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China: Enemy Du Jour? But Why?



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Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has not faced an existential threat—nothing to justify the trillions of dollars given to the Pentagon to maintain military predominance over the entire global community. The United States requires a foil for its foreign policy declarations and for maintaining the allegiance of the U.S. citizenry. Has China become that foil?

When the absence of the Soviet Union could no longer justify bloated defense spending, we pursued a Global War on Terror that led to two decades of warfare in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. Counter-terrorism can no longer justify increased military spending, so will we settle on China (and Russia) as threats to U.S. security? The Trump administration did so, driving China and Russia into each other's arms as they have created their closest bilateral relations since the 1950s. U.S. strategists previously worried about Sino-Soviet cooperation, even exaggerating that threat to justify the Vietnam War. Now, no one in a sensitive policy

position has such concerns even though U.S. relations with both China and Russia have deteriorated.

President Joe Biden will be somewhat hamstrung in his efforts toward China because of his own caustic language toward Beijing during the presidential campaign. In addition to hard-line appointments in the national security field, he will have to contend with a strong bipartisan push in the Congress to increase defense spending against the China threat. Congress is a major reason for the creation of the national security state that we have become, allowing the militarization of national security policy and the “forever wars” of the past two decades. China, of course, financed those wars.

The mainstream media is doing its part to justify military engagement by applying polemicized descriptions of U.S. adversaries, particularly China. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* cannot write about China without labeling the country as “increasingly muscular;” Russia is always described as “aggressive;” Iran is that “looming threat;” and Afghanistan is the “protracted conflict” that requires a U.S. military presence even after two decades of feckless occupation.

Biden’s national security team for China seems similar to the Trump team in terms of its hard-liner attitude toward China. Trump’s Asia coordinator and deputy national security adviser was Matthew Pottinger. Pottinger was recognized as a hard-liner within the National Security Council, so his prescient warnings about Covid-19 a year ago were dismissed as part of his polemical agenda regarding Beijing. (Biden also appointed a hard-liner on Russia from the Obama administration, Victoria Nuland, to the number three position at the Department of State, which will be discussed in a subsequent column.)

Biden’s Asia coordinator and deputy national security adviser is Kurt Campbell, who was the architect of the “pivot” toward the Pacific in the Obama administration. The so-called “pivot” initiated the downturn in Sino-American relations. In 2011, in order to distract attention from its withdrawal from Iraq, including withdrawal from our largest base in Iraq, the ironically-named Camp Victory, the Obama administration declared that its attention and resources would move from the Middle East to the Pacific. China interpreted the “pivot” as the beginning of a policy of containment, which Chinese leader Xi Jinping has opposed.

President Barack Obama’s administration, led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, supported the “pivot.” Clinton and Gates shared Cold War positions on both China and Russia; Gates even proclaimed that Beijing was pursuing a policy of “world conquest.” (Gates used a similar expression in the 1980s against the Soviet Union when he was deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency—even as the Soviet Union was melting down and pursuing improved relations with the United States.) The “pivot” appeared to be a foolish reprise of “containment,” but containing a very weak and unstable Soviet Union was a reasonable task. Containing a very strong and stable China is unlikely, a pipe dream on the part of Biden’s national security team.

In addition to placing Campbell in an influential position in the National Security Council, Biden named Ely Ratner to be the special assistant to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin who has no experience with Asian policy issues. Campbell and Ratner have coauthored pieces on China that can only be described as truculent. The new deputy to the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations is Jeffrey Prescott, another hardliner. The Council on Foreign Relations's Julian Gewirtz has been named a China director for the national security team. The views of these appointees on China appear unified, preparing the way for group think.

Biden should name a more conciliatory figure regarding China to the national security team. A seasoned professional such as Professor David Shambaugh of George Washington University could serve in a policy position. A younger professional who has written widely on diplomatic initiatives toward China is Lyle Goldstein, a research professor at the Naval War College.

From the start in 2011, the policy of the "pivot" was a bridge too far. It meant that the United States would focus less attention and fewer military resources to the Middle East, and that our focus and forces would be shifted to the Pacific. As for the Middle East, it has been our briar patch for the past five decades, and we have never seriously grappled with what amounts to even a partial withdrawal from the area. Given our continuing commitments there, it is unlikely that we could move sufficient military resources from the Middle East to significantly affect the Pacific region and thus elicit Beijing's attention.

In fact, there is nothing to be gained from adding to our Pacific presence in view of the more than sufficient military power we already maintain there. We have an expansive network of bases and facilities in the Far East as well as sophisticated naval and air power. Moreover, our Pacific allies do not want a Sino-American arms race in their backyard. They realize that when the elephants tangle, it is the grass that gets trampled. Additional tactical military maneuvers are unnecessary.

The best answer to China's clumsy diplomacy and provocative maneuvers in the region is to engage in more sophisticated diplomacy. A U.S. effort to bolster its bilateral ties with China's neighbors such as Vietnam would be a natural counter. We should strengthen our ties within the so-called Quad—the United States, Australia, India, and Japan. Our participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership would signal the goal of competing economically with China. At the same time, we could signal working with China on our many shared interests such as the environment, non-proliferation, and confidence-building-measures. Arms control and disarmament were central to launching a detente with the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s; the environmental challenge could be the key to a serious and institutionalized Sino-American dialogue.

There are potential points of confrontation between the United States and China, but they have nothing to do with U.S. national security concerns. We may be troubled by China's hard-line policies toward Tibet, the Uighurs, and Hong Kong, but these are Beijing's internal

problems and we have little ability to affect them. Beijing will not bend to our will over domestic policy. There are more relevant concerns with Beijing's external problems on the border with India or with regard to Taiwan, but here again the answer is to use diplomacy. We must stop the gratuitous aspects of our engagement with Taiwan or we could find ourselves sleepwalking into a confrontation that would benefit no one.

President Biden should follow his own instincts regarding the importance of the power of our example, and demonstrate far less concern for the example of U.S. power.

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