biden himself had a long record of favoring cordial relations, as well as close diplomatic and economic cooperation, with China. Indeed, during the 2020 presidential campaign, Trump and his supporters routinely referred to the former Vice President as "Beijing Biden," implying that he would appease the PRC. But American public opinion has turned sharply against China, and the Biden administration's attitudes and policies may be reflecting that shift.

Blinken startled observers when he conceded during his confirmation hearing that Trump had been right to take a tougher stand on China. The new Secretary of State's view has not softened appreciably since he took office. On February 6, he stated the United States intended to hold Beijing strictly accountable "for its abuses of the international system." That comment did not seem like the offer of an olive branch.

Although the Biden administration may back away somewhat from Trump's outright trade war against China, even that change is not certain. Policy with regard to Huawei, and the broader issue of technology quarrels, differs little from the Trump administration's approach. The new administration's stance on security issues is strikingly hardline. That posture is most evident with respect to Taiwan policy. An especially stunning gesture took place even before Biden took office when he extended an invitation to Taiwan's Economic and Cultural Representative in the United States to attend the presidential inauguration. It was the first time that Taipei's diplomat had been given that opportunity since the United States established official diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1979. Even Donald Trump, who significantly increased Washington's backing for Taiwan in multiple ways, did not display such disdain for Beijing's position. Since the inauguration, administration officials have issued several statements emphasizing Washington's "rock-solid" commitment to Taiwan.

Washington also has made several military moves in China's neighborhood. Lloyd Austin had barely taken the oath as Secretary of Defense before the Pentagon dispatched an aircraft carrier strike group to the South China Sea as a display of US military power. In early February, a guided missile destroyer, the USS John McCain, not only transited the geo-strategically sensitive Taiwan Strait, it subsequently conducted "freedom of navigation" patrols within 12 nautical miles of the PRC-held Paracel islands.

Even the Biden administration's calls for greater cooperation with America's traditional allies exhibit a noticeable animus toward the PRC. In remarks delivered on December 28th, Biden stated that "as we compete with China and hold China's government accountable for its abuses on trade, technology, human rights, and other fronts, our position will be much stronger when we build coalitions of like-minded partners and allies to make common cause with us in defense of our shared interests and values." Blinken has pushed the same theme, but even Australia and some of the other East Asian allies seem reluctant to follow Washington down that path. The NATO allies have even less incentive to do so.

Nevertheless, Biden exhibits no hesitation about adopting a firm line toward Beijing. That point became clear following his first telephone conversation with Xi Jinping on February 10. In his comments to reporters following that call, the President stated: "I spoke today with President Xi to offer good wishes to the Chinese people for lunar new year. I also shared concerns about Beijing's economic practices, human rights abuses, and coercion of Taiwan." A White House account of the conversation said that Biden also raised the crackdown in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and China's "increasingly assertive actions in the region." Moreover, the call took place just hours after the announcement that the administration was establishing a new Pentagon task force on China and that a senior State Department official had met with Taiwan's representative to the United States. Such a context suggests a chilly relationship, at best.

On the eve of the Lunar New Year, Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Joe Biden had their first official phone call since the latter's inauguration

Although it is early, the basic characteristics of the Biden team's East Asia policy are taking shape. On allied relations, the prognosis is for a return to the comfortable, conventional, but ultimately stale, approach that existed before Donald Trump took office. The same outcome is even more likely with respect to strategy for dealing with North Korea. On China policy, though, there will be more continuity than deviation from the firm, even confrontational, approach that marked the Trump years. With regard to that issue, a return to the pre-Trump period of accommodation and cooperation is unlikely.

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