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The Democrats on China, and the Significance for Israel

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If Joe Biden is elected President in November, what will be his administration's approach vis-à-vis China? And how might it affect Israel's ability to navigate the tension between the two great powers? The Democratic Party platform for 2020 provides an insight into these questions. The platform's language suggests that notwithstanding transition, Washington will continue the current tough stance on Beijing. At the same time, the Democrats vow to take a more nuanced and multilateral approach, taking into consideration not only US interests but also those of its allies. At the very basic level, Israel should continue to adapt its relations with Washington and Beijing to the era of great power competition. Further, Israel should seize the opportunity presented by the Democrats' emphasis on alliances, and participate in US efforts to create alternatives to Chinese investments and capabilities in certain areas, especially in technology R&D.

The consensus today is that current US policy vis-à-vis China is bipartisan, namely, that the strategic competition-turned-into-rivalry between Washington and Beijing will persist, regardless of who wins the presidential elections in November. And indeed, since 2016, broad agreement has emerged on both sides of the political aisle, as well as among the public and within the bureaucracy, that the United States and China are locked in a great power competition, one that spans military, diplomatic, economic, and technological domains. Nonetheless, the new [platform](#) released by the Democratic National Committee on July 24, 2020 suggests that if Joe Biden is elected President, his administration could adopt a slightly different approach on China. The platform's language still needs to be adopted in the current Democratic National Convention. Further, it only expresses the "ideas and beliefs that govern" the Democratic Party, and will not necessarily become a prescription for policy. Yet it is indicative of the Democratic position on US-China tensions. And this position is clear – Democrats will continue the Trump administration's tough stance on China, but promise a more nuanced and multilateral approach. Such a transition will also have implications for US allies, including Israel.

For Democrats, like Republicans, China is clearly the top priority foreign policy issue. In contrast to the 2016 [platform](#), which mentioned China and the Chinese people eight

times, this year's draft does so 25 times. In contrast, Russia is mentioned only five times in the new platform as compared with six in 2016; Iran is down to seven times from 16 in 2016 (and Israel is mentioned six times now versus nine in 2016). The language itself explicitly illustrates the Democrats' tough stance on China, and under certain circumstances, Democrats vow to take "aggressive action" against Beijing.

One of the notable elements of the platform's section on China is the attempt criticize the Trump administration's approach while simultaneously vowing to be just as tough on China. Likely the result of Trump's allegations that Biden would not sufficiently stand up to China, the Democrats do not question the need to confront China as a peer competitor. Yet they fault the current administration's stance on China for its lack of planning, counterproductive nature, and failure in achieving desired results for the American people. The key mishandled issue, according to the platform, is the "reckless" trade war, which the administration has "no plan for winning" and has led to hundreds of thousands of Americans losing their jobs. Moreover, Democrats imply that the Trump administration is not forceful enough in protecting US intellectual property and that its approach helped "exaggerate China's weight, over-militarize our policy, and hurt American workers." At the same time, Democrats recognize the need to work with China on two key issues: nuclear nonproliferation and climate change. Cooperation on responding to global health challenges and addressing the Covid-19 pandemic is starkly missing.

The platform explicitly says that China is not primarily a military threat, but clarifies that the US will stand up to aggression, especially in the South China Sea. Further, it reiterates the commitment to Taiwan and to freedom of navigation. On human rights, the Democrats criticize the Trump administration's record, promise to condemn the mistreatment of Uyghurs and other minorities, and use the loaded term "concentration camps." They also vow to stand with Hong Kong, and even sanction officials, individuals, and entities weakening Hong Kong's autonomy.

The Democrats blame the Trump administration for undermining US alliance networks, and instead highlight the importance of working with allies, both on domestic and global issues, e.g., trade. The Democrats emphasize that their approach to China will not only take US interests into consideration, but also those of its allies, and ensure that the rivalry with China does not hurt global stability. Europe is considered a US "natural partner" in the competition with China. They declare the sources of American strength – social openness, economic dynamism, and the power of alliances – as important for shaping international norms that reflect US values, implicitly criticizing the current administration's crackdown on students and academics of Chinese descent.

While Israel is not mentioned in the China context, the platform suggests that like other US allies, a change in Washington could have implications for how Israel navigates the tension between the United States and China. At the very basic level, the platform reinforces the understanding that the competition with China is a bipartisan issue that will continue to occupy center stage. In that regard, Israel should continue to adapt its relations with Washington to the era of great power competition. First, Israel should invest in better understanding and preparing for evolving US-China rivalry that takes on broader dimensions, including Taiwan; escalating military tensions in the South China Sea; US objection to rising global Chinese influence, be it through the Belt and Road Initiative or in international forums; and the competition for technological supremacy. Israel should also pay attention to growing tensions regarding human rights issues, such as the treatment of Uyghurs and other minorities within mainland China, and Hong Kong. While many of these broader issues are not top-priority Israeli interests, Israel's ties with both Washington and Beijing, although very different in nature, will nonetheless be affected by them in the future. For instance, the recent unproven accusation by Hong Kong pro-democracy activists that an Israeli forensics company is allegedly helping Hong Kong police break into protesters' cell phones could draw more attention in Washington under a Biden administration.

The release of the platform coincides with reports of a brewing 25-year strategic agreement between China and Iran, which if implemented would include massive infrastructure and technology investments, discounts for Iranian oil, and closer defense cooperation. Chinese-Iranian ties represent the convergence of US and Israel's top respective threats, and both the Trump administration and a future Biden administration oppose such a deal. The difference, however, is that the latter is likely to try and bring China back into an international diplomatic structure to deal with Iran and its nuclear program, like with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA): while in 2018 President Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal, with Israeli encouragement, the Democrats believe it is still the best pathway to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The platform does not necessarily reflect the Biden administration's future approach, but as Israel adjusts its Iran policy to a possible change in Washington, the government would be wise to articulate a clear position on its ties with China in light of possible growing Chinese-Iranian partnership.

Biden and his official team made clear that they will not meet with foreign government officials during the campaign. However, the Israeli government would do well to open a direct and discreet channel with foreign policy experts who are likely to play a role in a future Biden administration. This could help Israel understand early on to what extent they are planning to revisit the US China policy, what the key nuances are, and how exactly a Biden team envisages working with allies to rise up to the China challenge. An

open and transparent dialogue on China would set Israel's ties with a future Biden administration on a positive course and could help Israel gain goodwill on other issues. Given that the core tensions between the United States and Israel on China concerns Chinese investments in Israeli infrastructure and technology, Israel should closely study Biden's advisors' red lines on investments, and transfers of technologies and know-how. Israel's establishment of a foreign investment screening committee in January 2020 was an important step, although the exclusion of the technology sector from its mandate and other structural challenges render it insufficient to address bipartisan US concerns.

Israel should also seize the opportunity presented by the Democrats' premise to utilize alliances, and place itself as a key US partner in the broader context of US-China relations. While demonstrating how it heeds to US concerns with increased scrutiny on Chinese investments in certain areas, Israel should seek a clear designation of fields in which there is no US objection to engagement with China. If Biden is elected in November, Israel should work with him and his team on elevating US-Israel cooperation, focusing specifically on prime technological areas of US-Chinese competition, in which Israel is expected to limit cooperation with Beijing. If, as suggested, the Democrats will prioritize working with allies on creating alternatives to Chinese investments and capabilities in certain fields, participation in these efforts, particularly in technology R&D, could elevate Israel's position as an important global partner. On all other issues, Israel would have a green light to continue engaging and improving its ties with China.