

# Biden Administration Should Take Secretary Blinken Seriously

COMMENTARY

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Secretary of State Antony Blinken's major foreign policy speech about the China challenge delivered May 26 at George Washington University – notable for what it stressed, obscured, and omitted – deserves more attention than it has received. So too does the gap between the speech's call for action and the Biden administration's foreign policy in practice.

In "[The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China](#)," Blinken demonstrated the substantial progress that has been made in speaking about China since the Obama years. Then, the administration called for a "pivot to Asia" on the grounds that the region was home to half the world's population and some of the planet's fastest growing economies. However, the Chinese Communist Party and its one-party Leninist rule, predatory economic policies, massive military build-up, and quest to transform world order did not figure prominently in Obama administration calculations.

In contrast, the Trump administration put front and center China's arrival as a great-power competitor to the United States. In particular, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo emphasized the distinction between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people over whom the party exercises dictatorial control; highlighted the schemes of economic cooptation and coercion the CCP is implementing around the globe; called attention to the CCP's contempt for international law at home, in the South China Sea and Hong Kong, and in its dealings with other nations; underscored the strategic significance of China's development of a world-class military; and sounded the alarm

about the CCP's quest to insinuate authoritarian norms within international institutions. All this, the Pompeo Policy Planning Staff [showed](#), was part and parcel of the CCP's long-term goal, driven both by its Marxist-Leninist convictions and its hyper-nationalist ambitions, to place Beijing at the center of world politics and impose an authoritarian cast on international order.

Without so much as hinting at the shift in thinking about China accomplished by the Trump administration, Blinken largely embraced it in his GWU speech. But a more refined understanding of the threat to freedom posed by the CCP is needed than that put forward by Blinken.

At the heart of Blinken's speech was a contradiction. On the one hand, he called on America to "modernize" the post-World War II "rules-based international order" so "that it represents the interests, the values, the hopes of all nations, big and small, from all regions." On the other hand, he acknowledged that the "outcome is not guaranteed because the foundations of the international order are under serious and sustained challenge." Since, according to Blinken, the principal challenge to the rules-based international order stems from two nation-states – Russia and China – both of whose leaders believe they are pursuing their nation's interests, the defense of international order can't represent, as he asserted, "the interests, the values, the hopes of all nations." Rather – and consistent with the international institutions and norms of nation-state conduct that the U.S. led the way in establishing in the aftermath of World War II – international order should reflect the interests and principles of nations that respect nation-states' freedom and sovereignty and their obligation to safeguard human rights.

That does not mean that the U.S. must cooperate only with fellow liberal democracies. It does give America an interest in forming alliances, friendships, and partnerships aimed at preserving a free and open international order. In a complex and interconnected world, such an order favors liberal democracy and provides the best security for American citizens' freedom and prosperity.

Russia, Blinken stated, poses a “clear and present threat” because of its attack on Ukraine, which “also attacked the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, enshrined in the UN charter, to protect all countries from being conquered or coerced.” But the United States “will remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order – and that’s posed by the People’s Republic of China,” he emphasized. “China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”

That’s correct, but Blinken’s assessment of the China challenge understates an excruciating paradox. As he acknowledged, and as former Secretary Pompeo determined in January 2021, the CCP is perpetrating crimes against humanity and genocide against the Uyghurs in northwest China. Yet despite the PRC’s global ambitions and its sustained criminality, “the United States and China have to deal with each other for the foreseeable future,” Blinken insists, because “China is also integral to the global economy and to our ability to solve challenges from climate to COVID.” Never before has the U.S. economy been so tightly intertwined with a great-power rival flagrantly committing the most heinous of human rights violations.

To enable the United States to both counter and cooperate with a formidable strategic competitor engaged in crimes against humanity and genocide, Blinken announced a three-pronged strategy – each component of which has roots in Trump administration recalibration of U.S. foreign policy. First, the U.S. should invest strategically at home in America’s competitiveness, innovation, and democracy. Such investments encompass physical infrastructure; research and development; education and worker training; catalyzation of private-sector innovation in key 21<sup>st</sup>-century industries; and preservation of the openness, toleration, and capacity for self-criticism that typify America at its best.

Second, stated Blinken, the United States should cooperate with allies and partners to promote a free and open international order. Blinken boasted of Biden administration progress in bolstering cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, though he left out the foundations for that progress laid by Pompeo's revival of the Quad – a partnership embracing Japan, India, Australia, and U.S. In addition, Blinken noted, the Biden administration has furnished generous foreign assistance to fight COVID-19 and joined with European partners to promote trade and technological development.

Third, the U.S. must prevail in the competition against China over the shape of world order. That means, according to Blinken – and consistent with Trump administration warnings and initiatives – ramping up efforts to counter massive CCP intellectual property theft. It involves educating businesses keen to take advantage of China's cheap labor and enormous consumer markets about the CCP's high-handed and often illegal commercial conduct, threats to American national security, and abysmal human-rights record. It calls for measures to counter the CCP's unlawful actions in the South and East China Seas and for working with allies and partners to deter the CCP from employing its formidable military to snuff out freedom and democracy in Taiwan.

While countering the CCP's quest for global hegemony, Blinken is keen to cooperate with China on climate change – the PRC produces 28% of global emissions – as well as on COVID-19, non-proliferation and arms control, illegal and illicit narcotics, the global food crisis, and the economic downturn caused by the global pandemic.

To the extent that the United States must work with the CCP to address challenges that are global in nature, it should be from a position of strength. Yet contrary to Blinken's encouraging words, the Biden administration's conduct of foreign policy signals weakness.

Some blunders involve matters not directly related to China: for example, the failure to maintain – or the deliberate policy to weaken – control over America's southern border; the Afghanistan

withdrawal debacle; and the president's worse-than-embarrassing hat-in-hand visit to Saudi Arabia asking the Kingdom to pump more oil even as he blocks development of American oil and gas fields.

Other feckless Biden administration measures pertain directly to China. As Miranda Devine recently reported, the White House ended a number of tough Trump-era programs and policies. The reversal of orientation includes disbanding the China Initiative, which combatted Chinese espionage at universities and research centers; suspending tariffs on Chinese solar panels; revoking restrictions on the social media platform TikTok; and permitting Huawei to purchase chips used in automobile manufacturing. The Biden administration has also declined to advance the investigation of China's role in the origins, and cover-up, of COVID-19.

One can quarrel with the details of Blinken's GWU speech and object to his partisan refusal to acknowledge the Trump administration's achievements. But Secretary Blinken rightly highlighted the centrality of the China challenge. The Biden administration should take seriously its secretary of state's admonitions and exhortations.

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