

Why Washington Is Fed Up With Beijing

Decades of failed efforts to woo China explain the Biden administration's tough talk ahead of Alaska meeting.

BY MICHAEL HIRSH

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, as seasoned a diplomat as one can find in Washington, was about as undiplomatic as he could be when asked about his planned first meeting with Chinese counterparts in Anchorage, Alaska, on Thursday. “This is not a strategic dialogue,” Blinken said bluntly, contradicting Beijing’s own description of the event. “There’s no intent at this point for a series of follow-on engagements.”

Instead, Blinken told Congress last week, Washington would be mostly laying down demands. Only evidence of “tangible progress” by China would lead to more talks, he said. Or as a senior administration official said in a briefing, “We don’t want them to be operating under illusions about our tough-minded approach to their very problematic behavior.”

Behind those stark statements—something close to ultimatums—lay more than two decades of frustration on the part of Blinken, President Joe Biden, and many other senior officials from both parties. Starting with the Clinton administration, which brought China into the World Trade Organization, and on through the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, Washington was eager to engage in a strategic courtship with China. In 2006, the Bush administration started a “strategic dialogue” with China, optimistically calling both nations “responsible stakeholders in the international economic system.” President Barack Obama upped the stakes with his much-touted pivot to Asia, which was ultimately stillborn, and broader high-level talks with China called the “Strategic and Economic Dialogue.”

Many meetings were held, including a much-ballyhooed summit between Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping at Sunnylands, an estate in Southern California. None made much progress. Xi promised not to militarize the South China Sea, right before he laid claim to a smattering of atolls and fake islands and turned them into military outposts. Xi promised to dial back cyberattacks on the United States, right before he ramped up China’s cyberoffensive to new and invasive heights. China became a nation dedicated to autocratic rule, mass incarceration of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang, trampling human rights and democracy in Hong Kong, and escalating its threats toward Taiwan. All the while, China flagrantly violated the international rules on trade that it had signed up for, dumping state-subsidized goods all over the world, especially in Europe and the United States. Indeed, part of what led to the rise of U.S. President Donald Trump and American populism was the “China shock,” which decimated U.S. manufacturing employment over the last two decades.

Now, like a political generation collectively shedding its blinders, both Democrats and Republicans in Washington have belatedly realized that, as Blinken said in a speech earlier this month, China is not going to change, at least not swiftly or easily. A recalcitrant, aggressive China is America’s “biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century,” Blinken said, the only nation “with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system” that the United States built after World War II. The only real way to confront it will be massive alliance-building—a new kind of cordon sanitaire, in

effect. Blinken didn't use the word "containment"—neither he nor anyone else in the Biden administration wants a new cold war—but he might as well have.

Or as the two other senior U.S. officials who will meet with the Chinese on Thursday, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and National Security Council Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell, wrote in a 2019 essay in *Foreign Affairs*, "the era of engagement with China has come to an unceremonious close."

"The United States is in the midst of the most consequential rethinking of its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War," Sullivan and Campbell wrote in the essay, which was titled "Competition Without Catastrophe." "U.S. policymakers and analysts have mostly, and rightly, discarded some of the more optimistic assumptions that underpinned the four-decade-long strategy of diplomatic and economic engagement with China." That helps to explain why Biden, who has reversed a plethora of policies left behind by his predecessor, has left intact Trump's China trade-war tariffs and harsh anti-Beijing rhetoric.

"I think the meeting in Alaska might be the place where the Biden team informs Beijing that it is adopting what I call the 'Michael Corleone' approach," said Clyde Prestowitz, a former U.S. trade official and author of *The World Turned Upside Down*, a fresh look at the U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry. "Blinken and Sullivan will tell them to please understand that nothing we do is personal, it's just business."

"This means telling the Chinese that we are done complaining about unfair trade practices and WTO violations and also done with high-level economic dialogues, and that we are going to play the game more like them with industrial policy, technology targets for Made in USA 2030, and extensive 'gathering' of all high-tech secrets," he said.

But, as Sullivan and Campbell noted, that doesn't mean the United States has to reach for containment as it did to fence in and undermine the Soviet Union during the Cold War. For starters, expecting that the Chinese Communist Party will implode as the Soviets did is likely misguided. And second, on critical geopolitical issues such as climate change and pandemics, the Biden administration believes continued cooperation with China will be crucial.

That's why the Biden administration is preparing for a long-term struggle of wills with little hope of rapprochement, but at least a *modus vivendi*—or, as Sullivan and Campbell described it, "a steady state of clear-eyed coexistence on terms favorable to U.S. interests and values." Trump and his security team picked endless fights with China, but they eschewed any help from European or Asian allies. The biggest difference in Biden's approach, Blinken said in his speech, is that "we will engage China from a position of strength," rebuilding the alliances that Trump shredded with his unilateral approach. Blinken is flying to Alaska straight from meetings with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts in Tokyo and Seoul this week, alongside Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. Just a week ago, Biden's first multilateral summit roped together the so-called Quad—the United States, Japan, India, and Australia—whose representatives discussed how to bolster security and economic cooperation in the broad Indo-Pacific region against a certain rising power.

"We have been in very, very close contact with capitals in Latin American and Africa, Central and Southeast Asia about all of our common agenda, whether it's things like addressing the COVID pandemic, climate, and, of course, resisting coercion and aggressive behavior," a senior administration official told reporters Tuesday. In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman

Zhao Lijian accused the United States of trying to “poison the atmosphere in the run-up to the dialogue.”

The biggest issue, perhaps, is whether all these efforts will amount to more than mere words. For now the Quad is still merely a coalition on paper—and India has an ongoing defense partnership with Russia, including plenty of advanced weapons purchases. “I think the Indians are very wary about letting the Quad evolve into any kind of coalition devoted to collective defense,” said Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment, a former senior State Department official specializing in the Indo-Pacific region. “India will not go along with that vision.”

Some Australians are also worried about being drawn into America’s confrontational approach. “We have allowed the incompetent and borderline racist Morrison Government to lead Australians blindly towards a possibly permanent estrangement from China,” former Australian diplomat Tony Kevin wrote this week in a blog post critical of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. “It is unknown, perhaps unknowable, how much these policies are being steered by Washington and London.”

Meanwhile, Xi has used China’s economic heft to make its own rules and exercise influence as it pleases. It has deployed the massive Belt and Road Initiative to foster “debt-trap diplomacy” in Asia and Africa, while expanding its own commercial (and perhaps military) reach. It also exploited Trump’s unilateral approach and hasty withdrawal from the U.S.-brokered Trans-Pacific Partnership to orchestrate a 15-nation regional trade bloc, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, as an alternative to U.S. trade pressure. All the while, even as Republicans and Democrats bicker over industrial policy, infrastructure investment, and U.S. foreign-policy goals, Beijing is plowing ahead with its state-driven Made in China 2025 initiative to achieve dominance in the most important economic sectors of the future.

But now, in direct contrast to all the earnest U.S. attempts at bringing China in over the decades, it is striking to see how Biden is seeking to cut China out. With Biden’s “Buy American” plan, the administration is even considering a degree of economic decoupling, as China hawks have long advocated: “reshoring” U.S. businesses away from China. European allies remain somewhat on the fence, having concluded an investment pact with China late last year despite Sullivan’s efforts to delay it ahead of Biden’s inauguration. But several allies seem on board with Biden’s approach. As Britain said in its newly released global strategy this week, it plans to “work very closely on the Indo-Pacific with the Biden Administration.”

Yet without real strategic dialogue or diplomatic framework in the offing, many experts fear that the incremental sources of conflict will grow and some kind of cold war may become inevitable, even if the Biden administration wants to avoid it.

In the end, the new president’s team may be walking a dangerous and fine line, one they haven’t quite figured out how to maneuver yet. “I think their strategic approach to China policy is still a work in progress,” Tellis said. “Much will depend on the outcome of Anchorage.”

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