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US China Policy: Too Late, Too Little to Offer



Biden's meeting with Xi Jinping in Woodside, California, November 15, 2023. Photo: US State Department.

U.S. presidents nearing the end of their terms typically try to resolve policy challenges at the last minute in order to bolster their legacies. For President Bill Clinton, it was a belated effort to solve the North Korean problem, which received insufficient attention during his eight years in the White House. For President George W. Bush, it was a belated attempt to improve the bilateral relationship with Russia, but there was too much personal animosity between Bush and President Vladimir Putin because of the expansion of NATO. For President Barack Obama, the Middle East became central to the policy process, but the region was out of control and no Democratic administration ever puts pressure on Israel to achieve stability in the area.

President Joe Biden is no exception to the rule regarding late-stage policymaking in extremely difficult areas, and he has picked the most difficult and important challenge of all: the bilateral relationship with China. Unfortunately, Biden and his national security team believe they can “contain” China; they can't. The U.S.-China relationship is important in all policy areas: political, economic, environmental, and military. The United States and China

have the two largest economies in the world, and are the world's two greatest emitters of greenhouse gasses. China leads the world in the production of solar cells and panels, lithium-ion batteries, and electric vehicles; the United States is far behind in these areas and the promotion of increased tariffs on these items will not help the deteriorating environmental situation. The environmental challenge cannot be resolved without Sino-American cooperation.

The United States has tried to limit China's access to the most advanced types of semiconductors because of national security concerns, but China has successfully produced older types of semiconductor chips that are essential for smartphones, cars, telecommunications networks, and weaponry. China has been subsidizing these chips, and it appears that Washington's sanctions and tariffs have only forced the Chinese to become more self-sufficient. According to the New York Times, China is projected to add half of the world's new factory capacity for legacy chips in the next several years. China's overall manufacturing capabilities exceed the manufacturing output of the United States, all of Europe, Japan, and South Korea.

Biden's feckless efforts to "contain" China include the Federal Communications Commission's revocation of all licenses for China Telecom American to provide ordinary phone services in the United States, which did nothing to stop Beijing from placing malicious code in the electric grid and water and gas pipeline networks in the United States. Even worse, Chinese hackers have worked their way into the networks of major U.S. telecommunications firms, including the two largest, Verizon and AT&T. There is little discussion of U.S. efforts to exploit weaknesses in China's telecommunications systems, which former N.S.A. contractor Edward Snowden exposed ten years ago.

The most ludicrous aspect of the Sino-American Cold War is the effort to shut down the TikTok social media platform unless the company divests itself from Chinese ownership. The Supreme Court actually added a special hearing to its calendar for oral argument. The Cold War has gotten so intense that the United States seems prepared to drop its insistence on access to a social media site that would mean dropping its commitment to the First Amendment and denying access to 170 million Americans, including most of my 13 grandchildren who believe the U.S. threat is bananas.

The incoming Trump administration probably will not lead to any improvement in Sino-American relations in view of Trump's stocking the bureaucratic shelves with fervent "China Hawks." Trump and his national security team, including JD Vance, Marco Rubio, Tulsi Gabbard, John Ratcliffe, and Mike Waltz, favor greater tariffs and sanctions against China,

although China's share of the world economy is shrinking in view of restrictions imposed during the COVID crisis as well as the collapse of the property sector in China. If Trump pursues a policy of economic disruption, China will certainly reciprocate. Moreover, Trump and his minions do not believe there are environmental and energy problems that demand a workable relationship with Beijing.

An arms race will most likely be the immediate outcome of any worsening in Sino-American relations. The United States is committed to a long-term modernization of its strategic forces, and China is maintaining rapid growth of its nuclear arsenal. The United States has 1,550 strategic weapons deployed under the START agreement that expires in 2026. The Pentagon believes that China will have 1,000 strategic warheads by 2030, but the Pentagon is also known for worst-case sensitive intelligence issues. The force moderation programs of the United States, China, and Russia must be addressed. It's long past time to place arms control and disarmament at the top of the superpower agenda.

Politicians and pundits are devoting too much attention to the so-called "Quartet of Chaos" (China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea), and not enough time to the Sino-American bilateral relationship. Trump and his appointees thus far are too preoccupied with obtuse notions of a "woke" Pentagon as well as with the potential use of the Insurrection Act to deploy active-duty American troops into the streets. Meanwhile, the traditional geopolitical problems associated with Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific are worsening in terms of U.S. interests.

For far too long, the United States has been wasting precious budgetary resources on old-fashioned military policies that have brought no advantages to the American people. Our national security policies have been ineffectual and irrelevant to the genuine threats we face today regarding energy and the environment. There is little discussion or attention given to the commonality we face with China on these national security issues.

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