

## How Beijing Sees Biden

**For decades, Chinese leaders thought they knew the man who would become America's 46th president. But he was changing all along.**

By **Melinda Liu**, Newsweek's Beijing bureau chief.

Joe Biden has had more face time with Chinese leaders than any other U.S. president. He played basketball with Xi Jinping when they were both vice presidents; he sparred with former President Jiang Zemin over human rights; and he debated the merits of military cooperation with the legendary Deng Xiaoping. But of all of these leaders, he has spent the most time with Xi: Biden claimed in February 2021 to have had “24 [or] 25 hours of private meetings” with the man who is now the most powerful person in China since Mao Zedong.

One would expect, then, that the current occupant of the White House would be somewhat of a known quantity for Beijing—a familiar, reassuring face for a regime that prizes continuity and consistency. But Biden hasn't turned out to be the president China expected.

“China has a new recognition of a new Biden,” said Shi Yinong, an international relations expert at Beijing's Renmin University of China. “Before his election, few expected Biden could become so confrontational in dealing with China. It's been dramatic, even drastic.”

To many analysts in Beijing, Biden's presidency represents the worst of both worlds for China's strategic interests: Not only is he continuing his predecessor's muscular policies toward China, but he is also, unlike Donald Trump, a real believer in organizing a world in which democracies are aligned against autocracies. While Biden may provide a relief from Trump's unpredictability, officials in Beijing would have preferred Trump's self-centered and transactional approach on sensitive issues such as protecting human rights in Xinjiang and democracy in Taiwan.

For Beijing, the worst may just be beginning. A year into Biden's presidency, Chinese leaders are increasingly jittery about the reversal of another of Trump's traits—namely, his deliberate disrespect and neglect of U.S. allies. While the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could only be called chaotic, the Biden administration has since scrambled to restore credibility among allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region, which seek safety in numbers as they nervously watch China's rise.

The Biden administration has been “surprisingly effective at rallying its allies” while trying to thwart Russian military action in Ukraine, said Shi, representing a commonly held view in Beijing. While that effort ultimately turned out to be unsuccessful, it served to unite large parts of the world in enacting devastating sanctions on Russia and bringing Europe and NATO closer than ever before.

As Xi watched the way in which the United States reacted to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, his mind was certainly on Taiwan. Beijing insists that Taiwan is not only a part of China but that it must be reunited with the mainland—by force if necessary. For Xi, Taiwan represents the reddest of foreign-policy red lines. It's the topic that made him warn Biden, in a 2021 videoconference, that Taiwan's leaders were trying to garner “U.S. support for their

independence agenda,” according to China’s state-run Xinhua News Agency. “Such moves are extremely dangerous, just like playing with fire. Whoever plays with fire will get burnt.”

This brings us to another key difference between Trump and Biden that is especially relevant to Beijing: their commitment to democracy. Trump openly admired strongman leaders and favored a transactional approach toward long-standing U.S. norms. He suggested, as president-elect, that the foundational “One China” policy was useless “unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade.” Chinese officials were pleased to entertain the fleeting possibility that Taiwan could become a bargaining chip that Trump might give away while chasing his chimerical and ultimately failed trade deals with Beijing.

In contrast, Biden personally believes that Taiwan’s democratic system is a good thing, deserving of protection. He has even made several gaffes because of those beliefs. Last October, during a CNN town hall, he was asked if the United States would protect Taiwan if China attacked it. Biden said, “Yes, we have a commitment to do that.” (That wording is not U.S. official policy, and a White House aide later clarified that Washington’s position of so-called “strategic ambiguity” regarding Taiwan remained unchanged.) Such incidents “show Biden’s gut instinct and what he thinks the United States should do to defend Taiwan,” said Paul Haenle, who served as China director on the National Security Council under both U.S. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. “And that creates an element of deterrence; it reveals Biden’s personal beliefs and deeply held convictions. Of course, Beijing would prefer Trump in this case. ... It’s not like Trump cared much about Taiwan being a democracy.”

Washington continues to supply defensive weaponry to Taipei and leaves intentionally ambiguous whether it would act militarily to defend Taiwan if China were to attack. In recent years, Sino-American frictions have mounted over Beijing’s belligerent attitude toward the island, such as flooding Taiwan’s air defense identification zone with swarms of fighter jet incursions.

What would the United States do to deter a Chinese lurch across the Taiwan Strait? Elements of the potential toolkit got a test run just recently on the other side of the world: information warfare, careful nurturing and strengthening of existing alliances, and a full-court campaign to declassify and publicly disseminate proof of Russia’s military buildup around Ukraine and some of its alleged plans for false-flag provocations. Once Russian troops entered Ukraine, the United States and its allies and partners unleashed a barrage of financial and economic sanctions, most likely far exceeding what Beijing expected.

Biden’s proactive response to Moscow’s recent aggressions contrasts starkly with the U.S. reaction in 2014 to Russia’s occupation and annexation of Crimea. Since then, Moscow has continued to back pro-Russian separatists fighting to control more turf. Beijing’s military meanwhile has pursued Chinese claims to areas of the South China Sea by building structures on disputed reefs and harassing U.S. naval vessels. U.S. public opinion of Beijing’s aggressive behavior has become more negative over the years—and Republican protests about so-called U.S. appeasement more vocal—which helps explain why today’s Biden seems different from before.

To be sure, there are many reasons Taiwan is different from Ukraine—and China isn’t Russia. Nonetheless, parts of Biden’s Ukraine playbook, policymakers in both Washington and Beijing figure, could be used in any future showdown over Taiwan.

“The linkage is just common sense. When Chinese planners want to assess U.S. resolve, capabilities, and cohesion with its allies, they’ll look at the most recent event,” said Evan Medeiros, a professor of Asian studies at Georgetown University and former Asia director on Obama’s National Security Council. “Beijing would factor this into their cost-benefit calculation if they were to consider using force against Taiwan.”

Few people know exactly what Xi thinks of his U.S. counterpart. Opacity surrounds Xi’s inner circle, rivaled only by the secrecy of the Vatican. Though Biden has spent many hours talking with Xi, “In my understanding, the Chinese president remained very guarded,” Haenle said. “Biden didn’t get a strong sense of Xi’s worldview.” Meanwhile, Biden’s Chinese interlocutors came away with a deep impression of his personal beliefs and commitment to democratic values. (When he visited China in 2001, Biden received Communion from a Chinese Roman Catholic priest; Beijing’s regime is atheist, and during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution, devotees of foreign religions were persecuted for their beliefs.)

During his first visit to China in 1979, Biden told his hosts that he believed an increasingly prosperous China was good not just for Beijing but for the world. In 2001, he supported China’s accession to the World Trade Organization. Yet Biden didn’t shrink from criticizing China or standing up for his beliefs when they were inconvenient. In 1989, after the People’s Liberation Army brutally cracked down on pro-democracy protests that originated in Tiananmen Square, Biden was asked if Washington should mute some of its outrage because of the secret Sino-U.S. intelligence listening posts in Xinjiang and other forms of strategic cooperation. He responded: “Whatever military or intelligence arrangements may or may not exist, they cannot add up to a sufficient rationale for failing to act swiftly.”

Biden’s principled beliefs fit a long-standing Chinese stereotype of Democratic politicians being more vocal about human rights, less beholden to big U.S. corporations, and less adept at realpolitik than their Republican counterparts. This view was articulated as early as 1972, when U.S. President Richard Nixon made his groundbreaking trip to China to meet Mao. “I like rightists,” Mao said, according to Nixon’s memoirs. Mao lumped the U.S. Republican Party, Britain’s Conservative Party, and West Germany’s Christian Democratic Union together and declared himself “happy when these people on the right ‘come into power.’” Despite the tarnish of Watergate, Nixon is still highly revered in China because he engineered a historic rapprochement; his former aide Henry Kissinger remains a foreign-policy rock star for Chinese diplomats. In a speech marking the 50th anniversary of Nixon’s visit, China’s ambassador in Washington, Qin Gang, credited “Nixon’s pragmatic diplomacy” with helping to grow the United States and China into a “close-knit community with inseparable economic interests” and relations that have become “too big to fail.”

Between 2011 and 2012, Biden met Xi at least eight times to size up the man who would become China’s top leader. He has said he wanted to ascertain if the United States could have a competitive but not bellicose relationship with China. Biden took every opportunity to explain the U.S. government system, its processes, and the values of ordinary folks. In 2020, Biden told the New York Times that, as vice president, he had informed Xi of growing anger in Washington over China’s increasingly pugnacious actions in the South China Sea, hoping to make it clear that “as long as they played by a set of basic international rules that were written, and he did not like the fact he didn’t write them ... we’d have no problem.” He added: “But to the extent they tried to fundamentally alter the rules of airspace and seaspace ... then we’d have a problem.”

Today, many Chinese leaders and think tank experts view Biden through the prism of power dynamics. “They say it’s natural, it’s not personal. Because China is rising and the West is declining—of course the U.S. wants to keep China down,” Haenle said. “They say, ‘If we were the established power and the United States were the rising power, we would do the same thing. We’d mobilize to block the United States, too.’”

That binary worldview may partly explain why Xi thinks Biden is surrounding China with groups such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. In a January video address to the World Economic Forum, Xi called on nations to “discard Cold War mentality” and warned against “putting together exclusive small circles or blocs that polarize the world.” Though he refrained from naming names, Xi criticized those seeking to “hold back economic and technological advances of other countries” in the name of national security—a clear enough barb directed at the last five years of U.S. trade and technology policy toward China. “Today Chinese officials hate alliances,” observed one foreign diplomat in Beijing who requested anonymity. “They don’t want to see people ganging up.”

Chinese government white papers make clear that its planners see U.S. threats, confrontation, and encirclement almost everywhere. After Trump took office, Beijing’s senior leaders realized that his narcissistic pursuit of personal interest over national interest was good for China. His tenure triggered political polarization at home and a decline in U.S. leadership abroad. His disdain of America’s allies and shunning of multilateral organizations left “vacuums and spaces opening up around the world, in all regions, through the absence of an effective American diplomacy,” former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said in May 2018. For Chinese leaders such as Xi, Trump was “strategically comforting and tactically terrifying ... tactically terrifying because they actually do not know which way he will jump,” Rudd said.

For hints of another country’s strategic thinking, Chinese planners often scrutinize foreign leaders’ words, deeds, and decisions in great detail. But they’re not so great at self-reflection. They often underestimate how much their own government’s behavior—and external perceptions of it—can change with the times.

In one of his last meetings with Xi, Obama tried to explain what Xi could expect from Trump. Obama said Trump was a disrupter, prone to making trouble and shooting off his mouth, according to a U.S. expert on China who requested anonymity, “Obama said, ‘You’ll have to take it easy. You’re going to have to be the responsible one here.’ To which Xi responded, ‘I won’t throw the first punch. But if I get punched, I’ll punch back.’”

Such assertiveness has been a rare trait for Chinese leaders, unseen since Mao’s era. When he said it, Xi was of course aiming his words at Trump. However, Xi is likely not surprised to be facing off against Biden, given the robust U.S. campaign to rally its allies against Russia and other autocracies. Even further back, on the campaign trail in 2020, Biden had called Xi a “thug.” He said he believed Chinese officials were committing genocide against ethnic Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang. He promised “swift economic sanctions” if elected. Just months before Biden took office, U.S. public opinion surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center showed nearly three-fourths of Americans viewed China unfavorably—the highest in at least 15 years.

“There might have been some hope that Biden would return to the playbook of engagement,” Medeiros said. “There was a certain level of disappointment when he didn’t. But it didn’t reach the level of shock. There’s been a societal shift—it wasn’t just Trump.”

After Biden's inauguration in January 2021, some China watchers in the West were puzzled that Xi didn't quickly push to set up a meeting with Biden; in contrast, Xi had gotten on a plane to Mar-a-Lago in Florida a little over two months after Trump took office, despite the risk of being embarrassed by the new U.S. president. "The Chinese said they saw Trump as a transactional guy, someone they could do a deal with. But around him they saw a lot of hawks. So they thought, 'We need to get Xi to have a relationship with Trump early on to marginalize the hawks,'" said a U.S. source familiar with Chinese discussions at the time. "But with Biden, they sense there's very little daylight between the way he talks and the way his advisors talk."

For Biden's first year in office, Xi's aides saw little benefit in having their president talk with his U.S. counterpart in person—especially if there was a risk of Xi losing face in the eyes of his audience back home. Xi faces a crucial year with an ambitious domestic agenda, including aiming for a nearly unprecedented third term that could see him become China's top leader for life. Beijing has hawks, too, and they want Washington to make a gesture to repair the damage that Trump did to bilateral relations. "The Chinese are frustrated," Haenle said. "They knew it would take some time to see Biden's approach to China, but they didn't think it would take this long. They simply say, 'It was the Trump administration's fault for putting us in the position we're in. We're in wait-and-see mode. We'll wait for you to untie the knot.'"

That may not happen. Aside from urgent Ukraine-related communications, the most substantial point of contact between Xi and Biden has been a three-and-a-half-hour virtual meeting in November 2021. For months beforehand, Biden tried to avoid looking soft on China. In June, a reporter asked Biden if he could persuade Xi "old friend to old friend" to allow the World Health Organization access to search for the pandemic's origin in China. "Let's get something straight ... we're not old friends," Biden replied. "It's just pure business." During the CNN town hall in October, Biden said: "I don't want a cold war with China. I just want to make China understand that we are not going to step back, we are not going to change any of our views."

When the two presidents finally saw each other (on huge screens) in November, Xi warmly greeted Biden and said he was happy to see his "old friend." Some Western commentators thought Xi was trolling Biden or pressuring him to be friendlier. The correct explanation might be less Machiavellian. Xi's aides hadn't informed China's top leader that Biden didn't consider him an "old friend" anymore. "It was a lag in communication at the top," said a Chinese source familiar with the exchange. "Xi hadn't heard that Biden denied they were friends."

Anyway, it wouldn't have mattered. In Xi's eyes, China is rising, and the United States is declining. Against that backdrop, their relationship has a certain inevitability about it. Xi and his team would maintain it's nothing personal. On the eve of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February, Xi had welcomed to China the man he'd been calling his "best friend" since 2019: Russian President Vladimir Putin. As a token of that friendship, Putin waited until after the Games concluded to invade Ukraine.

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