



BIDEN SEEKING MIDDLE GROUND ON CHINA POLICY

BY ROBERT SUTTER

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President Joseph Biden has long collaborated with colleagues with opposing views in the interest of achieving important policy accomplishments of broad national interest. In the process, he adjusts his positions on key issues, finding a middle position among competing pressures. For instance, Biden [did this](#) in deliberations among clashing Democratic members of Congress in trying to gain congressional approval of the \$1.9 billion coronavirus relief plan.

Biden also demonstrated this tendency in adjusting his [recent position](#) on China. Candidate Biden's rhetoric on China throughout active campaigning of 2019 was in line with other Democratic candidates in giving only secondary attention to China. The rhetoric contrasted sharply with the dramatic hardening of US policy carried out by the Trump administration, with bipartisan congressional support, at that time. Biden at first dismissed the danger posed by Beijing and later stressed that the United States had little to worry about as it was much more powerful than China. Ambivalent public opinion about China at this time suggested that the episodic disapproval of Chinese government practices by Biden and other Democratic Party candidates was an appropriate approach. Senior advisor Jake Sullivan [agreed](#), judging that the "inside the beltway" discourse about the acute danger posed by China was politically unattractive and not shared

by the American public. As public opinion at first gradually and then dramatically turned against the Chinese government in 2020 and the Republican Party focused on criticizing candidate Biden as soft on China, Biden turned sharply against China and attacked Trump policies as counterproductive and ineffective.

Seeking middle ground on China in 2021—key determinants

China policy is now under review by the Biden administration with final decisions likely coming only after consultations with US allies and partners and congressional decision makers, and following administration actions on more important domestic priorities. Going forward, determinants influencing how President Biden will adjust his approach and find an appropriate middle ground on China push policy in different directions. On one side are strong pressures to remain firm in the face of China's many challenges to US interests; on the other side are determinants favoring some moderation of existing pressures. Public opinion, partisan politics and bipartisan congressional resolve along with China's uncompromising behavior head the list of determinants favoring a sustained tough administration approach to China. US business interests and those of allies and partners along with practical need for cooperation with China on important issues argue for moderation toward China.

Sustain Toughness

Public Opinion. Longstanding ambivalence in US public opinion about China seen as late as 2019 has been replaced by overwhelming disapproval of the Chinese government in 2021. The widely used Gallup annual [poll](#) measuring US approval and disapproval of foreign governments showed unprecedented disapproval of China's government unseen since the dark days of the Cold War. It surpassed US disapproval of Vladimir Putin's Russia. Only North Korea and Iran had higher disapproval ratings.

Concurrent [polling](#) by the Pew Research Center also showed overwhelming American disapproval of the Chinese government, with 82% not having confidence

in President Xi Jinping. The polls illustrated rising American angst over Chinese challenges to the United States on eight issues involving human rights, economic practices, and security matters. Americans were seen in agreement against Chinese human rights and economic practices, but there were important partisan divides.

Partisan divisions; continuing bipartisan congressional resolve against China's challenges. The Pew [findings](#) showed strong partisan division over the priority of US countermeasures against China. 63% of Republicans but only 36% of Democrats favored giving a top priority to long term US efforts to limit China's power and influence. Recent [polling](#) by the Chicago Council on Global affairs went further in underlining a partisan divide, showing that a majority of Democrats favored a policy of friendly cooperation and engagement with Beijing.

The Pew [findings](#) also showed a continuing strongly partisan divide since the George W Bush administration in viewing the president's foreign policy effectiveness, with the out-of-power party supporters viewing the president negatively and the in-power party supporters viewing the president positively. Significantly, overall public confidence in President Biden doing the right thing in foreign affairs was comparatively low at 60%; President Barack Obama's level at the start of his first term was 74%. And the level of confidence in President Biden doing the right thing on China issues was lower still at 53%, lower than in other areas of foreign policy.

Meanwhile, Republicans seem determined to defend the Trump government legacy of American countermeasures against Chinese challenges. Trump has been consistent in taking a hard line on China for almost a year and he remains a major force in American politics. The annual American Conservative Union CPAC conference in February [targeted](#) Biden's China policy; the 120 member House of Representatives Republican Study Committee sharply [condemned](#) Biden's China policy. Continued bipartisan congressional accord on sustaining US resolve on China showed in hearings of Senate Intelligence Committee and Senate Foreign Relations

Committee considering senior administration leaders seeking Senate approval.

Chinese government behavior. Beijing remains [uncompromising](#) in the face of US countermeasures. It conducts egregious human rights violations in Xinjiang, imposes authoritarian rule in Hong Kong and targets Australia, India and Taiwan for special coercive treatment. Ever increasing are Chinese military advances to deter and if needed destroy American forces; closer collaboration with Putin's Russia against US interests; China's three-decade long efforts using state directed development polices to plunder foreign intellectual property rights and undermine international competitors, fundamentally weakening the free trade economic system; using gains from state directed economic practices to support ambitions to lead future high-technology industries, displacing the United States; exploiting economic dependencies via the Belt and Road Initiative and other means; fostering corrupt and/or authoritarian governments against the West; coercing neighbors unwilling to defer to China's ever increasing demands; employing widespread influence operations abroad using clandestine means; and disregarding international law and accepted diplomatic practices.

Moderation

US business has been publicly low keyed in registering its concern over the costs to the American economy coming from existing US restrictions and tariffs targeting adverse Chinese economic practices and [warning](#) against perceived dramatic costs associated with further US efforts to "decouple" the US from China's economy. The business interests of many US allies and partners share these broad concerns. And the governments of allies and partners generally oppose extreme measures undertaken in the last year of the Trump government arguing for ideologically based systemic opposition to the Chinese regime. They favor more nuanced approaches that the Biden government will need to consider in its in-depth consultations with allies and partners. Meanwhile, the administration's perceived need to work cooperatively with China on climate change, the

Iran nuclear agreement, and other matters may involve some easing of US pressures against China.

Clashing middle grounds?

President Biden finding a middle ground with US, allied and partner interests in adopting a more moderate policy toward China appears to run up counter to the president's efforts to find a middle ground with US public preferences and Republican decision makers to counter China's uncompromising challenges to the United States. There is no clear path forward on how to avoid or resolve this prospective dilemma.

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