

## **“Foreign Policy for the Middle Class” Begins with Restraint**

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President Biden comes to office with rare expertise in international affairs and foreign policy, heading the most qualified and credentialed foreign and security policy roster since at least the GHW Bush Administration almost 30 years ago. Biden has moved quickly to repair damage caused by his predecessor, including by rejoining the Paris Climate Accords and the World Health Organization, and has sent reassuring signals to allies and partners in NATO and elsewhere. The Administration has also enunciated goals for US “leadership” on existential problems like climate change and pandemic disease as well as regional threats and challenges.

Do such ambitious goals fit with the Administration’s domestic “build back better” agenda and “foreign policy for the middle class”? That is not clear.

Earlier this month, the Biden Administration released its “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, a 24-page foretaste of a longer National Security Strategy likely to be issued sometime in the next year. The document is chock full of policy desiderata. It focuses heavily on the close interpenetration of foreign and domestic policy and describes how “build back better” serves both. The overall impression one takes away from the Interim Guidance, however, is of a world locked in existential struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, in which a renewed America must resume “leadership” to outcompete, and if necessary, confront and defeat, Russia and China. US policy toward these two countries must be, if anything, more assertive under Biden than under Trump.

I am on board with this idea regarding Russia. Transatlantic relations, including in NATO, are on a sound footing and moving in the right direction. The picture is not entirely rosy. Europe is troubled and problems abound. Still, despite the corrosive effect of the Trump Presidency on public opinion and on the critical political cohesion of the transatlantic alliance, NATO is healthy and reinvigorated, with a long and realistic “to-do list”. Broad agreement on how to deal with Putin is holding. A more balanced strategic dialogue between the US and Europe is taking shape, and the notion is taking hold that Europe and European states must do more to defend themselves and address security challenges in adjacent regions.

The recipe for dealing with China is harder to swallow.

Without a doubt, China does many things that we don’t like, and its rise to parity with the United States in most respects is uncomfortable. Under Xi Jinping, China has become more assertive and even menacing. Defining just what China is – partner, rival, competitor, enemy? – has become a sort of parlor game. The outcome of this discussion, undertaken so lightly, could be deadly serious. But it is also the wrong discussion: we should focus on what China “does” rather than what China “is”. Does China truly seek to upend the so-called “rules-based order”, as Secretary of State Blinken has said? That is a critically important assessment; rushing to judgment could have grave consequences for all sides, including the United States.

Parts of the Administration’s approach on China make obvious sense, such as strengthening ties with friendly countries in the Indo Pacific, Europe, and elsewhere in order to address Chinese policies and

practices deemed destructive or unfair. Opening moves have been promising: the initiative by the Quad (U.S., Japan, Australia and India) to support COVID vaccinations in the Indo Pacific region and the joint visit by Blinken and Defense Secretary Austin to Japan and South Korea. The messaging during Blinken and Austin's tour, however, was openly confrontational toward China. Then, when all eyes were on Anchorage and the meeting between Secretary Blinken and National Security Advisor Sullivan and their Chinese counterparts, the two sides publicly excoriated each other. The Administration insists it was sending a clear message to China that America expected sustained, intense competition, was prepared for confrontation, and had limited interest in cooperation.

Message received. No matter how strenuously the new team argues that it wants to avoid a Cold War with China, the measures proposed in the Interim Guidance and elsewhere for addressing the China challenge, taken together, look for all the world like a containment strategy with long-term expectations of regime change. To be fair, the word "containment" does not appear in the Interim Guidance and is not part of the Biden Administration vocabulary, but the idea hangs in the air. "Containment" sounds deceptively benign, modest and risk-averse; of course, it is none of those things. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, containment was the rationale for Vietnam and other wars and brought the world to the brink of nuclear devastation during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Furthermore, many voices couch the US-China rivalry in ideological terms, pitting US and Western defense of democracy and free markets against China's allegedly expansionist program of authoritarian communism and predatory investment. Xi Jinping – hardly a sympathetic figure in any case – is demonized, and the very notion of peaceful coexistence with China and the Chinese Communist Party is contested. Biden and his team themselves describe what amounts to a manichean struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, embodied by America and China.

Being "tough on China" enjoys almost universal political support in Washington, as prominent Democrats and Republicans profile themselves as "China hawks." There is little room for moderate views and more nuanced approaches. On the contrary. Senate Majority Leader Schumer is reportedly considering major China-focused legislation as a means of helping to unify Congress and wrong-foot the GOP. While such legislation might well include sensible measures such as onshoring critical supply chains and investment in science and technology, the populist anti-China logic is front and center.

While China's recent behavior has alienated its regional neighbors and alarmed much of the world, their ire seems too mild for Washington's taste. Countries in the region, including some in the Quad, are more cautious than the US. Meanwhile, complaints are loud that Europeans "don't get it" regarding China or refuse to put alleged strategic sense above narrow material interest. There is an element of truth to these complaints; Europeans have been slow to recognize how China and others exploit the weaknesses of our systems, and it is difficult to craft a common position in the European Union on key issues. The EU-China investment agreement agreed late last year was seen as a rebuff in Washington and a sign of Euro straddling. In fact, there has been a good deal of movement toward US views on China. Still, the expectation persists that Europeans should simply fall in line behind the US on China, reminiscent of GW Bush's "either with us or against us" line on Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism.

Where do "build back better" and "foreign policy for the middle class" fit in this picture?

The Biden Administration argues that there are no trade-offs between getting tough on China and "foreign policy for the middle class" – that on the contrary, they are two sides of the same coin. Confronting China has something for everybody. "Build back better" is the key both to beating China and

curing our domestic ills. The Administration's goals for addressing China's systemic abuse of the global trading system are indeed shared by China hawks and domestic progressives, and also enjoy the support of many partners around the world. But this is only part of a much broader agenda for countering China. There is no clear reason why the win-win alignment of China hawks and domestic progressives over trade and related issues must extend to such policies as reinforcing deterrence and "pushback" along the "first ring of islands" (including Taiwan) and in the South China Sea, investing more heavily in new armaments, or convening a "democracy summit" to embarrass China (and Russia) – especially if these policies jeopardize cooperation on climate change, pandemic disease, and other existential threats, and could even impede progress on trade and related concerns.

What should we do? For starters, we should slow down and show restraint. Our partners are not so eager for Washington's "leadership" that they will set aside their own priorities. American policy makers expect, not unreasonably, that others will take US concerns about China more seriously. At the same time, it is incumbent on the US to take the views of others more seriously. The more that US China policy looks like containment or a new Cold War, the more strain it will put on transatlantic relations and other partnerships, and the less likely it will be that Europe and others will follow America's "lead."

Second, we need to look harder at the costs and benefits of competition, confrontation and containment. We have time to do this more methodically, and doing so will facilitate real cooperation with allies and partners. After all, the evolution of the US-China rivalry, if that is the right word, is expected to last decades. Surely there is time to do our homework before committing ourselves and others to a risky, confrontational posture. Without selling out our interests, we might even consider putting a positive value on cooperation over confrontation, or at least approach the former with the same relish we express for the latter.

Finally, we should examine very carefully how "foreign policy for the middle class" fits with our China policy. Many of our broader China policy goals do not bear directly on the creation of a level playing field for American workers and companies or enhanced competitiveness in emerging technologies. It is quite possible that some of our goals are in part incompatible and require trade-offs, and that pursuing all simultaneously will come at the cost of American middle-class interests. That, I'm afraid, would truly be a return to "normalcy" in US foreign policy.