



COUNTERING COMPLAINTS ABOUT BIDEN'S CHINA STRATEGY: LESSONS FROM THE US ASIA-FIRST POLICY

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One of the most important [criticisms](#) of the Biden administration efforts to oppose serious [challenges](#) coming from Chinese government behavior are that the strategy is vague and dangerous because it does not sufficiently [reassure China](#). Such criticisms are unrealistic and at odds with past US success in following similar policies against Chinese challenges.

US Objectives and Achievements

The Biden government's efforts resemble the Asia-first strategies—explained below—used successfully by the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations to curb Chinese challenges and assertiveness. Biden's main objectives focus on [strengthening America](#) at home and establishing power and influence abroad to change circumstances influencing Chinese interests, thereby prompting Beijing to curb its challenging behavior. Calling for a clear end-state in these efforts is unrealistic as the process is subject to unpredictable changes over a prolonged period of acute competition.

The record shows growing US achievements in strengthening against China with impressive momentum for six years. The policies have sustained backing from two very different US administrations and bipartisan majorities in Congress, along with broad approval in public opinion and US media.

The Biden administration has successfully completed a first stage of strengthening America at home and building power and influence abroad with a growing array of allies and partners. The passage of the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill in 2021 and [two massive bills](#) in 2022 were important in competing with China, especially in high technology. With strong congressional backing, the administration in 2022 imposed a ban on the export of US advanced computer chip technology to China, and in 2023 an [Executive Order](#) with broad congressional support proposed restricting high technology investments by US companies in China.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and China's strong military reaction to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 advanced US strengthening abroad. Biden and his aides built on US-backed [NATO resolve to counter Russia and its China partner](#). They connected NATO with Japan and other Indo-Pacific powers like Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand. Led by Biden, the [G-7 countries](#) and NATO showed unprecedented concern with China's adverse impact on Asian security, including coercive behavior over South China Sea disputes and Taiwan.

The [Biden administration's success](#) saw the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam advance ties with the United States despite risks of Chinese retaliation. The absence of traditional trade agreements giving greater access to US markets was offset as the US accommodated allies and partners using multi-billion dollar high technology and climate change expenditures and other [measures](#) under the [Indo-Pacific Economic Policy Framework](#).

US Asia-First Policy Toward China

What came to be called the [US Asia-first policy](#) emerged after two years during the first term of the Reagan administration. It countered Chinese efforts to leverage acute concern by US leaders in the late 1970s and early 1980s in sustaining strong Chinese backing as the United States faced powerful challenges from the Soviet Union. Beijing repeatedly threatened to downgrade the US relationship over continued US arms sales to Taiwan and a host of other issues. Also

making leading US leaders nervous, Beijing began talks with Moscow to ease tensions.

In response, US policy under the leadership of Secretary of State George Shultz (1982-1989) and backed by senior Asia policy makers [Paul Wolfowitz](#), [Richard Armitage](#) and [Gaston Sigur](#), reversed the heretofore top US priority of advancing closer ties with China. The latter policy, followed since the Nixon administration, became known as the “China-first policy.” Shultz’s predecessor, Alexander Haig, and his subordinates strongly advocated that approach and sought to accommodate Chinese demands to ensure Beijing’s alignment with the United States against the USSR. The new US policy leaders took advantage of a massive buildup of US military strength and stronger alignment with allies, especially Japan and NATO powers, to deal effectively with Soviet expansionism. They downgraded China’s importance as they rebuilt strong relations with Japan and other allies and partners including Taiwan. They remained unmoved by Chinese demands. Countering longstanding Chinese pressure against the sale of fighter aircraft, they went forward with the sale and assembly in Taiwan of 130 advanced fighter aircraft. The result was Chinese [grudging adjustment](#), leading to much smoother China-US relations for the rest of Reagan’s term.

[A second episode](#) of the Asia-first policy occurred at the outset of the George W. Bush administration. Incoming administration leaders included veterans from the Reagan years like Wolfowitz and Armitage. They viewed the Clinton government as passive and intimidated by Chinese pressures that might lead to a repeat of the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1995-96. Taking advantage of Clinton administration preoccupations, Chinese leaders advanced military assertiveness in the Taiwan Strait and strident pressure against US missile defense, NATO expansion, and security ties with Japan.

Bush policy makers enhanced US military strength along with strengthening alliances in the Asia-Pacific as they scrapped Clinton’s approach. China recalculated, resulting in Beijing’s new “peaceful rise” approach, which gave top priority to reassuring the United States. [Authoritative Chinese experts](#) told this

interviewer that there was a genuine concern that to do otherwise would have risked a repeat of the US response to Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany. Beijing stuck to the peaceful rise approach until the end of that decade, though its assessment of declining US power and resolve grew with the unsuccessful US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Lessons for Today

China is much more powerful today than it was in the 1980s and the 2000s. Nevertheless, China had profound leverage in those periods, which it used to have its way at US expense. US strengthening and firm resolve was effective in curbing Chinese assertiveness in those instances. Against this background, the Biden administration impressive strengthening at home and building power and influence abroad represents a proven approach that has strong momentum for sustained competition in the period ahead.

On the recent complaint that the United States is not sufficiently reassuring China, it is notable that US reassurance on Taiwan and other sensitive issues was infrequent in the first episode of Asia-first policy and was not much evident in the second. Among other negative consequences, special reassurance of China risked weakening resolve in the United States and among allies and partners. The Biden government avoided such measures even when the crisis posed by China’s military actions after the Pelosi visit prompted a spike in commentators urging greater accommodation of Chinese interests. That crisis passed after a few weeks and US hardening to counter Chinese challenges intensified. An added reason for the Biden administration to avoid special reassurance to China is likely strong criticism from Congress, threatening the bipartisan unity on China policy that has sustained a strong and unified America facing the Chinese challenges. Past experience and current conditions argue against special reassurance of China at this time.

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