

The Biden Administration and the China Challenge | Opinion

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On Feb. 4, in his first [foreign-policy speech](#) as president of the United States, [Joe Biden](#) caricatured Trump administration diplomacy as an abject failure—destructive of American interests and contrary to American ideals. At the same time, Biden gave unwitting recognition to former secretary of state [Mike Pompeo](#)'s signature achievement, which was to reorient American foreign policy toward the challenge presented by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Biden thereby acknowledged a defining test confronting him and his administration: Can they pick up where the Trump administration left off by elaborating and implementing a concrete strategy to prevail in the contest launched by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the shape of the international order?

Biden's speech included several notable departures from the Obama administration's foreign policy in favor of Trump administration priorities. During [Barack Obama](#)'s eight years as president—and Biden's as vice president—Washington did not highlight a new era of great-power competition that ushered in new threats to freedom. Yet on Feb. 4th, President Biden followed in the Trump administration's footsteps by affirming, "American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy."

The Obama administration did not make championing human rights abroad a centerpiece of its foreign policy. Yet on Feb. 4th, President Biden echoed the [report](#) of the Commission on Unalienable Rights (on which I served as executive secretary) established by former secretary Pompeo: "we must start with diplomacy rooted in America's most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law and treating every person with dignity."

And the Obama administration did not stress the urgency of the China challenge. Yet on Feb. 4, in line with a [series of speeches](#) given last summer by four Trump administration senior officials—National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien, [FBI](#) director Christopher Wray, Attorney General [William Barr](#) and Secretary Pompeo—President Biden promised to "take on directly the challenges posed by [*sic*] our prosperity, security and democratic values by our most serious competitor, China."

Biden's new awareness is welcome, but his cursory treatment of what he himself characterizes as America's "most serious competitor" is worrisome. The failure to recognize that his stance continues rather than repudiates the Trump administration's recasting of U.S. foreign policy exacerbates the disunity Biden pledged in his [inaugural address](#) to overcome. And by forgoing

clarification of the demands that will be made of government and citizens—indeed, by omitting the slightest indication that long-term planning and execution will be necessary—Biden cast doubt on the seriousness with which he takes the China challenge.

The good news is that the Biden administration need not construct a China strategy from scratch. Having embraced the Trump administration's understanding that the PRC is America's paramount great-power competitor, the White House should take advantage of Trump administration China analysis and policy, beginning with the 2017 [National Security Strategy](#) and including the 2020 "[United States Strategic Approach to People's Republic of China](#)." These documents broke with the conventional wisdom that, since the Nixon administration, saw China as a rising status-quo power pursuing hegemony in its region and eminence within the established international order. The Trump administration outlined and commenced the implementation of a strategy—economic, diplomatic, military—to counter the full scope of the CCP's ambitions. A revisionist great power, China under the CCP has moved outward from the Indo-Pacific region in a quest to reshape international order in line with the party's authoritarian interests and ideas.

In November 2020, the State Department's Policy Planning Staff—I served as director—produced a long paper that examined the larger context of China's emergence as the United States' foremost great-power competitor. "[The Elements of the China Challenge](#)" explains the blind spots and false assumptions that induced the U.S. foreign-policy establishment for decades to downplay the China challenge. The paper describes the repressive communist dictatorship that governs China, the CCP's massive surveillance state and the party's systematic and egregious abuse of human rights. It surveys the CCP's programs of economic coercion and cooptation in every region of the world, the party's relentless pursuit of a world-class military and its infusion of authoritarian norms and standards into international organizations. It explores the mixture of Marxist-Leninist and hyper-nationalist ideas that govern the CCP's ruthless means and imperial ends. It enumerates China's vulnerabilities, both those endemic to authoritarian regimes and those specific to the PRC. And it outlines the tasks that the United States must undertake to secure freedom.

The Biden administration would also benefit from consideration of "[The Longer Telegram](#)," an ambitious effort to articulate a full-blown China strategy the Atlantic Council recently posted online. The anonymous author is "a former senior government official with deep expertise and experience dealing with China"—and, the paper demonstrates, with a seasoned knowledge of American foreign affairs and defense policy and a patriot's love of the nation's finest traditions.

The author's recommendations are uneven. Some cling to conventional wisdom: Contrary to "The Longer Telegram," General Secretary [Xi Jinping](#)'s aggressiveness does not represent a break with longstanding CCP policy but flows from the wealth, power and influence that his predecessors patiently acquired for China by loosening the economy, modernizing, and strengthening the military. Some are far-fetched: The anonymous author's hopes notwithstanding, the bitter experiences of Presidents Bush, Obama and Trump should dampen expectations about enlisting Russia to hem in China. Some are ill-conceived: It is one thing to preserve a world order favorable to U.S. interests and consistent with American principles, as the

Policy Planning paper advises, but quite another to impel China to embrace it, as the anonymous author counsels.

Nevertheless, "The Longer Telegram" reinforces crucial aspects of "The Elements of the China Challenge." The Policy Planning paper describes the character and magnitude of the CCP's threat to freedom while the Atlantic Council paper focuses on a lengthy list of concrete steps to address the China challenge. Yet both pay homage to State Department official George Kennan's 1946 "[Long Telegram](#)" from Moscow and his anonymously published 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article, "[The Sources of Soviet Conduct](#)." These seminal writings threw the Soviet challenge into sharp relief by describing Soviet conduct internally and abroad, identifying the mix of ideas—Marxism-Leninism and Russian nationalism—that drove Soviet conduct, pinpointing the weaknesses of the Soviet system and affirming that the United States would persevere provided it remained true to its principles.

Both "The Elements of the China Challenge" and "The Longer Telegram" emphasize that China's economic, technological and military might enable the CCP to credibly pursue its strategic objective—to displace the United States as the world's preeminent power and knit together a new international order with Beijing at the center. Both distinguish between the people of China and the Chinese Communist Party while cautioning that the latter has staying power. Both argue that American strategy must revolve around preserving the free, open and rules-based international order that advances U.S. interests and reflects America's ideals. Both recognize that despite the CCP's contempt for human rights, since China is a leading trade partner for the world's major economies, the United States must develop criteria to inform not only deterrence of but also the inevitable cooperation with China—in, for example, commerce, climate and health. Both underscore that the magnitude of the China challenge makes partners, friends and allies more important to the United States than ever. Both maintain that the United States must put its own house in order by rededicating itself to the principles of freedom and democracy, invigorating the domestic economy, ensuring that the [U.S. military](#) remains the world's most formidable fighting force and reforming education—both the humanities and sciences—to better equip students to understand and defend the principles of freedom. And both argue that to prevail in the contest over the shape of world order—which is also a contest of ideas—the United States must champion human rights, not least because the rights shared equally by all persons lie at the core of America's constitutional system.

President Biden correctly warns that the United States faces a "new moment of advancing authoritarianism." To rise to what he himself characterizes as "the challenges" to "our prosperity, security, and democratic values by our most serious competitor," Biden and his team should take advantage of the foundations that have been laid for refashioning U.S. foreign policy to secure freedom.

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