

*Opinion*

## US-China relations: Biden's America must evolve beyond old ideas with bigger guns



- Mutual demonisation has no place in China-US diplomacy and will produce nothing good. Patriotism without modulation on both sides could trigger a chain of events that eludes the control of their manipulators

**Tom Plate**

Published: 1:00am, 1 Dec, 2020



Lightning flashes over the US Navy aircraft carrier USS Nimitz as it transits the South China Sea on July 4.  
Photo: Reuters

The filling of key policy positions in the incoming Biden administration proceeds apace. So far, though, none of the announced or expected top-level appointees offer particular savvy or expertise about Beijing.

The designated Biden secretary of state is Antony Blinken, whose career competence and sensible style will prove refreshing and might someday even blur memories in foreign capitals of his predecessor Mike Pompeo. But as close as this likeable diplomat is to Biden – and closeness is an enormous asset – Blinken has no pretensions of being some Sino-superman in a China cape.

He will need all the help on China he can get, and as soon as he can get it. America's top diplomat will find himself pulled in many international directions, especially at the start. China, representing 18 per cent of the

global population and 32 per cent of Asia's, is a whale of a challenge. The country's ambitious Communist Party takes few prolonged naps.

Right away, the incoming administration would help itself greatly by designating a special super-coordinator for China or even create a new position of China tsar. This would charge some capable figure with sorting out the maddening bilateral matrix, with all its military, diplomatic, economic and human rights issues that can spin the relationship into infinite regress.

Ideally, this person would be neither a panda hugger nor a panda strangler. They certainly should be fluent in Mandarin and preferably have served as a foreign service officer on the mainland. They should be of a quality to deserve everyone's respect, including Beijing's.

To get the ball rolling, a current high-ranking career official could be vetted. American intelligence expert Greg Treverton, whose extensive career includes service as chairman of the National Intelligence Council in the Obama administration, imagines a scenario in which the China coordinator would be situated near the secretary of state in a re-energised State Department: "One easy way would be to make 'P' dual-hatted as the China coordinator. Of course, being located in State would have some downsides, but the fate of most rootless tsars is that they become, as I say, tsardines." "P" is Washington lingo for the high-ranking post of undersecretary of state for political affairs.

More reconstruction of the conceptual sort will be needed as Biden's people will not be able to get by without the guiding leverage of a big idea. The world is too complicated and China too large and successful to lean on old analogies such as a "new" cold war based on the containment concept that worked in 1946 but has aged like everything else since then.

America does not have the kind of wealth advantage over China that it had over the former Soviet Union to be able to blithely outspend them on weapons. To get into that sort of contest is to run the very real risk America might wind up being outspent by China.

Issues of ethical and moral legitimacy face these two powers should they wind up shackling the bilateral relationship in grandpa's cold war terms. Each grinds along with domestic problems that cannot be solved solely with money but also cannot be cut down to size without a great deal of it. Some problems, such as climate change and health, face all nations while some are unique to them.

The just-published book *Invisible China: How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise*, by Stanford University professor Scott Rozelle and education researcher Natalie Johnson, examines deep systemic faults in China's development that, if not addressed, could disrupt China's growth. As the citizen of a country with a comparable issue – an urban-rural divide that was evident in the recent US election – the *Invisible China* thesis hit home.

It is impossible to see how regional and global stability can improve with China and the US at each other's throats. Mutual demonisation has no place in China-US diplomacy and will produce nothing good. Patriotism without modulation on both sides could trigger a chain of events that eludes the control of their manipulators.

The persistent Covid-19 pandemic is taking so much air out of the economy and our human spirit. The drift to war can only be checked by steely willpower and absolute planet-caring.

It is foolish to believe peace and stability can be achieved by demonising. Alas, from the perspective of many in the US government, military and news media, whenever an issue arises with Beijing, China is always the guilty party. What's the point in trying to negotiate with Beijing? Strategically speaking, let's do to China precisely what we did to the Soviets – arm ourselves to the teeth. What other option is there?

At the same time, the rest of the world is supposed to hold on for dear life and succumb to a kind of subjugation to a nuclear-tinged duel between two geopolitical dinosaurs. Is this America's smartest vision for Asia's future? Is it China's? The US government must come up with better, but China's must as well if its "peace-loving" branding is to have credibility.

**Clinical Professor Tom Plate is founder of Asia Media International at Loyola Marymount University, in the Asian and Asian American Studies Department. He is vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute**