A New Strategy for China with Biden? Or is it Too Late?

During the Obama era, in which Biden served as Vice President, the US approached China quite differently. Will Biden be able to revert to a softer strategy?

Donald Trump’s trade war with China is now being hailed by voices of Neoliberalism as an accomplishment. An editorial in The Economist wrote: “The achievement of the Trump administration was to recognize the threat from China. The task of the Biden administration will be to work out what to do about it.” While many of Trump’s foreign policy moves were viewed as hysterical and erratic, as he leaves office it seems his anti-China pivot is being celebrated by even his detractors.

Trump has surrounded himself with a crew of anti-China fanatics, the most notorious of which is Peter Navarro. Navarro is an academic economist who has been beating the anti-Beijing drum for years. Just shortly before the November 3rd vote, the New York Times exposed Trump’s relationship with the Falun Gong religious cult and its publication, The Epoch Times.

Trump Digs Up “The China Lobby”

The anti-China element that Trump has linked himself to has deep roots in US politics. In the 1950s, Republicans castigated the Democrats with the repeated question: “Who lost China?” A group of conservative fanatics called the John Birch Society was formed, taking their name from a US spy executed in China, whom was deemed to be the first casualty of the Cold War. In the early 1960s, the “China Lobby” was identified by liberals as the most right-wing, militaristic element in Washington DC that threatened world peace.

When Richard Nixon met with Mao Zedong, the anti-China elements in his own party launched a billboard and bumper sticker campaign opposing his move. The image of a syringe accompanied with the words “Cut Off China” was plastered across the USA, along with the false allegations that China was responsible for importing heroin to the United States.

As Jimmy Carter met with Deng Xiaoping and moved to establish formal diplomatic relations, strange rumblings of opposition manifested themselves. Members of the Revolutionary Communist Party, a strange Maoist sect that opposed Deng were permitted to enter the White House grounds and confront Deng during his visit to Washington. Statements wrongly attributed by the press to Bob Avakian, the leader of the group, seemed to be sending a message to Jimmy Carter that a new Lee Harvey Oswald had been found. The Secret Service investigated the Revolutionary Communist Party on the grounds some kind of credible threat against Carter’s life had been leveled. It has since been revealed the organization was riddled with FBI informers amid its protests targeting Chinese diplomatic sites.

However, as the 1980s progressed, the Washington DC Foreign Policy seemed to accept US relations with China as a new fact of life. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger had long pushed the idea of utilizing the Sino-Soviet split to divide the global Communist movement, and their strategy seemed to be working. The Hollywood film Red Dawn ended with the United States being rescued by China from Soviet and Nicaraguan invaders.

As American companies poured investment into China, US media insisted that China was communist in name only, and celebrated its economic achievements along with the Asian Tigers. Conservatives often celebrated the more authoritarian aspects of Chinese society while castigating the “sensitivity” and “softness” perceived in liberals.

However, the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square that coincided with the color revolutions across Eastern Europe
indicated that the desire to topple the Chinese Communist Party was very well alive. US media demonized the Chinese state and highlighted the protesters ad naseum and continues to do so on each successive anniversary. On May 7th, 1999, Bill Clinton bombed Serbia and destroyed the Chinese embassy sparking massive international outcry.

**The Obama Strategy & Labor Opposition**

Part of the reason that US hostility toward the Chinese Communist Party has been muted is due to the fact that tremendous efforts from the US deep state have gone into building up US influence within China and with the party itself. The Ford Foundation, notorious for cooperating with American intelligence, long sponsored a massive think tank known as the Institute for Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. This think tank, along with other academic institutions sponsored by the US in China, lobbied the Communist Party to be more free market and pro-western in its orientation.

Knowing that there was an pro-American apparatus within China and within the government, Barack Obama went out of his way to give symbolic friendly gestures as US President. Obama praised China’s best-selling science fiction novel The Three Body Problem, and celebrated the cultural achievements of Confucius. The aim, of course, was to cultivate a larger constituency of US sympathizers within China and influence the country from within.

Joe Biden seemed to be following this orientation during the opening of his Presidential campaign, but swiftly changed his tone as the race continued. The Economist reports that “During the campaign Mr. Biden had to be reprogrammed on China, says an adviser. It seems to have worked. Mr. Biden has since called Xi a thug.”

Interestingly, Biden’s left-wing opponents within the Democratic Party, centered around Bernie Sanders, seemed to be far more hostile to China. The small circle of “Democratic Socialists” on Capitol Hill including Bernie Sanders and “the squad” of female freshman congressman, have called for harsher tariffs and echo Trump’s rhetoric about China hurting the US economy. The AFL-CIO, a primary sponsor of the “Berniecrat” voices which are often marginalized within the Democratic Party by the Democratic Leadership Council and more centrist voices, is very hostile to China.

The AFL-CIO’s relationship with American intelligence is longstanding. During the 1950s, the US labor federation cooperated with the Central Intelligence Agency to establish an international coalition of labor unions that worked to undermine Communists. Jay Lovestone, expelled from the US Communist Party for “American Exceptionalism” in 1928, became the director of the CIA’s labor efforts. His crowning achievements was the unrest fomented in Poland by the “Solidarity” dock workers organization. CIA’s links to certain labor activists in China highlighted in the Chinese press are not difficult to establish.

However, the rise of Xi Jinping and Trump’s trade war seems to have been a big game changer. Xi Jinping’s rise to power has signified a revival of Marxist-Leninist ideology and criticism of the west, along with celebration of China’s unique identity. In response, Trump seems to have cozied up the remnants of the paleo-conservative “China Lobby” and aimed to follow their advance and “cut off China” with tariffs and hysterical allegations about COVID19.

Biden’s backing seems to come from elements within the US power structure that favor a softer approach with Beijing. However, the escalated climate of the previous four years may make a big reversal in Sino-US relations impossible. Biden may simply follow Trump’s course as the geopolitical stage marches ahead post-COVID, completely reshuffled.

Robert Smith is an independent American researcher and analyst that specializes in social psychology and conflict resolution. He writes especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”