



## For Biden, China Rivalry Adds Urgency To Infrastructure Push

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President Biden unveils a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan in Pittsburgh on March 31. In his speech, Biden said the plan would help the U.S. compete with China.

As President Biden and his administration sell a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan to Americans, one theme keeps coming up alongside dilapidated bridges, contaminated water pipes and uneven Internet access: competition with China.

When Biden announced the proposal in Pittsburgh, he made sure to argue the measure would put the U.S. "in a position to win the global competition with China in the upcoming years."

Biden wants the U.S. to spend more money on its physical infrastructure, as well as research and development in emerging technologies, because that's what China is doing.

"[Republicans] know China and other countries are eating our lunch," Biden said later in the speech. "So there's no reason why it can't be bipartisan again."

There's certainly an element of politics to the framing. In a divided Washington, concern about the growing economic and political power — as well as assertiveness — of China is a worry that both parties share.

But the repeated references in Biden's comments about infrastructure and the proposals the White House sees as key to leveling the economic playing field with China also demonstrate how the administration is approaching both foreign and economic policy.

"If we don't act, we're just going to fall further behind. China spends three times as much on infrastructure as a share of GDP than we do," Daleep Singh, a deputy national security adviser, as well as deputy director of Biden's National Economic Council, told NPR in an interview.

"In the 1960s, around the time of Sputnik, we spent more on public [research and development] than any other country and companies combined — about 2% as a share of our economy. And that gave us a huge lead on technology until the 1990s. And now, if you look at what our federal government spends on public R&D, it's less than half that amount. And meanwhile, in China, there we've seen R&D expenditures increase roughly 30 times since 1990."

In an increasingly protectionist and populist global environment — and after China and the U.S. amped up a trade war of tariffs and hostile rhetoric under President Donald Trump — the Biden administration worries the spending gap could allow China to set more terms on the global market.

Biden officials and their Chinese counterparts have gotten off to a rocky start. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan held a tense, confrontational meeting with Chinese diplomats last month in Anchorage, Alaska. The administration has left Trump-era tariffs in place. This week, Biden sent an unofficial delegation of former U.S. officials to Taiwan to show support for Taiwan amid heightened Chinese military maneuvers, even as Biden's climate envoy, John Kerry, prepared to travel to China to discuss collaboration on confronting climate change.

Ali Wyne, who analyzes U.S.-China relations for the Eurasia Group, sees Biden's infrastructure pitch as the latest amplification of an escalating argument that Chinese and American leaders are carrying out on a global stage.

Wyne says there are three key audiences for what he calls dueling narratives from the Biden administration and Chinese President Xi Jinping's government: U.S. and Chinese citizens, but also leaders in the rest of the world, who are making decisions each day about which country to align with.

Wyne says China is arguing that it's now in the world's driver's seat, economically and politically. At the same time, he told NPR, China is arguing "that the United States is, sufficiently at this point, riven by domestic dysfunction and sufficiently uncertain about its course in world affairs. That it is no longer just in relative decline, but it has in fact entered into a state of acute terminal decline."

"And the United States is pushing back," Wyne explained, "saying, nope, we are going to reinvent ourselves at home and abroad and wait until this next chapter writes itself."

You could hear the framing at play as Singh explained why the infrastructure plan would help the U.S. compete. "Look, China has global ambition, and their global ambition is centered upon their economy and their technological progress," he said.

The administration is worried that China is outpacing the U.S. on not only physical infrastructure but also research on artificial intelligence, high-speed computing and communications.

The messaging also underscores just how committed the Biden administration is to tapping into the federal government's regulatory and market power in order to shift private industry.

"We're convinced that if we just leave it to the private sector, the amount of innovative capacity that we're going to generate is going to be lower than what is good for America, good for our national interests," Singh told NPR. "And so we're thinking really hard about how can the government help to shift incentives, provide resources, provide coordination?"

This type of thinking is a huge shift from how the federal government has largely operated over the past few decades. It's part of the administration's return to an unapologetic approach to big government, a traditional approach of Democrats decades ago.

"The reality is, at home or abroad, we don't believe — I don't believe — the private sector by itself is going to solve the biggest problems we have in our society," said Singh. "Whether it's extreme levels of inequality or social disparity, an existential climate crisis or people dropping out of the workforce or stagnant wages."

So far, this approach to both domestic and foreign policy isn't winning over Republicans. "I don't think it has anything to do with reality," said Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., an increasingly vocal critic of China.

Like many other Republican lawmakers, Scott thinks Biden's bill is too broad. "It's a nice little story, calling it the infrastructure bill. But less than 10% goes to roads and bridges, things like that."

Scott also thinks the administration isn't taking a hard-enough stance on China and its human rights and economic records.

But as Scott and other Republicans on Capitol Hill are criticizing Biden for not being aggressive enough, others worry Biden's approach to China looks and feels like his predecessor's protectionist policies.

"I didn't expect them to be so, for lack of a better word, Trumpy on trade rhetoric," said Scott Lincicome, a senior fellow at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

Lincicome sees the "us vs. them" framing of all these policies — as well as the fact that, so far, Biden is keeping Trump tariffs in place — as a different strain of the same nationalism that animated the last administration's foreign policy.

Lincicome worries this is nationalism. Singh argues it's the exact opposite.

He said one reason that the Biden administration is so focused on tying its foreign policy efforts to boosting the American middle class is that it's worried about the sustained nationalistic mood at home and around the world.

"If we don't deliver for our middle class, for example, then our ambition to lead again on the world stage is going to fail. Why? Because people will turn inward, not because they have any malice, but because that's what economic insecurity and social displacement and the loss of dignity does to a society," said Singh.