

# Fostering the Emerging Consensus About the China Challenge

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor  
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Although laden with former Obama administration officials—starting with President Biden himself, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan—the Biden administration foreign policy team has embraced a decidedly harder line than the previous Democratic White House on the nation’s top foreign policy challenge. They could lead more effectively by expanding their circle of partners at home.

Acknowledging the role that the Trump administration played in identifying and addressing the threat the Chinese Communist Party presents to the free and open international order would signal that the Biden administration intends to act energetically on its welcome words and work diligently across the U.S. political divide to counter Beijing’s authoritarian aims.

In response to China’s rise, the Obama administration effected a “pivot to Asia.” This shift [recognized](#) the need for America, according to University of Michigan professor Kenneth Lieberthal, “to play a leadership role in Asia for decades to come.” In formal White House remarks shortly after his inauguration, President Biden went considerably further. Following in the footsteps of the Trump administration, Biden [proclaimed](#) the People’s Republic of China “our most serious competitor” while emphasizing “the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States.” Biden promised to “confront China’s economic abuses; counter its aggressive, coercive action; to push back on China’s attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance.”

While distancing itself from Trump administration policies in myriad ways, the current administration has maintained or extended Trump sanctions and tariffs on China. It has taken up where the Trump administration left off in criticizing Beijing's unfair trade practices and massive criminal theft of intellectual property. And, in the wake of former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's January 2021 [determination](#) that China is committing crimes against humanity and genocide against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the new administration has [decried](#) China's "horrendous human right abuses." [At the United Nations on Tuesday](#), Biden stopped short of mentioning China, but it is likely that the president had Beijing in mind while reaffirming America's [dedication](#) to the rights inherent in all persons, committing the United States to cooperating with partners and the private sector to invest hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure in developing countries, and pledging U.S. readiness to oppose authoritarian powers that seek to extend their influence.

The Biden administration's stance is more in keeping with that of the Trump administration than with that of any of its other predecessors in the last 50 years. For decades following President Nixon's 1972 visit to China, the dominant view in the United States has been that bilateral engagement with Beijing and the incorporation of China into international organizations would temper the Chinese Communist Party's repressive one-party state at home, its nationalist claims over Hong Kong and Taiwan, and its affinity for other authoritarian regimes. Over the years, a small but growing number of scholars called into question that rosy assessment. The Trump administration made a clean break with the conventional wisdom in a series of high-profile administration [speeches](#) and a number of unclassified papers, including the 2017 [National Security Strategy](#), the [2018 National Defense Strategy](#), and the 2020 [United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China](#).

In November 2020, the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, which I headed, published "[The Elements of the China Challenge](#)." This paper brought together the various strands of the Trump administration's analysis by placing the CCP's hegemonic ambitions in historical and geopolitical context; setting forth the key features, and the animating ideas, of China's conduct; and enumerating

the tasks the United States must undertake to oppose effectively the CCP's reshaping of world politics.

The Policy Planning Staff argued that the American propensity to suppose that development toward liberal democracy was inevitable along with the foreign-policy establishment's neglect of the CCP's authoritative pronouncements and writings blinded the United States to Beijing's longstanding determination to infuse the international order with authoritarian norms. We surveyed the schemes of economic co-optation and coercion, backed by an enormous and expanding economy, that the CCP employed in every region of the world as well its development of a world-class military and its efforts to bend international organizations to its will.

We also examined the Marxist-Leninist dictatorship that the CCP imposes on China's 1.4 billion people, and the extreme Chinese nationalism that drives the party's quest to place Beijing at the center of a reconfigured world order. We summarized the CCP's many and varied vulnerabilities. And we concluded that America must take several steps to meet the China challenge. These include fortifying the U.S military; reevaluating our alliance system and international organizations with a view to restructuring both to address the present round of great-power competition; and training a new generation of diplomats, foreign policy experts, and defense analysts in Mandarin and in science and technology. Above all, we emphasized, it was incumbent on leaders to rededicate the nation to the principles of freedom that undergird the American constitutional order and which, in our extraordinarily diverse nation, provide the enduring foundation for civic cohesion.

It is gratifying that every one of these propositions finds strong support in Rush Doshi's exhaustively researched and painstakingly argued book, "The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order." It is regrettable that Doshi, who was the founding director of the Brookings China Strategy Initiative and is currently serving as director for China on the Biden administration National

Security Council, gives the reader scarcely a hint of the developing convergence of opinion among Democrats and Republicans about the China challenge.

Conversant with the relevant scholarship, knowledgeable about military affairs, well-read in diplomatic history, and in seemingly encyclopedic command of CCP speeches and documents, party media, and Chinese think-tank commentary, Doshi throws into sharp relief the unity of purpose that underlies China's evolving strategies for operating within the Indo-Pacific region and dealing with the wider world. His detailed analysis leaves little room for doubt that the CCP seeks to replace the American-led free and open international order with a Chinese-led order friendly to illiberal and anti-democratic governments.

Since Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping jump-started the Chinese economy in the late 1970s and early 1980s by incorporating free-market elements, the PRC, according to Doshi, has adopted three distinct "strategies of displacement." As China rapidly acquired wealth, Deng insisted on "hiding capabilities and biding time." With what Doshi refers to as "the traumatic trifecta" — China's destabilizing 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising, America's swift and decisive victory in the 1991 Iraq War, and the Soviet Union's sudden dissolution in late 1991 — the CCP concluded that an empowered United States, the world's only remaining superpower, had become China's principal threat, which necessitated the adoption of measures to blunt American influence in Asia. The 2008 global financial crisis convinced the CCP that a weakened West and its own growing strength had brought the time for "hiding and biding" to an end. The moment had arrived, in the words of then-President Hu Jintao, for "actively accomplishing something," which translated into building an alternative economic and political order within the Indo-Pacific. In 2016, Brexit and Donald Trump's election led General Secretary Xi Jinping to conclude that the West's decline was irreversible. Such "great changes unseen in a century," Xi announced, enabled China to extend its order-building to the entire world.

“Together,” writes Doshi, “these strategies at the regional and then global levels provide a rough means of ascent for the Chinese Communist Party’s nationalist elites, who seek to restore China to its due place and roll back the historical aberration of the West’s overwhelming global influence.”

Doshi argues that U.S. accommodation of Chinese assertiveness would only play into the CCP’s hands. Moreover, prospects for changing China are slim, not least because Beijing’s already prodigious economic power is bound to keep growing, which will further embolden the party. Accordingly, Doshi sketches a compelling “asymmetric strategy” to enable the United States to prevail in competition with Beijing over the shape of world order. His case would have been even stronger, and better for the country, had he observed that his recommendations fit well with much of the Trump administration’s China policy.

For example, the United States should, Doshi maintains, pursue “deterrence by denial” in the Indo-Pacific, which involves developing unmanned aircraft, submarines with large missile payloads, mine warfare, and assisting allies, partners, and friends (Taiwan, Japan, India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia) to do the same—as is specified in the Trump administration National Security Strategy. In addition, Doshi recommends that the United States dilute China’s control over infrastructure in other countries by devising new forms of cooperation with friends and more effective public-private partnerships to assist developing countries—consistent with Secretary Pompeo’s reinvigoration of the Quad (Japan, India, Australia, and the United States) and Trump administration efforts to diversify and refine American foreign aid. And the United States, Doshi argues, should inform the world about the extent of CCP corruption and the dangers of CCP authoritarianism—as did the Trump administration in major speeches last summer by National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien, FBI Director Christopher Wray, Attorney General William Barr, and Secretary Pompeo.

A comprehensive array of such measures, Doshi appreciates, will require a concerted national effort. In the conclusion of his book, he rightly asserts that “a constructive China policy” depends on “American leaders” who can “find affirmative ways to rebuild the solidarity and civic identity that make democracy work.”

All the more’s the pity that Doshi missed the opportunity to build trust and comity by acknowledging the emerging consensus about the China challenge.

Too much is at stake for partisan posturing to obscure the overriding public interest in building a unified American approach.

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