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China and the United States in the Biden Era: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

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China has come to realize that its strategic competition with the United States will not disappear; it will merely assume a change in form in response to the style and policy of the new American president. Therefore, Beijing believes it must shape its relations with the US so as to contain the damage. China is emerging from the Donald Trump era with a decision to develop advanced technologies independently, above all, semiconductor industry, in order to avoid dependence on the United States. Along with the major disputes between the countries on the issues of trade and human rights, China will attempt to encourage cooperative ventures in a range of areas, mainly in the multilateral sphere, which was almost completely neglected during the Trump administration.

With the end of the Trump era and Joe Biden's forthcoming entry into the White House in January 2021, questions are arising about China and the United States of the coming years. In this context, it should be considered what changed from China's perspective in its relations with the United States during Trump's term, and what China now thinks about the future of these relations.

The beginning of Trump's term in January 2017 coincided with the end of Chinese President Xi Jinping's first term, during which Xi emerged as his country's core leader, with no opposition in the Chinese Communist Party, or indeed, anywhere in China. As such, Xi stepped up [China's "return to its central role in the world"](#) via long-term plans; chief among them were building a moderately prosperous society in 2021, marking the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, and turning China into a modern socialist country by 2049, the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The "[Made in China 2025](#)" plan listed China's goals: building advanced industry and transferring technology from the world to the Chinese market in order to make China a leading and mostly self-reliant technological power.

China's rapid technological progress and growing political and military self-confidence, including increased military activity in the region of Taiwan and the South China Sea, have made Washington realize that while the United States slept, China was moving

forward and becoming a leading global power, for example in 5G technology. Together with the trade war, which was designed to reduce the US trade deficit with China, the Trump administration therefore began a technological campaign that included sanctions against Chinese companies, a ban on exports of advanced technology, and warnings about the national security risks resulting from the use of Chinese technologies. The object of this campaign was to slow Chinese technological growth and try to redesign the global order in order to prevent China from achieving technological supremacy over Western countries.

China is emerging from the Trump period with an understanding of its technological weak points. It is determined to pursue its (traditional) concept of self-reliance with quick and steady progress, including in areas in which it was not active enough up until now, while having to face American sanctions. China's aim in the coming decade, with major government investment, will be to foster its ability to develop advanced technologies independently, above all semiconductor industry.

From a political standpoint, the Trump period exacerbated Chinese concerns about the direction of United States policy on two major issues: an intention to undermine the foundations of the Chinese Communist Party's rule, which impacts negatively on the ability of the two governments to engage in dialogue, and the American effort to dispute the One China policy on the issue of Taiwan.

An attack on the legitimacy of the regime and a severed connection between the leaderships: Under the Nixon administration, a public message addressed to the People's Republic of China was sent for the first time as a sign of recognition of the Communist regime. Even though the United States preached democracy worldwide, American administrations since Nixon have recognized the legitimacy of the regime in Beijing. In contrast, President Trump and senior administration officials have made blunt statements in the past two years attacking the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party's regime. On July 23, 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [called](#) for regime change in China, stating, "communists almost always lie. The biggest lie that they tell is to think that they speak for 1.4 billion people who are surveilled, oppressed, and scared to speak out...CCP fears the Chinese people's honest opinions more than any foe."

The attack against the Chinese regime's legitimacy and the Chinese Communist Party leaders, combined with the frequent reference to "the Chinese virus" during the COVID-19 pandemic, has generated unprecedented tension in bilateral relations. The leaders previously took care to maintain a direct connection between them, including personal meetings and telephone calls several times a year, which helped in finding compromise solutions in crisis situations. However, the two Presidents have not spoken with each

other for several months (their most recent telephone conversation was on March 26, 2020).

Now, with the election of Biden, it appears that the two countries share an interest in stabilizing relations anew at the leadership level. It is thus likely that immediately after President-elect Biden assumes office, a telephone conversation will take place between him and President Xi Jinping. The Biden administration will probably also revert to the policy that prevailed before the Trump administration, and will refrain from attacking the Chinese regime's legitimacy.

Taiwan and the One China policy: Following Nixon's visit to China in 1972, China refused to institute full relations with the United States until Washington recognized the principle of One China. Only after President Jimmy Carter recognized this policy, closed the US embassy in Taipei, and replaced it with an embassy in Beijing were full diplomatic relations formed between the two countries (on January 1, 1979). The Trump administration, however, challenged the Chinese on the One China policy, expanded weapons sales to Taiwan (which occurred a number of times in previous crises), approved visits to Taipei by US cabinet members, and developed a governmental connection with the Taiwan's President. The Chinese complained, but even at the peak of the tension, the two sides avoided a military confrontation. At the same time, Taiwan's effort to leverage its success in combating the COVID-19 epidemic in order to improve its international status was unsuccessful.

It appears that in addition to protesting American measures, the Chinese government will underscore to the Biden administration its high sensitivity to any challenge of this basic principle. For his part, Biden is expected to emphasize to Taiwan the continued commitment of the United States to the island's security, but will not back acts of independence that detract from the One China policy, and, like Trump, will refrain from measures liable to result in a military conflict with China.

In addition to these issues, the trade imbalance between the countries and human rights violations in China will continue to create tension in the bilateral relations. As Vice President, Biden was involved (in May 2012) in finding a solution to the crisis with China concerning the human rights of Chen Guangcheng, who found asylum in the American embassy in Beijing. Following negotiations at the leadership level, Chen was allowed to leave for the United States. The Biden administration will make clear its criticism of China, especially in the context of Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang, as well as the imprisonment without trial of human rights activists in China. For its part, China will continue to assert to these are Chinese internal affairs in which the United States should not intervene.

At the same time, China is likely to try to encourage cooperation in a variety of areas, primarily in the multilateral sphere, which was almost completely abandoned by the Trump administration.

In a speech on November 20, 2020 at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, President Xi Jinping emphasized that China was favorably considering joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) free trade agreement. The agreement, originally called the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), was signed by President Obama and abandoned by President Trump early in his term. The Chinese President's declaration, combined with his call for strengthening the multilateral mechanisms, will challenge President Biden if he decides to rejoin the agreement that China is eager to join.

The immediate issue between the two countries will be creation of a global mechanism for combating the pandemic. In order to achieve progress in this matter, the Biden administration will have to meet Chinese expectations that the anti-Chinese rhetoric typical of the Trump administration will be avoided, and will have to recalibrate United States policy toward the World Health Organization (WHO). Beyond this, the two countries will search for common interests on the issue of climate change and rebuilding multilateral frameworks for arms control and prevention of nuclear proliferation.

China will regard the return of the United States to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as a success. As during the Obama administration, Beijing will try to serve as an active mediator between the United States and Iran. China possesses means to pressure Iran, which needs China's help for its economic development, and this role is likely to give China many advantages vis-à-vis the United States. Past experience shows that if China has to sacrifice Iran in order to advance its essential interests with the United States, for example in the context of Taiwan, it will not hesitate to do so.

Beyond this, with the beginning of the Biden administration, the Chinese will attempt to engage in dialogue with the White House toward possible cooperation, and will probably attempt to advance a solution to the crisis involving Meng Wanzhou, daughter of the founder of the Huawei company, who is still waiting in Canada for a ruling on her extradition to the United States. Even if this is an isolated personal issue, it is a very important matter of principle for the heads of the Chinese Communist Party. If the Chinese request is ignored and Meng is extradited, the resultant background noise in Beijing will almost certainly make compromises with the United States on other issues unlikely, and will also lead to a harsh Chinese response against the Canadian administration.

In conclusion, it appears that Beijing also realizes that the Trump administration brought the two countries to a new and different period. The strategic competition that prevailed between them for many years has intensified. While it will probably not die down or change direction in the coming years, the nature of this competition will change slightly, in accordance with the new American president's style. China will attempt to shape its policy so that the damage that it suffers will be minimal, and it will be able to pursue its internal interests and continue building a strong and stable modern country under the control of the Chinese Communist Party.