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By Peter Symonds
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Biden's choice for US trade representative signals anti-China stance

In his choice of US trade representative, President-elect Joe Biden has made clear that he will continue the aggressive anti-China confrontation launched by the Obama administration a decade ago and stepped up under Trump. While the appointee is responsible for US trade policy internationally, Biden's nomination of Katherine Tai last Friday targeted China in particular.

In justifying his decision, Biden praised Tai's record as "the chief trade enforcer against unfair trade practices by China, which will be a key priority in the Biden-Harris administration." He highlighted her role as the chief legal counsel for the US at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) between 2011 and 2014, where she marshaled international support, including from the EU, Japan and Australia, against Chinese limits on the export of rare earths.



Katherine Tai

(Photo: Inter-American Dialogue/Flickr)

China imposed a ban on the export of rare earths to Japan in 2010 amid sharp tensions over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea, which are controlled by Tokyo but claimed by both countries. The conflict was exacerbated by the Obama administration's belligerent stance towards Beijing, which was made explicit in its "pivot to Asia" announced

in November 2011. China's export restrictions on rare earths were later extended to the US and Europe, then dropped in 2015 after an adverse WTO ruling.

A Hong Kong-based trade lawyer Benjamin Kostrzewa, who worked on the WTO rare earths case with Tai, described her as "having an iron-fist-in-a-velvet-glove approach."

Biden said Tai would work closely with his economic, national security and foreign policy officials. "She understands that we need ... to be considerably more strategic than we've been in how we trade, and that makes us all stronger, how we're made stronger by trade," he declared.

Tai, whose parents were born in China and raised her in Taiwan, is closely connected to the Democrats and currently serves as the chief trade lawyer for the ways and means committee in the Democrat-dominated House of Representatives. She has been part of the push by the military establishment to ensure key supply chains are based in the US.

Tai has not just been active on trade issues. She has also been involved in recent months in mobilising Democratic Party support for the escalating US propaganda campaign over alleged Chinese human rights abuses of Muslim Uyghurs in the western province of Xinjiang. As vice-president, Biden played an active role in the Obama administration's pivot to Asia—a determined across-the-board diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at undermining China and preventing it from threatening the global hegemony of US imperialism. Under Obama, the US military refocused 60 percent of naval and air assets to the Indo-Pacific and drew up its AirSea Battle strategy for war with China.

As part of these war plans, the Obama administration strengthened military alliances, strategic partnerships and basing arrangements throughout Asia and deliberately aggravated dangerous hot spots including on the Korean Peninsula and in Indo-China. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton transformed what had been longstanding maritime disputes in the South China Sea between Beijing and its neighbours into a major international flashpoint, further inflamed by the provocative dispatch of US warships into Chinese-claimed waters.

On the economic front, Obama pushed the formation of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP)—a trade and investment bloc that deliberately excluded China and was held up as the "gold standard" in particular for protecting US intellectual property rights. Trump immediately ditched the TPP on assuming office and replaced it with aggressive "America First" trade war policies that targeted China, but also affected US allies in Europe and Asia.

Biden has already indicated that he will not immediately wind back Trump's punitive tariffs of up to 25 percent on \$370 billion worth of Chinese products exported to the US, or take action to change the Phase 1 trade agreement reached by Trump this year that commits China to buying an additional \$200 billion in US goods and services in 2020–21. In an interview earlier this month in the *New York Times*, Biden declared: "I'm not going to make any immediate moves, and the same applies to the tariffs. I'm not going to prejudice my options." Biden said his main priority was going to be to marshal US allies in Europe and Asia and on that basis to "develop a coherent strategy." His goal, he declared, "would be to pursue trade policies that actually produce progress on China's abusive practices—that's stealing intellectual property, dumping products, illegal subsidies to corporations" and forcing "tech transfers" from American companies to their Chinese counterparts.

These unsubstantiated allegations against China highlight the central concern in the American ruling class—that China will not simply function as a huge cheap labour platform for American corporations, but will challenge US domination in hi-tech areas that are critical to the maintenance of its economic and strategic global supremacy. Trump has already taken action in the name of "national security" to attempt to undermine Chinese hi-tech rivals such as Huawei. Biden is signaling that he will accelerate the US economic offensive in hi-tech.

Biden indicated last month that he intends to invest \$300 billion in research and development and other areas to ensure that American corporations are not eclipsed by China or any other

rival. In his *New York Times* interview, Biden declared: “I want to make sure we’re going to fight like hell by investing in America first,” before listing energy, biotech, advanced materials and artificial intelligence as areas for large-scale government investment in research.

Biden stated his determination to maintain US global dominance in an essay entitled “Why America Must Lead Again; Rescuing US Foreign Policy After Trump” in the March/April edition of *Foreign Affairs*.

“The Biden foreign policy agenda will place the United States back at the head of the table, in a position to work with its allies and partners to mobilize collective action on global threats. The world does not organize itself... If we continue his [Trump’s] abdication of that responsibility, then one of two things will happen: either someone else will take the United States’ place, but not in a way that advances our interests and values, or no one will, and chaos will ensue.”

Biden then made absolutely clear who he is talking about. “China represents a special challenge,” he stated, “The United States does need to get tough with China.”

Regardless of who is finally installed in the White House next month, the US economic warfare and military build-up against China will continue apace. Biden is assembling an administration that will be every bit as aggressive in its confrontation with China as that of Trump—a path that is plunging the world towards a catastrophic war.

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