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Opinion

US-China relations: A Biden presidency must start healing bilateral ties and alliances battered by Trump



Tom Plate

- Years of living outrageously under Donald Trump have grated on almost everyone's nerves as he has launched a losing trade war and blamed China for internal problems
- Any US president who cannot understand China's perspective and the importance of good US-China relations is not fit to lead the country

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President Xi Jinping and then-US vice-president Joe Biden hold T-shirts given to them by students during their visit to the International Studies Learning Centre in South Gate, California, on February 17, 2012. Improving the bilateral relationship is essential to ensuring prosperity for both countries and the wider world. Photo: AP

A re-released photo of Joe Biden, then US vice-president, on the border between North and South Korea is being touted by some as evidence of embedded American complacency. Yet it's almost a required photo stop for American politicians who, as if some mountain-climbing Edmund Hillary, can never be happy except at the top.

This career politician is pictured peering northwesterly, like some General George Patton through all-seeing binoculars. Some in Asia might joke that he looks like he is scouting locations for a summer home. American complacency means never having to say you've gone too far.

It's true Biden has enough [foreign policy experience](#) for two candidates for the US presidency. As vice-president, his views were not always a perfect reflection of those of President Barack Obama, his boss for eight years. What he would do for Asia if he is inaugurated in January as the 46th president is no mystery – he would play nicer with allies without kowtowing to others.

He has shown characteristic empathy and rightly decried Washington's blackmail practice of [threatening US troop withdrawals](#) whenever South Korea hints at deviating from US policy. This is not, he has suggested, the way allies should relate.

He is right. The way Washington has treated its key allies has been less than exemplary. It is more likely that current US President Donald Trump would start wearing medical masks than US troops would ever actually be withdrawn, barring a peace breakthrough with China.

It should be obvious that the US is gracing South Korea with its [constant military presence](#) not solely for the Koreans but to afford a flexible military option against the Chinese and Russians. The US military almost always plays to stay.

More than Russia, China spooks the American political, military and security-intelligence establishment. The last few years of living outrageously under Trump have grated on almost everyone's nerves. While China has gained, America has launched a trade war it is losing and is blaming Beijing for problems it cannot solve at home, such as the Covid-19 crisis.

Australians perhaps more than anyone feel left out: "Are we of the Asian persuasion or of the Western tradition?" With every new prime minister, it seems the Aussies go into melancholy meltdown, wondering if anyone cares for them other than themselves.

The current prime minister, Scott Morrison, foolishly fights [the identity crisis](#) by denying there is one. Meanwhile, his fellow Aussies, according to the latest Pew Research Centre poll, distrust President Xi Jinping almost as much as many Americans do.

The Australian National University's Hugh White sums up the country's bundle of nerves in the latest issue of Australian Foreign Affairs. Beijing, he says, "is deeply resolved to take America's place as the leading power in East Asia. Nearly three years after declaring China to be its key strategic rival, Washington still has no coherent policy to resist this challenge."

To fill in the gap, Australia will probably whip up some new policy mixology if it does not resign itself to simply going it alone. By continuing to [devalue allies and alliances](#), the Trump administration will not help the insomnia.

The view from Beijing of Asia's current disarray might seem to validate Xi's "[wolf warrior](#)" instincts to prowl even more. Why not a "century of domination" after that awful "century of humiliation"?

The answer is that a series of pyrrhic victories in nearby seas are not in China's long-term interests as much as a stable, prosperous and conflict-resolving neighbourhood – particularly if the new China rather than the old America aims to become the prime contractor. More Chinese will make more money and wind up living better if their government spends less on expensive military expansion.

Perhaps one way to demonstrate that point to Beijing is to place before it a 21st-century horizontal line of determined opponents. An alliance of [the United States, Japan, India and Australia](#) – if not

Indonesia – is the current thinking. Total up the four defence budgets, economies and populations, and together the “Quad” would more than challenge China’s.

The downside is colossal, though. Aggregate expenditure for arms and military electronics that would suck away life-enhancing funding. This would further intensify domestic fissures – especially [politically volatile income disparities](#) and ever more serious health dangers – which would eventually gnaw away at the moral validity of governments, including China’s.

Asia, the West and China are going about their 21st century in a way that could transport the destinies of both superpowers back into the 19th century. Beijing wanting more and more and Washington not wanting to lose anything at all won’t work any magic. Each needs the other, more than they realise.

Former Chinese president Jiang Zemin had it exactly right, according to his biographer Robert Lawrence Kuhn: “While many Americans criticise Jiang for being anti-American, some Chinese derogate him for being pro-American. Jiang is not pro-American, but he does understand America. He is, above all, a Chinese patriot who believes that America can help China grow strong and that good relations between America and China are vital for peace and prosperity in the 21st century.”

Any American president who cannot relate to Jiang’s perspective is not competent to lead us. China will be around a lot longer than Covid-19, as will the US. There must be a better way to structure the bilateral relationship.

Clinical Professor Tom Plate is founder of Asia Media International at Loyola Marymount University, where he is tenured to the Asian and Asian-American Studies Department