

Time for the West to revisit its China narratives

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If President-elect **Joe Biden** loses sleep at night, it's almost certainly about the fact that his country is awash in Covid-19 infections and deaths. Like Chinese ruler **Xi Jinping**, he first must solve domestic problems before he can turn his eyes abroad.

But China won't wait for the U.S. to get its house in order; in fact, it's clear Beijing sees America's disastrous Covid-19 response as thumping validation of its belief that long-term trends favor Chinese interests. And China hands won't wait to start trying to alter the trajectory of U.S.-China relations in directions that suit their worldview. Over the past few days, prominent think tanks and even officials in government have issued a flurry of policy papers aimed at catching the eyes and ears of policymakers who will take their seats in Arlington, Foggy Bottom and 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in January.

At issue is not just persuasive argument, or the concrete policies to come. Equally important are the personnel and the narratives that a new president elevates or ignores. **Donald Trump's** influence on the China field has been profound, as he picked a slate of new winners and reset the discursive terms even for those China analysts who vehemently opposed him. As Biden assumes the bully pulpit, it presents a fresh chance for him to lay the ground rules of the very debate that will, in turn, support his policy choices. It may feel hasty to revisit the China narrative so soon after Trump changed everything. But that's life in Washington.

Translating Washington

The State Department's internal think tank has issued a long report on China, but it contains little that's new. The Policy Planning staff at Foggy Bottom touted the Wednesday report as the China equivalent to George Kennan's 1946 "long telegram," which spelled out the U.S. strategy of Soviet containment. But while staff at what insiders call "S/P" are tasked with "innovation and creativity" within their agency, most of what's here equates to the 2020 version of conventional wisdom about China, marshaling administration talking points that felt fresh two years ago but are well-worn now.

— **Notable absence: a "theory of mind" for China that goes beneath the surface.** The report generally describes China as a monolith, giving scant mention to the competing interests or equities that even a dictatorship must consider when making and executing policy, particularly in a large and complex country like China. There's little about internal sentiment, or how the U.S. might leverage that to its advantage. The report quotes Xi at length, often implying disapproval even when Xi has uttered things any leader in his position might say, such as a statement that he wants China's (untested) military to be able to "win battles" or his desire to make the world's most populous country "a global leader in terms of power and global influence." If S/P has better intel on China's internal dynamics, it's not sharing.

— **“China is not the Soviet Union,”** according to **Oriana Skylar Mastro**, a fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. “China is not trying to build a socialist international order,” she tells China Watcher. “China is a richer, more powerful, more pragmatic and a more attractive partner than the Soviet Union ever was. We ignore these differences at our peril.” Mastro adds that “the report fails to capture the fact that much of China’s power has been pursued in legitimate ways. I say this not to excuse China, but to highlight why it has been so difficult to get other countries to see the problem the way we do.”

The White House will stop Americans from investing in Chinese companies with military ties. An executive order issued last Thursday prohibits Americans from trading public shares of any “Communist Chinese military company,” one of several promised moves on China in the waning days of Trump’s presidency.

— **“The administration is attempting to ‘lock in’ the move,”** one President-elect Biden is “unlikely to revoke,” **Julia Friedlander**, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, tells China Watcher. “Market regulators, however, have statutory independence from the executive, so the proof will be in the pudding how this is implemented.” **Elsa B. Kania**, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, tells China Watcher the measure is currently “limited ... given that only 31 entities are so far included in its purview to date, nor does American investment appear to be particularly significant for any of those companies.” Kania calls the criteria for inclusion “dubious,” with the published entities including “an assortment of state-owned enterprises, defense conglomerates, and enterprises with varying degrees of linkages to the Chinese military and national security system.”

— **Reality check: This is a meek signal for those hoping for a bevy of tough-on-China measures in Trump’s final weeks.** Officials told Axios on Sunday they were lining up “historic” and hard to reverse actions on China. This one is merely the latter, and like many administration moves, narrower and vaguer than it first appears.

China and 14 other countries just inked a trade deal covering 2.2 billion people, and the U.S. isn’t in it. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (or RCEP), signed Sunday, “isn’t an economic game changer, [but] it’s still quite significant,” Cato Institute senior fellow **Scott Lincicome** tells China Watcher. “The substantial tariff liberalization and trade facilitation measures will further strengthen Asian manufacturing supply chains and reduce the competitiveness of rival manufacturers in Europe, India and North America. RCEP ... is a clear signal that the world is moving on without the United States, which is at risk of becoming just another country in the global economy.”

Biden told Japan the U.S. will defend the Senkaku islands from China. On his first call with new Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, the president-elect reportedly “pleasantly surprised” the PM by bringing up the islands and saying he thinks a mutual defense treaty covers them. China refers to them as the Diaoyu, and control over them has been a nationalist rallying cry for decades. **M. Taylor Fravel**, professor of political science at MIT, tells China Watcher the call was a “smart move” because it “signaled to Japan — early and clearly — a renewed commitment to the alliance” and also “signaled to the region, including China, that the United States intends to remain an active player in East Asia’s security, starting with its allies.”

Low credit score. Chinese web users are circulating this (photoshopped, tongue-in-cheek) image of Trump sporting a credit score of 116 out of 950, the result of his refusal to concede the U.S. election:

2020 HALIFAX INTERNATIONAL SECURITY FORUM: Tune in as international security leaders from democracies around the world discuss key challenges at the [12th annual Halifax International Security Forum](#). As an official media partner, POLITICO will livestream conversation beginning at 11:30 a.m. on November 20.

THE CHINA WATCHERS

In addition to new policies, the transition to a new presidential administration offers the chance to revisit the narrative around China. Your host polled a variety of academics for this edition with the question: what do we need to change in the way we talk about the country? Judging from their responses, there's much that needs to be revisited, both in how the West talks about China's government and its people.

Stop saying that “Chinese lack creativity and originality (due to education, communism, etc.), such that they can only copy, follow or modify Western original ideas and designs,” says **Yu Zhou**, professor of geography at Vassar College. “This was never accurate in the first place even when China was copying and following Western ideas. For technology development, you are likely to first follow pioneering steps, which does not mean that you are incapable of being creative.”

“In many areas of science the U.S.-China relationship is no longer that of teacher-student, but one that must be reassessed as equals,” says **Shellen Wu**, professor of history at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. “In 2018, China surpassed the U.S. in the total number of science publications.”

“The current narrative about Chinese elites embracing Biden needs to be tempered with how many Chinese people are Trump fans,” says **Diana Fu**, professor of political science at the University of Toronto. “These *chuan fen*, or Trump fans, range from those who admire Trump’s strong man rule to Chinese dissidents in the diaspora who applaud Trump’s 'anti-CCP' stance. Some Chinese Trump fans living in the U.S. believe, just as some Latinos in Florida do, that Biden will usher in an unpalatable form of socialism.”

— **Reality check: Unlike most countries, China registered a drop in citizen approval of the U.S. after Biden’s win,** according to Morning Consult polling [released](#) last Thursday.

Stop saying “that peer-to-peer exchanges are harmful to U.S. interests,” says **Michael Meyer**, professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. “The Peace Corps, Fulbright — hell, even the Pentagon-hosted exchanges, should be reinstated.”

Stop saying “we should not pursue competition with China because we need its cooperation on climate change and at the U.N.,” says **Van Jackson**, Center for a New American Security. “Political scientist Alexander George published a 700-plus page book documenting the history of security cooperation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.”

“Rethink Thucydides’ trap, which assumes that a rising China will inevitably clash with the U.S.,” says **Xiaoyu Pu**, professor of political science at the University of Nevada, Reno.

“China doesn’t always seek to have a higher status. Furthermore, framing the U.S.-China relationship as one characterized by rising and declining powers is inaccurate. Both China and the U.S. can be rising powers as long as they maintain economic growth while pursuing self-strengthening reform.”

Let go of the notion that China experiences regular “shifts between loosening and tightening,” says **Jeffrey Wasserstrom**, professor of history at UC-Irvine. “Eight years into the Xi Jinping period, there has been no let up to speak of at any point, and a clearly discernible ramping up of controls ... More than that, the current trend toward tightening began before Xi's rise.”

Stop “treat[ing] China's actions in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan as distinct and unrelated,” says **David G. Atwill**, professor of history at Penn State University. “Within China the central government’s actions in these disparate regions are conceived as stemming from a single historical thread: for the PRC to be safe, powerful and ascendant such ethnic, linguistic and political differences in the territorial must be suppressed.”

Stop saying that “Xi's China is in the process of an unprecedented move to strip away the rights of autonomy previously granted to many of those living on the country's periphery,” says **Allen R. Carlson**, professor of government at Cornell University. “Such a story is not wrong, but it lacks historical perspective, in that Beijing has never granted much in the way of meaningful autonomy to such regions.”

“The phrase ‘reunification with the PRC’ in the Taiwan context needs to be discarded,” says **Margaret Lewis**, professor at Seton Hall Law School. “Beijing seeks unification or, alternatively, annexation, but Taiwan was never part of the People's Republic of China.”

Revise “the narrative of debt entrapment diplomacy as a describer of China’s outbound investment/loans/projects,” says **Min Ye**, professor of international relations at Boston University. “Serious studies conducted by scholars and researchers at U.S.-based institutions have disapproved this narrative, whether it refers to Sri Lanka, or Pakistan, or elsewhere. Surveys of recipient countries have shown that the ruling elites there do not support this narrative, and when the U.S pushes such framing, they found it offensive and patronizing.”

“We need to re-calibrate the narrative that China has developed an effective form of authoritarian governance that, for the most part, works for its 1.4 billion citizens,” says **Tashi Rabgey**, professor of international affairs at George Washington University. “This prevailing narrative underestimates China’s serious problem of scale. A better understanding of the multilevel and regional challenges facing China’s policy coordination across every regulatory area — from the economy to food security to environmental protection to language use in education — would cast new light on policy failures and crises that have led to the development of new regionalization of policy interests and demands across the entirety of the state.”

HOT FROM THE CHINA WATCHERSPHERE

The China watcher’s China watcher is keeping the faith. The Wire China profiles **Jerome A. Cohen**, a retired professor at NYU Law School who has studied, and frequently participated in, China’s legal reform since the 1960s and is considered America’s preeminent legal scholar on China. China’s rightward turn under Xi over the past decade has frustrated Cohen’s efforts, but

in an interview, Cohen insists, “you have to take a long view.” Cohen remains bullish on what he calls the “enormous energy, enormous ability, enormous ambition, and individualism” of the Chinese people. “The reason Xi Jinping has to impose this terrible dictatorship is Chinese are very individualistic people ... I think something is going to work out that will give people in China not only economic progress but also considerable freedom. It’s a very exciting story.”

Pro-vaxxers: Chinese people are paying scalpers to get access to an unapproved Covid-19 vaccine, the New York Times’ **Sui-Lee Wee** and **Elsie Chen** reported Tuesday, a mirror image of the U.S.’ anti-vaxxer problem. “In China, there’s this trend of ‘everyone is getting it, so I want it, too,’” **Jennifer Huang Bouey**, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation, told the Times. “Their problem is different from the U.S. They probably have to think about how not to create a riot when getting a vaccine, not so much how to try to roll it out.” China is making vaccines available to thousands of people even though they have not completed testing.

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“**China versus democracy.**” POLITICO’s **Luiza Ch. Savage** will moderate a livestreamed panel at the Halifax International Security Forum on Friday at 11:30 a.m. ET that includes Biden ally (and potential future Secretary of State) **Chris Coons** (D-Del.) speaking about “China vs. Democracy: The Greatest Game,” a handbook the forum published on Monday. The authors interviewed a who’s who of China analysts (including your host) and reached a series of grim conclusions about China’s intentions and what’s needed to deal with them. “Democracies cannot continue on a path of misreading this regime or failing sufficiently to push it back,” the authors write. The report calls not for regime change, but “regime reconfiguration” in China, since “the way the CCP calibrates its interests and ambitions in the world will have to change ... if stable equilibrium ... is ever to be achieved.”

— **Better get those critical minerals secure first.** China-led disruptions to the supply of the minerals and metals used in high-tech materials “could be devastating to the U.S.,” **Sharon Burke**, director of the Resource Security group at the think tank New America, tells Savage in the latest Global Translations podcast. Burke “recalled designing a ‘war game’ simulation in which America was knee-capped in a military confrontation as soon as China cut off supplies. ‘We were bringing our artillery and the Chinese just manipulated trade in raw materials and in industrial capacity to end the war before it ever started.’”

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Do you have tips? Chinese-language stories we might have missed? Stories we should follow and haven’t? (Reasoned) complaints? Email davidwertime at politico dot com.