

BIDEN'S GEOPOLITICAL FALLOUT FOR CHINA

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No one will be surprised to learn that Beijing has been following the American election closely. Who is in the White House means a lot not only for Sino-US relations, but also for US policies toward Europe, Russia, and China's neighbours.

A Silver Lining for Sino-US Relations?

Chinese decision-makers and think-tankers have been distressed by the unpredictability that Donald Trump brought to US foreign policy in the past four years. President-elect Joe Biden, who is a former US Vice-President and a foreign policy veteran, is deemed to be more predictable. Many of his advisers used to serve in the Barack Obama administration, while Biden himself has had numerous encounters with the Chinese leadership during his political career.

But Beijing knows very well that President Biden will not stop the US from seeing China as a competitor. It is after all Barack Obama, the President that Biden served as Vice-President, who "pivoted to Asia". Obama even claimed recently that "if we hadn't been going through a financial crisis, my posture toward China would have been more explicitly contentious around trade issues".

The US will not change its strategic focus: dealing with the rise of China. The change will be in the approach. Trump's key word is decoupling. What will be Biden's? Biden will not go as far as decoupling. Nor will he go back to the old engagement policy.

Presumably, Biden's approach will be a moderated containment. He will work with allies, which will make his dealings with China easier, but also less blunt. He will not support the idea of an economic cut-off, but might seek decoupling in certain fields, such as technology, instead. He might rekindle the cooperation with Beijing on climate change and on regional hotspots such as North Korea, Iran, and Afghanistan.

A Transatlantic Reset?

Biden has received overwhelmed support across the Atlantic. Europeans are much more enthusiastic than China about the new president. Transatlantic policy might turn out to be one of the biggest policy changes after the power reshuffle in Washington.

No doubt, Biden will try to strengthen transatlantic bonds once he is in office. His proposal of a Democracy Summit has already aroused much enthusiasm among US allies. His choice of Antony Blinken, whose ties to Europe are said to be lifelong, deep and personal, as his Secretary of State sends a strong signal. According to a think-tank speech in July, Blinken said: "China sees alliances as a core source of strength for the United States, something they don't share and enjoy".¹

Judging from Biden's speeches during the campaign trail, the next US president will return to the Paris Agreement on climate change, a European pet project, and re-enter the US in many multilateral institutions that Trump has, or has threatened to, quit. Biden probably will listen to his European counterparts on the Iran nuclear deal, another European diplomatic feat that has been destroyed by Trump, and might even find ways to make a new one.

Of course, Europe understands that Biden cannot change everything. The US presidential race was so close that although he has won the election, he represents only half of a divided nation. Not to mention that Biden will be hindered by partisan gridlock in Congress. Besides, Biden's focus will be on domestic issues and China, not on Europe. In a word, Trumpism will somehow continue without Trump.

Therefore, the Europeans hold steadfast to the ideal of strategic autonomy, a concept predating but much focused on during the Trump years. The geopolitical upheaval has left the Europeans with few choices at hand. Politicians in Brussels and in European capitals have vowed that Europe should not be reduced to a "playground" or a "colony". Toward the end of Trump's term, strategic autonomy became the loudest answer to the new geopolitical contingency.

Though German officials might be a little bit less interested than their French friends in the concept of autonomy, as the recent spat between German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and French President Emmanuel Macron on the American security umbrella has revealed,² such schisms should not be overplayed. The Europeans will find no difficulty to get past this difference about the meaning of words. As Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, put on his blog: "a capable and strategically aware Europe is the best partner for the US – and also what Europe itself needs".³

In his call to Biden in November 23, European Council President Charles Michel identified the following fields to cooperate: the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recovery, climate change, security, and multilateralism.⁴ But observers from the rest of the world might be more interested to see how the two sides solve their trade and digital disputes as a start.

New thinking on China's neighbourhood?

After the election, Biden's first official call to foreigners was made to the Canadian Prime Minister, on 9 November. The next day, he called the UK, Ireland, Germany, and France. The day after, he called Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Such an order might say something about Biden's regional priorities in terms of alliances.

The Obama administration used to woo Asian-Pacific countries with a free trade zone, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP). Nevertheless, Trump withdrew from TPP within the first week of taking office, and the remaining TPP members have tried to save the agreement as CPTPP, or Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Biden might consider going back to a revised CPTPP.

His interest might increase when considering the announcement of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on 15 November by 15 Asian-Pacific countries, as well as Chinese president Xi Jinping's subsequent publicly declared interest in joining CPTPP. "The RCEP deal shows quite conclusively that the Trump Administration's strategy to isolate China and to cut it off from global value chains has failed", as a European observer aptly put.⁵

If Biden meets with domestic resistance against joining a trade agreement with the region, he will have to think hard about how to assure US allies such as Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan, who are concerned about China's rising influence, but meanwhile also continue to work for closer economic ties with the powerhouse.

For Biden, it is easier to deal with another Trump legacy in the region, namely, the Indo-Pacific Strategy, with an increasingly active security Quad (comprising the US, Japan, India, and Australia) at its centre.

India is a very important neighbour of China. In 2017, India joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a sign of its good relationship with China and Russia. But 2020 has seen the outbreak of clashes on the Sino-Indian border, and waves of clamping down on Chinese apps on the Indian market. Things could have been better without the Quad or the US' global campaign against Chinese technology, some Chinese strategists think.

Compared to Trump, Biden might be a little bit more critical toward India. Actually, he called the Indian leader five days later than his calls with Japan and Australia. Though Biden will carry ahead the Indo-Pacific Strategy, his more balanced approach toward India might help China and India to better navigate their disputes.

A Bitter Russia?

Four years ago, Russia was among the happiest to see Donald Trump elected. Russia hoped that an anti-establishment US president would change Russia's post-Cold War strategic impasse. Nevertheless, due to the deeply entrenched animosity toward Russia in the US establishment, Trump was not able to visit Russia or to receive the Russian leader on American soil even once, let alone to change US policy on Russia – the ongoing sanctions because of Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 2014 are a useful reminder. For Russia, Trump is a lost opportunity.

It seems that the Kremlin is very reluctant to congratulate Biden with his victory. The Democrats have long held a negative perception of Russia. The recent revision of the Russian constitution and the turbulence in Belarus might perpetuate this perception.

Two Blocs?

Will a more cooperative US president draw US allies together against another bloc led by China? First, such a prospect seems not on Biden's wish list. Second, it simply does not work.

In the past four years, US allies already tried to cooperate on issues related to China, sometimes along with the US, sometimes not. For example, Europe and Canada have a very good cooperation record on climate change; Europe and Japan have worked consistently on WTO reform; France and Germany have resorted to Australia on their Indo-Pacific strategies. But the cooperation has been case-by-case.

US allies have their own interests. Some European think-tankers urge the EU to "learn from Japan's adept economic diplomacy". Japan has navigated successfully between China and the US, striking trade deals with both as well as with the EU, they argue.⁶

Europe will not do everything on US terms. In terms of the economy, Europe and the US are competitors. The common challenge of the China Model might push Europe and the US closer on economic issues. However, Europe does not just see China as a strategic rival. The EU's definition of China is a more complicated one, mixing partner, competitor, and rival. Europe will continue to engage China.

Furthermore, global issues such as climate change and the pandemic might lead to wide cooperation among China, the US, Europe, and many others. China's pledge of net-zero emission by 2060 has already cleared a path for a good start.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Transcript: Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs: A Conversation with Former Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Washington, Hudson Institute, 9 July 2020, <https://www.hudson.org/research/16210-transcript-dialogues-on-american-foreign-policy-and-world-affairs-a-conversation-with-former-deputy-secretary-of-state-antony-blinken>.

² Steven Erlanger, "As Trump Exits, Rifts in Europe Widen Again". In: *The New York Times*, 24 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/24/world/europe/trump-macron-merkel-france-germany.html>.

³ Josep Borrell, Let's Make the Most of This New Chapter in EU-US Relations. Brussels, EEAS, 9 November 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/88393/let%E2%80%99s-make-most-new-chapter-eu-us-relations_en.

⁴ Read out of the phone call between President Charles Michel and US President-elect Joe Biden. Brussels, European Council Press release, 23 November 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/11/23/read-out-of-the-phone-call-between-president-charles-michel-and-us-president-elect-joe-biden/#>.

⁵ Uri Dadush & Abdulelah Darandary, *The impact of the new Asian trade mega-deal on the European Union*. Brussels, Bruegel, 19 November 2020, <https://www.bruegel.org/2020/11/the-impact-of-the-new-asian-trade-mega-deal-on-the-european-union/>.

⁶ Uri Dadush & Abdulelah Darandary, op. cit.