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## US-China relations: Capitol chaos a chance for Beijing to show leadership and give peace a chance



Tom Plate

- China should make it known a fresh start with the Biden administration is its top foreign policy priority, tone down its rhetoric and take the lead on UN Security Council reform in the spirit of global citizenship

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

It's embarrassing. Like some televangelist preacher caught with his trousers down at an out-of-town house of pleasure, America has been caught with its democracy down.

Point one: a scary but also confused and confusing coup attempt. Point two: a Republican president who should never have been president. Point three: a first lady whose main contribution was to the bottom lines of the money-mongers of haute couture. Point four, and most embarrassing of all: many in the Republican Party seem to be mostly enjoying the crazy ride.

Beijing, as much as it could manage, tried to appear not to dance on the grave of what some were calling the strange death of American liberal democracy. It did not need to party so hard anyway; the mess in Washington spoke volumes by itself.

Besides, the timing was a bit awkward with the Beijing-controlled Hong Kong government proceeding with rounding up its perceived enemies in the city. Those scooped up by police are viewed as valiant, pro-democracy angels by many in the US government and public.

And so the standard rhetorical scolding and threatening by members of the US Congress and the media might well have seemed odd given that police in the United States were seen making arrests for violations of law and order in the run-up to and through the invasion of the Capitol Building.

At the time of writing, US President Donald Trump, who has set a perilous standard of governance that will be easy for President-elect Joe Biden to avoid replicating, is still technically president. One way or the other, that will not be the case for long.

He lost the election for a second term, but he also overwhelmingly lost plausibility, save for those who are either easily fooled or hell-bent on insurrection. Fortunately, the US Constitution bars the nation's leader from morphing into a president for life – maybe not such a bad idea for any system.

For the Chinese government and the Chinese people, it would not be an error to overestimate the current civic demoralisation. With the giant fog of the Covid-19 pandemic clouding everything, who knows when the sun will shine on America again? Yes, nihilism is the enemy of hope but, in the current circumstances, hope might be the enemy of reality.

The pandemic injects all confident predictions with uncertainty. Perhaps our great medical scientists do have enough rope to strangle the viral octopus, but the civic virus of disarray has caught our political scientists off balance, historians grasp for analogies that truly enlighten and quality news media struggle to articulate without cliché.

This is a huge opportunity for Beijing. Yes, on the downside, it appeals greatly to those who hanker after the usual dreary global geopolitics and a chance to gain an edge over the US. But is there some way to inch away from the old and aim for something new? To give peace a chance?

The opportunity would require President Xi Jinping's government to summon whatever hidden reserves of largesse percolate through the corridors of power and invest it in a more productive, level-headed and calm relationship.

It should continue to make it known that a fresh start with the incoming Biden administration is the top priority of Chinese foreign policy. It should shelve every instinct to annoy Washington or its allies and friends, including Taiwan, while proposing – by example, not just through global press releases – new ways of relating.

It might also tone down the unnecessary ferocity of the rhetoric of whomever is the rough Chinese equivalent of US political blowhards such as Texas Senator Ted Cruz, who encouraged the insurrection. It is time to get serious about peace.

One obvious move – beyond mere symbolism – would be for China to take the lead at the United Nations to reform the sputtering Security Council. It might not be too late. As fractured and flawed as it is, the UN is the one place where 193 states meet for the purpose of consciously avoiding war.

A brilliant reform campaign led by Beijing would be striking in its spirit of global citizenship. Obviously, this would require expanding the number of permanent members on the council – perhaps even doubling them.

At the moment, the US is in negative momentum. Politically, the incoming Biden government will find itself running as fast as it can simply to stay in place. Like China, America has scars and not enough cans of spray paint with which to gloss them over.

If Xi and Biden were to somehow switch jobs, who would end up with the better deal? A superpower ride is never easy-going. Obstacles and enemies arise from within as well as without.

The ideological dissonance between China and the United States needs to be understood more for domestic effect than international intent. A world view can work to motivate people to believe and to act as if one, even though it is based on a kind of magical thinking, whether from political stage left or stage right.

The governance trick is to lower the volume on doctrinal conformity. Rigidity in political ideology will lead to decline rather than renewal.

Political ideology taken too seriously by even the well-motivated can eat away at all that has been achieved. If you need to glue yourself to something that is impossible to achieve to remain plausible, at what point are you kidding yourself and others?

**LMU Clinical Professor Tom Plate is vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute and the author of the Giants of Asia book series, including Conversations with Ban Ki-Moon**