

Presentation
Cross-Strait Relations under the US-China
Framework after the US Presidential
Election

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Abstract

No matter who is to control the White House, the U.S. president would in the first place be guided by U.S. interests. And they will continue to compete on trade, technology and military capabilities. The U.S. would not change its policy for ‘strategic ambiguity’ on Taiwan, while the U.S. and China would continue to have confrontations and cooperation. Biden would probably place more emphasis on maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Biden will keep playing the Taiwan card. He would handle security, economic and diplomatic issues separately when it came to managing Washington’s relations with Beijing and Taipei. The Biden administration will continue arms sales to Taiwan, but he knows how to seek a balance. Washington would still adhere to the US-Taiwan Relations Act and adopt a “strategic ambiguity” toward cross-strait relations. China would not attack Taiwan, as long as President Tsai Ing-Wen (蔡英文) does not push for de jure independence or moves to rely on foreign countries for security. For Taiwan, it needs its own strategy, and cannot just follow the

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U.S. policy as before. Taiwan must adjust its hostile attitude towards China. Taiwan may stay closer to the U.S. but unnecessarily anti and hate China. Taiwan has to carefully and closely observe changes in US-China-Taiwan relations to find the most appropriate approach going forward.

If without other conditions, Joseph R. Biden should be American newly-elected president. The interactions between the U.S. and China under Biden's administration will have potential impact on cross-strait relations. This article discusses cross-strait relations after the U.S. Presidential election. This paper's framework will analyze Biden's China policy upon his position, and China's responsive attitudes under which the U.S.-Taiwan relations and the cross-strait relations will be analyzed.

Biden's China Policy

As president, Biden will face deep dilemmas, and a lot of unfinished business, stemming from President Trump's four years anti-China. In addition to a deadly pandemic and a weakened economy, Biden will inherit a toxic relationship with China when he takes office in 2021.

President Trump has placed tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars of products from China, imposed sanctions and restricted Chinese companies from buying American technology. Trump at the same time issued an executive order barring investments in Chinese firms with military ties. In addition to Huawei Technologies Company, recently Trump has stepped up to blacklist SMIC, China's largest and most technological advanced circuit chip Manufacturing Company, and strengthened monitor of Chinese companies in the United States. This is Trump's a multiyear onslaught for forcing Beijing to change its trade model and as punishment for China's authoritarian ways.¹

The hard choices for Biden will include deciding whether to maintain tariffs on about \$360 billion worth of Chinese imports. These tariffs have raised costs for American businesses and consumers. On the other hand Biden will face whether to relax those levies in exchange for concessions on economic issues or other fronts, like climate change. Biden must be very careful and may need to take a smarter approach that combines working with the Chinese on some issues like global warming and the pandemic, while competing with them on technological leadership and confronting them on other issues like military expansionism, human rights violations or unfair trade.²

Biden is an experienced politician and more adapt at foreign affairs than President Trump. He would adopt a diplomatic approach that focuses on communication and coordination. Biden may depart from Trump's punishing approach. At the same time his administration will be eager to maintain leverage over China to accomplish its own policy goals. On the other hand, Biden's administration will face pressure from lawmakers in both parties who view China as a national

¹ Ana Swanson, 'Biden's China Policy? A Balancing Act for a Toxic Relationship', *New York Times*, (16 Nov. 2020), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/16/business/economy/biden-china-trade-policy.html>.

² Ibid.

security threat and have introduced legislation aimed at penalizing Beijing for its human rights abuses, global influence operations and economic practices. Therefore, Biden will face pressure from both parties not to revert to the approach that he and many of his predecessors had earlier embraced in trying to transform China's economic practices by bringing it into the global economy.³

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Biden was friendly to China and argued that integrating China into the global trading system would force Beijing to play by international rules, to the benefit of American workers. In 2000, he voted to grant China permanent normal trading relations, which paved the way for China's entry into the World Trade Organization and deeper global economic ties. However, two decades later, Biden acknowledges that China exploited the international system, and he has called for a more aggressive approach. Biden has said the United States must get "tough with China," and referred to Xi Jinping, the Chinese President, as a "thug."⁴ And the U.S. Congress is also relatively unified on taking a tough stance on China. Hundreds of China-related bills are circulating, including several bipartisan efforts. It will remind Biden's emphasis on competing with China by investing in American industries like quantum computing and artificial intelligence upon his presidency.

President Trump has adopted a tough stance on China, and this probably doesn't give Biden a lot of political flexibility early on, but Biden's administration will expect a significant departure from Trump's administration in tone, style and process. Biden may see China as a competitor, but not necessarily an adversary.

Trump's administration shows no signs of backing off a confrontational approach and shows no sign of letting up in his final days in office. For example, Trump's administration has begun economic talks with Taiwan that are likely to rankle Beijing after he lost the election. Trump's administration has other measures to punish China, including sanctions related to China's security crackdowns in Hong Kong and the Xinjiang region, where the Chinese government has carried out mass detentions and harsh policing of ethnic minorities. However, most of what Trump could do is through executive orders and executive actions. These executive acts can be reversed by a Biden administration. Biden's team has a moderate track record on trade and China, believing they can work with Chinese leaders on some issues even as they challenge them on others.⁵ With performance in foreign diplomacy and national security, Biden should be a tough and rational policy decision-maker as well as a realistic under multilateralism.⁶ There are a lot of tools in that toolbox. The Biden administration may be thoughtful and strategic about how

3 Ana Swanson, 'Biden's China Policy? A Balancing Act for a Toxic Relationship', *New York Times*, (16 Nov. 2020), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/16/world/asia/china-united-states-biden.html?ga=2.149483254.1547904328.1605588097-514297481.1605588097>

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Yong-ming Yang, '拜登之中美台三角關係' ['Biden's China-US-Taiwan relationship'], 聯合報 [*The United Dairy News*], (29 Nov. 2020), available at: <https://udn.com/news/story/7339/5051478>.

to use them.

China's Responsive Attitudes toward Biden

China also faces a new administration that has vowed to be equally tough. Biden's election victory will not fundamentally affect the core policies of Beijing. Those core policies are being driven by the increasingly hard-line, one-man rule of Xi Jinping, the Chinese President and his desire to reassert party power throughout Chinese society. Biden's views on China have hardened since he was vice president in the Obama administration. However, Biden believe that some of Trump's anti-China policies are costly and unstrategy. And he appears determined to leave in place many of President Trump's harshest measures, including tariffs and restrictions on Chinese technology. On the campaign trail, he called Xi "a thug" and vowed he would more forcefully address human rights violations, including mass detentions and forced labor in the western region of Xinjiang.⁷ It can be seen that Biden's policy toward China is soft but hard.

In the post-pandemic era, the structural tensions between China and the United States are even sharper, and it will be very hard for 'technical measures' to resolve or ease them. It clashed with India over their disputed border in the Himalayas, cracked down on promised freedoms in Hong Kong, targeted Australia with restrictions on exports of wine, barley and coal. Especially before and after the election, China continues to threaten Taiwan with force and interference of aircraft crossing the border. It has also responded to each punitive step by Trump's government with measures of its own, barring travel by administration officials and lawmakers, imposing sanctions on companies and expelling American journalists.

Biden has offered relatively few concrete proposals for dealing with China. In his victory speech, Biden said clear that his first priority would be fighting the coronavirus pandemic at home. It could be months into 2021 before he turns his full attention to America's most vexing geopolitical relationship. However, Biden's victory has raised hopes in some quarters that the two countries could resume cooperation on at least some issues, especially climate change and nuclear proliferation by North Korea and Iran. The Chinese would welcome the "breathing space" to defuse tensions. That also gives them more time to build China's own strength, economically and militarily.

The unchecked spread of the virus and continuing political tumult in the United States have reinforced Beijing's view that the United States is in decline. So even as the Chinese leadership sees abundant domestic and international risks, it is becoming more confident in its efforts to resist international pressure on issues that are core to its domestic legitimacy and regime security. Xi has used China's success in fighting the pandemic to set a political and economic agenda to make the country less dependent on the rest of the world in crucial fields. China would enhance

⁷ Steven Lee Myers, 'Buffeted by Trump, China Has Little Hope for Warmer Relations With Biden', *New York Times*, (9 Nov. 2020), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/09/world/asia/china-united-states-biden.html?ga=2.148082423.1547904328.1605588097-514297481.1605588097>.

its dominance of industrial supply chains as a potential weapon to strike back against protectionist threats from abroad, especially the U. S.

Xi is marching ahead with a new five-year plan. The plan will guide policy starting in 2021. An outline carries the stamp of Xi, who reinforced his gloomy prognosis of the global pressures at an important party gathering. Xi has made a layout without heirs and does not intend to retire. With a likely third term beginning in 2022, he stands to be in power. Beijing gutted Hong Kong's legislature by allowing the disqualification of lawmakers deemed "unpatriotic." The move reflected Beijing's aim to consolidate its position while much of the world is distracted by the coronavirus pandemic. China's government recognized the strategic opportunity of the domestic distractions in the United States. But Beijing has also been careful about which fights it picked at this time, given the domestic challenges on its plate, such as a slowing economy. Xi's approach was cautious and prudent and legally correct, China hoped the Biden administration would bring some improvement in U.S.-China relations.

Basically the Biden victory has sent mixed signals on its China policies, pledging to get tough with Beijing but also laying out key areas for cooperation, including climate change, global health and nuclear non-proliferation. Biden and his diplomatic team were the right people to deal with US-China relations. Biden, who was known as a unifier and problem solver. He had many qualities that would qualify his work on foreign relations, including ties with China.⁸ The diplomatic team of Biden's administration is the highest quality. They are sensible, centrist, very process-oriented, very deep thinking and long-term thinking. As China flexes its muscles, Asian countries are looking forward to a stable U.S. government. Biden is offering assurances to America's top allies in the Asia-Pacific region that he is not going to be a soft touch. Biden spoke with the leaders of Australia, Japan and South Korea underlining in each call his commitment to "strengthen" their bilateral alliance.⁹

What Trump has done in the past four years has a large social base in America that is driven by populism, anti-globalization and narrow nationalism. Some people call "Trumpism". However, Trump has gained over 70 million votes, so the social base is very much there. It will continue to affect American foreign policy.¹⁰ Washington and Beijing should work out their

8 Steven Lee Myers, 'Buffeted by Trump, China Has Little Hope for Warmer Relations With Biden', *New York Times*, (9 Nov. 2020), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/09/world/asia/china-united-states-biden.html?ga=2.148082423.1547904328.1605588097-514297481.1605588097>.

9 Steven Lee Myers, 'Buffeted by Trump, China Has Little Hope for Warmer Relations With Biden', *New York Times*, (9 Nov. 2020), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/09/world/asia/china-united-states-biden.html?ga=2.148082423.1547904328.1605588097-514297481.1605588097>; Simon Denyer and Eva Dou, 'Biden vows to defend U.S. allies as China asserts power in Asia', *the Washington Post*, (12 November 2020), available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/biden-china-japan-korea-allies/2020/11/12/6cf6e212-24af-11eb-9c4a-0dc6242c4814_story.html.

10 Echo Xie, 'US-China relations: Trump divisions could haunt Biden presidency', *South China Morning Post*, (12 Nov, 2020), available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3109496/us-china-relations-could-haunt-biden>.

different issues in a face-to-face way, Biden and Xi Jinping should also get together as soon as possible. China and the US could restart a dialogue with a series of issues, including finance, cyberspace, public health, reform of the World Trade Organization, and revisiting a crisis management mechanism between the two countries in the South China Sea. We should not expect Biden to soft-pedal on China. The U.S. Congress is not in a friendly mood with regard to China. However, it may expect a more cooperative style of diplomacy from a Biden administration, but these thorny issues and problems will not go away automatically.

Despite differences in political ideology, there could still be opportunities for long-term cooperation between U.S. and China relations. Multilateralism is very much needed at this critical moment. A Biden administration is expected to build multinational coalitions and tackle global issues through multilateralism – a course largely abandoned by the Trump administration.¹¹ The international community expect a more stable and predictable policy towards the rising superpower compared to the Trump years.

Cross-Strait Relations

Confrontation and the risk of military conflict over Taiwan between Beijing and Washington look set to continue under the Biden administration.

Bipartisan support in the US Congress for President Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy – widely seen as targeting Beijing – which indicated key Washington policies of a strategic global retrenchment and more investment in the Pacific to counteract a rising China were likely to continue. However, Biden is expected to take a less openly confrontational approach. Unlike Trump's rude and fierce style, Biden would be more moderate and stable when dealing with Beijing.

The Biden's administration may use salami tactics to help Taiwan strengthen its defensive capability or postpone arms sales to Taiwan, instead of Trump's administration large packages of arms deals and other drastic moves to infuriate China. Despite concerns in both the U.S. and China about the possibility of a major conflict between the two powers – and continuing dialogue to keep military-to-military relations stable – the bipartisan coalition in the US against China meant the risks of a misstep in the Taiwan Strait amid ongoing tensions would continue to exist.¹²

Biden will keep playing the Taiwan card, like Trump, because it is always the most effective measure to strike China hardliners. China's hardline insistence that the Taiwan issue is a 'bottom line' means military confrontations between the China's PLA and the US military in the Taiwan Strait will become a constant reality in the future. China regards Taiwan as a breakaway province that must eventually be reunited with the mainland, by force if necessary. Consequently, any

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Echo Xie, 'US-China relations: Biden expected to keep Taiwan card in play against Beijing', *South China Morning Post*, (16 Nov, 2020), available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3110016/us-china-relations-biden-expected-keep-taiwan-card-play>.

move to encourage Taiwan towards independence would be considered as a violation of the one-China policy and an unacceptable challenge to China's bottom line.

An indication of Biden's approach to the Taiwan issue was gleaned from an article Biden wrote for World Journal, published two weeks before the presidential election. In article Biden promised to rebuild relationships with Washington's closest partners in the Pacific. "That includes deepening our ties with Taiwan, a leading democracy, major economy, technology powerhouse – and a shining example of how an open society can effectively contain Covid-19," Biden wrote. At the same time. Biden added that "Washington would collaborate with Beijing when it was in American interests, including on public health and climate change." This implied Biden would handle security, economic and diplomatic issues separately when it came to managing the U.S. relations with China and Taiwan. The Biden administration may continue or postpone arms sales to Taiwan. There may no let-up to US sales of advance weaponry to Taiwan. In short, he should be a wise politician who knows how to balance the relationship between the U.S., China and Taiwan.

The Trump administration has approved 18 arms sale deals to Taiwan, compared to 17 during Barack Obama's eight years in office. But it was under Obama in 2013 that the U.S. enhanced Taiwan's strategic role when the U.S. Air Force upgraded the long-range early warning radar surveillance system on Taiwan's Leshan mountain. The system had dramatically strengthened Taiwan's military surveillance of airspace from the Korean peninsula to the southernmost part of the South China Sea. That meant it was able to monitor both China's PLA aircraft movements and missiles, as well as North Korean ballistic missile tests.¹³ The Trump administration has included Taiwan as one of its close partners in its Indo-Pacific strategy. The act and effort of the Trump administration is consolidating its maritime domination in the Pacific.

With the help of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) solutions, the U.S. is able to intervene in the Taiwan issue once some indications emerge to show the PLA is going to take action against Taiwan. In other words, if China keeps reinforcing suppression on Taiwan, it may prompt The U.S. to play up Taiwan's role in its Indo-Pacific strategy.

In the two weeks leading up to the presidential election, Trump approved three more arms deals for Taiwan, including four weapons-ready MQ-9B Sea Guardian armed drones, 11 HIMARS truck-based rocket launchers, 135 Boeing AGM-84H SLAM-ER missiles and related equipment, and six MS-110 Recce external sensor pods made by Collins Aerospace for planes. This package followed the biggest ever arms deal to Taiwan, finalized in August with the sale of 90 F-16 viper fighter jets equipped with the most advanced fifth generation AESA radar systems – eclipsing former president George H.W. Bush's approval for the sale of 150 F-16s to Taiwan in 1992.¹⁴

13 Ibid.

14 Echo Xie, 'US-China relations: Biden expected to keep Taiwan card in play against Beijing', *South China Morning Post*, (16 Nov, 2020), available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3110016/us-china-relations-biden-expected-keep-taiwan-card-play>.

In order to help the Taiwan military to counter the PLA, the US has reserved hardware and software back doors in many of the arms sales to Taiwan for future upgrading. According to the US State Department, the F-16 viper jets, MQ-98 armed drones, HIMARS, and SLAM-ER missiles are advanced and offensive weapons that will not only enhance the Taiwanese military's surveillance capability, but will also help Taiwan employ a highly reliable and effective system to counter or deter maritime aggression, coastal blockades and amphibious assaults. Trump's weapon deals with Taiwan had exposed Washington's long-foreseeable hidden strategy that it had spent four decades preparing.

For China, Beijing has been strengthening its coastal forces for decades, to be combat-ready for a possible invasion of Taiwan, with two aircraft carrier strike groups, more than 1,000 fighter jets, and the recent deployment of its most advanced DF-17 hypersonic missiles and other powerful weapons systems to the PLA's Eastern and Southern theatre commands overseeing the Taiwan Strait. However, taking back Taiwan by force was not a priority for Beijing. There is no timetable for a Taiwan reunification plan. Beijing's current key concern is how to govern Taiwan and keep the island's prosperity in the future, rather than to liberate it. And, the protests and political turmoil in Hong Kong had reminded the China's leadership that they would face more and worse resistance when dealing with Taiwanese people if they used force to take back Taiwan without comprehensive plans and preparations. Therefore, before coming up with a comprehensive plan about how to govern Taiwan after reunification, China prefers to maintain the status quo of Taiwan.¹⁵

Some scholars analyze that China would not attack Taiwan before 2024, as long as President Tsai Ing-Wen (蔡英文) does not push for *de jure* independence or moves to rely on foreign countries for security. The U.S. would not change its policy for 'strategic ambiguity' on Taiwan, while the U.S. and China would continue to have confrontations and cooperation.¹⁶

The key for Taiwan is to avoid becoming embroiled in US-China conflicts, while striving for inclusion on issues where the two sides cooperate. Next year Beijing is to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the founding of CCP, so it is highly unlikely that China would start a war. And the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would hold its 20th National Congress in 2022. During this period China should not attack Taiwan. In addition, the CCP's deadline to complete its military modernization effort is 2027, when it would mark the 100-year anniversary of the Chinese Red Army, the predecessor of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Therefore, as long as President Tsai does not push for *de jure* independence, and avoids overreliance on foreign countries for security, then China would not attack Taiwan before 2024.¹⁷

Donald Trump and Joe Biden contender in presidential election, all agreed on deterring

15 Ibid.

16 Sherry Hsiao, 'KMT think tank urges link to Biden', *Taipei times*, (6 Nov, 2020), available at: <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/11/06/2003746470>.

17 Chen Yu-Fu and Jason Pan, 'Attack by China unlikely before 2024, academic says', *Taipei times*, (6 Nov, 2020), available at: <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/11/06/2003746471>.

China's rise as a regional power, and confrontations between the nations would continue in the long term. Biden may favor multilateralism, while he is against decoupling from China. Therefore Taiwan needs its own strategy, and cannot just follow the U.S. policy as before.

Traditionally, US foreign policy has been bipartisan, the general attitudes and policies of both major US parties are similar, although their approaches might be different. The strength of their support of Taiwan is about the same, But the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government has given people the illusion or feeling that Taiwan relationship with the U.S. has improved a lot. In fact, the U.S. has its "bottom line," the U.S. would still adhere to the US-Taiwan Relations Act and adopt a "strategic ambiguity" toward cross-strait relations. A Biden presidency would likely mean fewer "diplomatic surprises" from Washington, such as clashes with Beijing. And this might be good for Taiwan. Biden would probably place more emphasis on maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

No matter who is to control the White House, the U.S. president would in the first place be guided by US interests. And they will continue to compete on trade, technology and military capabilities. Most importantly, Taiwan must insist on its positions on freedom and democracy. It should closely cooperate with the U.S. The KMT and the DPP both maintain a pro-US stance. However, it must not become a chess piece.

The former Secretary of the State Pompeo who clearly said that "Taiwan is not part of China" which are inappropriate words and deeds. President Tsai Ing-Wen responds that "Taiwan is an independent sovereignty country" which should be an appropriate expression. The only thing that the Tsai's national state security team must adjust its hostile attitude towards China. Taiwan may stay closer to the U.S. but unnecessarily anti and hate China. The most important thing is Taiwan efforts over the past few years and has gained a global economic competitive advantage. Due to the strong sanction imposed by the U.S. on China's technology, factories, Taiwan has become the lifeline of controlling the global semiconductor. This is Taiwan's advantage. At the same time, Taiwan's success in fighting COVID-19 has made President Tsai Ing-Wen the second woman to win the International Leadership Pioneer Award after the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. All of these need to be cherished. Taiwan must have confidence in itself.

In conclusion, no matter which candidate ends up in the White House, the U.S. and China will continue to compete on trade, technology and military capabilities. The Harvard University professor Graham Allison who put forward the "Thucydides' Trap," Graham Allison said that unless the U.S. and China form a new type of cooperation between superpowers, Taiwan will likely become a time-bomb and may be in danger.¹⁸ Therefore, Taiwan has to carefully and closely observe changes in US-China-Taiwan relations to find the most appropriate approach

18 'Transcript of Ambassador Cui Tiankai's Dialogue with Professor Graham Allison at the Annual Conference of the Institute for China-America Studies', *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America*, (5 Dec, 2020), available at: <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgxss/t1838064.htm>.

going forward.

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