

**Biden's China strategy:  
Coalition-driven competition or Cold War-style confrontation?**

Cheng Li

In 1998, at a time when the United States enjoyed supreme power and influence on the world stage, Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, wrote his classic book on grand strategy, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. In the book, Brzezinski, one of the world's foremost strategic thinkers, issued a warning to the American foreign policy establishment:

Potentially, the most dangerous scenario would be a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran, an “antihegemonic” coalition united not by ideology but by complementary grievances. It would be reminiscent in scale and scope of the challenge once posed by the Sino-Soviet bloc, though this time China would likely be the leader and Russia the follower. Averting this contingency, however remote it may be, will require a display of U.S. geostrategic skill on the western, eastern, and southern perimeters of Eurasia simultaneously.<sup>1</sup>

The geopolitical landscape today seems to reflect what Brzezinski feared over two decades ago. Throughout President Joe Biden's first 100 days in office, his administration has largely continued the Trump administration's hawkish approach toward China. President Biden has also made international coalition building his primary foreign policy initiative, which differs markedly from his predecessor's “America First” approach.

To counter this strategic move, China has enhanced its diplomatic, economic, and military relationship with both Russia and Iran in recent months, resulting in the closest ties these countries have had in the post-Cold War era. This “Cold War-like bloc” or “Cold War-style alliance” (*jiemeng lengzhan*) — a new term that has been used by government officials and geopolitical analysts around the world — reflects concerns within the international community regarding Biden's foreign policy strategy.<sup>2</sup>

The Biden administration is still reviewing its strategy and policies toward China, which are expected to be finalized over the summer. Senior officials on the foreign policy team have frequently emphasized three “C” words: competition, cooperation, and confrontation. According to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the new administration's approach to China

will be “competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.”<sup>3</sup> The Biden administration has reaffirmed the desire for collaboration and cooperation with China in areas that serve American interests, a sharp contrast with the “all-encompassing decoupling” policy toward China in the final year of the Trump administration. However, Biden himself has emphasized that “stiff competition” defines U.S.-China relations.<sup>4</sup>

Is the world heading toward what the late Brzezinski referred to as “the most dangerous scenario”? What can the Biden administration do to distinguish between strategies of “coalition-driven competition” and “Cold War-style confrontation? How will other countries respond to this “stiff competition,” especially if it evolves into an adversarial relationship? To what extent has the Biden administration’s China strategy reflected the enduring impact of the Trump administration? Can some of the Biden administration’s recent moves be interpreted as temporary tactics rather than long-term strategy? What role has domestic political pressure in the United States and China’s economic and technological challenge played in shaping Biden’s China strategy? This chapter aims to address these important questions about the most consequential bilateral relationship in the world today.

### **Two contending blocs looming large?**

Washington is wise to focus on improving its relationship with its allies to confront the growing power and influence of China. Beijing’s increasingly assertive conduct, both in the region and on the world stage—including the pressure campaign against Taiwan, economic coercion against Australia, and retaliatory sanctions targeting individuals and institutions in North America and Europe—has caused serious concern in the U.S. and ally countries.<sup>5</sup> Even during the presidential campaign, Biden made it very clear that his administration would prioritize working closely with traditional U.S. allies. During his senate confirmation hearing, Antony Blinken reaffirmed the importance of revitalizing U.S. core alliances, which he considered to be “force multipliers of our influence around the world.”<sup>6</sup>

During the first 100 days of the Biden administration, senior officials actively pursued these priorities by forming a united front to confront China’s global outreach. Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin’s visit to Japan and South Korea, Blinken and Austin’s respective meetings with the EU and NATO leaders in Brussels, and Austin’s visit to India all reflect the urgent need for coalition building. Notably, the White House also hosted a

Quadrilateral (Quad) Security Dialogue Summit via video conference, bringing together the top leaders of Japan, Australia, and India for the first time. In mid-April, President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga met at the White House, and some U.S. media sources characterized this U.S.-Japan summit as being “all about China.”<sup>7</sup>

From the Chinese perspective, many of the Biden administration’s recent moves indicate that a new anti-China Cold War is imminent. These actions include restructuring global industrial and supply chains, initiating the so-called “chip alliance” or “semiconductor industry alliance,”<sup>8</sup> joining “like-minded countries” to boycott Chinese products and China-sponsored events because of human rights issues, urging EU countries to reconsider the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, and hosting the “democracy summit” at the White House.

These actions and the resulting reactions from China have increasingly driven the world into two trade and investment systems, two IT and internet systems, potentially two financial and currency systems, and two political and military blocs. The core group of the bloc competing against the U.S.-led coalition, as outlined by some Chinese and foreign analysts, includes China, Russia, and Iran. Some stunning episodes during Biden’s first 100 days in office—including his reference to Russian President Vladimir Putin as a “killer” and his comprehensive sanctions against Russia issued in mid-April, continuing tensions with Iran along with the nuclear incident at the Natanz complex,<sup>9</sup> and extraordinary diplomatic (or undiplomatic) collisions at the high-level U.S.-China dialogue in Anchorage—have unsurprisingly pushed China, Russia, and Iran to collaborate even more closely.

Despite the absence of an “ideological glue” or trust among these three countries, they are inclined to show solidarity to combat what they perceive to be a formidable threat from the U.S.-led military bloc. During Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s visit to China in late March to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Treaty on Good-Neighborhood and Friendly Cooperation between Russia and China,” he stated that “Sino-Russian relations are now at the best level in history.”<sup>10</sup> Lavrov elaborated that he and his counterpart, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, shared the opinion that Russian-Chinese foreign policy interaction remains a vital factor in global geopolitics.<sup>11</sup>

A few days later, on March 27, 2021, China and Iran formally signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement. This agreement includes three critical clauses: 1) China will

increase investment in Iran's energy facilities and infrastructure construction, which has directly undermined U.S.-led economic sanctions against Iran; 2) the Chinese yuan and China's newly launched digital currency will be used to settle petroleum and trade exchanges between the two countries; and 3) Iran will use China's Beidou global positioning and navigation system so that Iranian missiles are no longer subject to the interference of U.S.-owned GPS.<sup>12</sup> According to some Chinese analysts, the signing of the China-Iran cooperation agreement is a landmark event, showing that China's strategy abroad has shifted from passive defense to proactive offense.<sup>13</sup>

Chinese leaders and the public are not convinced by the statements recently made by President Biden that these U.S.-led alliances are "not anti-Chinese" and that the United States is "not looking for confrontation" with China.<sup>14</sup> Chinese media widely reported stories such as the U.S. strongly pressuring South Korea to join the Quad and also inviting the UK, France, and Germany to participate in naval exercises in the South China Sea in March, an operation known as "Free Navigation."<sup>15</sup>

Beijing's greatest concern is the Biden administration's position regarding Taiwan. The fact that the representative of Taiwan to the United States was invited to attend the inauguration ceremony of President Biden, an act unprecedented since the establishment of U.S.-China diplomatic relations in 1979, was a bad omen for the Chinese government.<sup>16</sup>

Chinese commentators have recently observed that four moves by the Biden administration have greatly escalated tensions across the Taiwan Strait: 1) the U.S. forcibly engaging Japan and Australia in preparations for military intervention in the region; 2) the U.S. and Taiwan signing a maritime patrol agreement to encourage Taiwan's military to participate in Indo-Pacific security affairs through maritime patrols; 3) the issuing of guidelines encouraging "official exchanges" between the U.S. and Taiwan; and 4) the U.S. ambassador to Palau joining the Palau president for an official visit to Taiwan.<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, in PRC media, aggressive anti-American rhetoric has reached a new high, resulting from what the Chinese have called "U.S. provocative conduct to challenge Beijing's redline."<sup>18</sup>

### **Limits of a Cold War-like bloc**

Although it may seem contradictory, Chinese leadership is also cynical about the effectiveness of a U.S.-led Cold War-style bloc. Beijing is keenly aware that some leaders in

Europe and Asia have been critical of or have expressed reservations about Washington's inclination to form a "Cold War-like bloc." A few days after President Biden's inauguration, German Chancellor Angela Merkel explicitly stated that she "would very much wish to avoid the building of blocs."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, known for his criticism of Beijing and his concern about China's "systemic challenge" to Britain's security, prosperity, and liberal values, "has warned that the UK must not get drawn into a new 'Cold War' with China."<sup>20</sup>

As an advisor to the top Chinese leadership recently observed, although the United States and Europe are speaking in unison on democracy and human rights as well as on the issues of Xinjiang and Hong Kong, Europeans have independent views on the imperative to cooperate with China on the economic and trade front, nuclear nonproliferation, and climate change.<sup>21</sup> Many European countries prefer to keep an equal distance in their relationships with Washington and Beijing.

The same can be said of American allies in the Asia Pacific. Although security concerns and the need for military cooperation is a primary objective of the Quad, at this point, the Quad should not be considered a military alliance or Asia's "mini-NATO" aimed at containing China. As Zhang Yun, a Chinese scholar who teaches in Japan, observed, "multilateral military alliances have never worked in the Asian region."<sup>22</sup> Japanese Prime Minister Suga explicitly expressed disapproval of an "Asian NATO." India, with its principles of non-alliance, neutrality, and independence, and its good relationship with Russia, is unlikely to change its longstanding foreign policy posture to join a U.S.-led military alliance.<sup>23</sup>

From an even broader perspective, the outlook on China in many countries in Africa, South America, and Asia profoundly differs from that of the United States. These countries don't appear to see China as a security threat to world peace and don't perceive China's economic outreach efforts, including the Belt and Road Initiative, to be "predatory" or "debt trap" diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> As Joseph Nye recently observed, "nearly 100 countries count China as their largest trading partner, compared to 57 for the U.S. Furthermore, China plans to lend more than \$1 trillion for infrastructure projects with its Belt and Road Initiative over the next decade, while the U.S. has cut back aid."<sup>25</sup>

For analysts of American foreign policy, including those in China, there seems to be a fundamental contradiction between the Biden administration's top priority for domestic renewal

and its tough and aggressive foreign policy approach toward China, Russia, and Iran, as well as other authoritarian regimes such as North Korea and Syria. Prior to the 2020 presidential election, a group of foreign policy strategists and socio-economic policy experts, including current National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, authored a substantial report, *Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class*, which includes the following statement:

there is no evidence America’s middle class will rally behind efforts aimed at restoring U.S. primacy in a unipolar world, escalating a new Cold War with China, or waging a cosmic struggle between the world’s democracies and authoritarian governments.<sup>26</sup>

The authors elaborate that the new President should avoid drawn-out military conflicts that “cost too many lives and taxpayer dollars.”<sup>27</sup>

When considering President-elect Biden’s top four priorities, which include combating COVID-19, accelerating economic recovery, ensuring racial equity and social justice, and coordinating on climate change, Beijing saw an overlap with China’s own interests and hoped this could provide a window of opportunity for U.S.-China reengagement. The Chinese leadership believed that the Biden administration could achieve these goals faster and more effectively through U.S.-China bilateral cooperation.

However, Chinese senior officials soon realized that the window of opportunity was extremely narrow, if it even existed at all, considering the political and strategic assessments of the Biden administration.<sup>28</sup> The now well-known comment by China’s top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, to his American counterparts— “we thought too well of you”— has reaffirmed the widespread sentiment in China prior to the Anchorage dialogue that “there is no essential difference between the Biden team and the Trump team.”<sup>29</sup> Many Chinese now believe that the Biden administration could be more detrimental to U.S.-China relations than the Trump administration. In their view, the Biden administration’s strategic approach to create an anti-China alliance and its ideological appeal to countries around the world to characterize the Chinese government as a genocidal regime, have backed China into a corner.

### **Shadows of the past and the deadlock of the present**

The Biden team has long been critical of the previous administration’s approach to Beijing and has characterized Trump’s China policy as a failure. They believe that the Trump

administration not only failed to effectively contain China’s global outreach and to enhance America’s hard and soft power, but also contributed to the growing risk of military conflict in a drastic way. The Biden team has explicitly asserted that all-encompassing economic decoupling with China does not serve American interests. During the presidential campaign, Biden and his team claimed that it was Russia, not China, that interfered in the 2020 U.S election, which was confirmed by the National Intelligence Council report released on March 15, 2021.<sup>30</sup>

From Beijing’s perspective, the hawkish approach to China in the final year of the Trump administration revealed that the Trump team sought to defeat and destroy China in much the same way that the United States defeated the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Their assessment was based on three main observations:

- On the economic front, the Trump administration aimed to implement systemic and complete decoupling with China.
- On the political and ideological front, the Trump administration pursued regime change to overthrow CCP rule.
- On the military and security front, through the Taipei Act of 2019 and other measures aimed at undermining the “one China policy,” Beijing feared that the U.S. would move toward supporting Taiwan independence.<sup>31</sup>

China understandably reacted assertively to these three policy trajectories, which inflicted significant damage on the bilateral relationship, with both sides increasingly viewing geopolitics as zero-sum.

Some of the Trump administration’s policy initiatives provoked strong nationalistic sentiment in China, arguably playing in the Chinese Communist Party leadership’s favor. These Trump administration initiatives included sensationalizing China as a “whole-of-society threat” to the U.S., targeting Chinese and Chinese American scientists, claiming that Beijing is “weaponizing” Chinese students enrolled in U.S. universities, employing phrases like “Chinese virus” or “Kung Flu,” imposing sanctions on senior Chinese officials for their roles in cracking down on the democratic movement in Hong Kong, canceling the Peace Corps and Fulbright programs in China, ordering China to close its consulate in Houston, and restricting members of the Chinese Communist Party and their families—about 300 million people—from visiting the United States.<sup>32</sup>

President Biden has indeed reversed some of the above policies; for example, he used executive orders to ban the use of phrases like “Chinese virus” or “Kung Flu” and to condemn the racial profiling of Chinese Americans and Asian Americans. But most of the aforementioned policies of the Trump team have remained. In terms of tensions over the Taiwan Strait, many observers believe that the risk of military conflict has increased during the Biden administration, as previously described. One can argue that Beijing’s continuation of its aggressive measures has contributed to the escalation of tensions and thus, U.S. initiatives can be seen as a response based on fears of a Chinese military threat.

Two important factors, one relating to the domestic political environment in the United States and the other reflecting China’s competitive edge, may help explain the current dangerous standoff in the bilateral relationship.

*U.S. domestic political environment regarding China.* It is too simplistic to assume that decision-makers, the foreign policy community, and the general public in the United States have reached a consensus regarding America’s China strategy. There are clear differences in views regarding the nature of the China challenge between Republicans and Democrats and also within each party. For example, in a recent public opinion survey conducted by the Pew Research Center,<sup>33</sup> 54 percent of Republicans viewed China as an “enemy” compared to 20 percent of Democrats. Yet, policy toward China has nevertheless emerged as an area for cooperation between Democrats and Republicans. In an effort to bridge partisan divides, the Biden administration seems to view an aggressive China policy as a means for finding common ground with Republicans.

In early April on the Senate floor, the bipartisan legislation proposed the “Strategic Competition Act of 2021,”<sup>34</sup> deserves great attention. This legislation claims to allocate hundreds of millions of dollars to “a host of new initiatives aimed at helping the U.S. succeed in long-term ideological, military, economic and technological competition” with China. If enacted, the legislation will likely drive the Biden administration to prioritize efforts to counter a rising global China.

The American public’s increasingly negative view of China, largely stemming from exposure to the issues in Xinjiang and Hong Kong and blame directed at China due to COVID-19, have further pushed the Biden team to take a tough stance against this authoritarian regime.

A Gallup poll conducted in March showed that the share of Americans who see China as the “greatest enemy” has doubled in the past year, from 22 percent to 45 percent.<sup>35</sup>

*Concerns about China’s competitive edge.* The second important factor that explains the Biden administration’s hesitancy to pursue cooperation with China is grounded in the daunting challenge of Chinese economic and technological competitiveness. Over the past two decades, China’s GDP per capita has increased from about \$1,000 in 2001 to \$10,000 in 2020 and is expected to reach \$30,000 in 2035. In comparison, in 1979, when China began its economic reforms and opening up, the country’s GDP per capita was less than \$300, accounting for about 3 percent of that of the United States at the time.<sup>36</sup>

In China and elsewhere, it has been widely reported that despite COVID-19, China’s GDP growth in 2020 was 2.3 percent, which was much higher than all other major economies (which experienced negative 4 percent growth or worse). The Chinese economy in 2020 was reported to be 10 percent bigger than in 2019. According to some economists, China’s GDP is expected to surpass the United States in 2028 (this is two years earlier than previously expected as a result of COVID-19).<sup>37</sup>

As an American scholar recently wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, “as recently as 2007, America had six times as many companies in the global Fortune 500 as did China. By 2018 China had reached near-parity.”<sup>38</sup> Even more significantly, as noted in a 2020 report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, China recently passed the U.S. in research and development (R&D) investment (at purchasing power parity, PPP).<sup>39</sup> The U.S. FY2021 budget, according to this report, would cut federal support for R&D by \$7.9 billion (about 9 percent). The report also found that American corporations are more inclined to move R&D laboratories to other countries, including China. Although the United States has maintained its supremacy in some areas of science and technology (S&T), “global leadership in science and technology is measured in months or years, not decades or centuries,”<sup>40</sup> as emphasized in the report.

The Biden administration wants to adopt policies that will enhance America’s competitiveness in S&T, R&D, and IT infrastructure. Loss of American supremacy in any of these areas will “have grave consequences” for the country’s economy, job creation, standard of living, and national security.<sup>41</sup> During his White House press conference in March, President Biden said that “back in the ‘60s, we used to invest a little over 2 percent of our entire GDP in

pure research and science. Today, it's 0.7 percent.”<sup>42</sup> Biden emphasized that China is investing three times more in infrastructure than the United States.

It is reasonable to argue that China's advancements in S&T over the past few decades is partly due to the intelligence and diligence of the Chinese people and partly due to the openness of the market economies and generosity of universities and research institutions in advanced countries, especially the United States. For many Americans, China's extensive violations of intellectual property rights, barriers to market access for U.S. companies, state-sponsored economic espionage, mercantilist techniques to gain dominance in new technologies, and global outreach through state capitalism have unfairly advantaged Chinese economic expansion.

Understandable, President Biden is determined, as was his predecessor, to challenge unfair practices by the Chinese government. Although the United States may still remain at the forefront in innovation and technology—after all, 15 of the world's top 20 research universities are in the United States; none are in the PRC<sup>43</sup>—American political leaders cannot afford complacency. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, the United States confronts a country with economic and technological potential that is comparable to its own.

### **Final thoughts**

Henry Kissinger, another foremost strategic thinker of our time, recently warned that “‘endless’ competition between the world's two largest economies risks unforeseen escalation and subsequent conflict.”<sup>44</sup> In Kissinger's view, U.S.-China competition today differs from Cold War competition in two crucial respects. First, the United States and China today are almost equally powerful, while the Soviet Union in the Cold War era was relatively weaker than the U.S. and was not integrated into the global economy. Second, the current situation is more dangerous given the availability of “artificial intelligence (AI) and futuristic weaponry” in addition to nuclear armaments.<sup>45</sup> Neither country could win a total war or destroy the other and thus, the two countries and the greater international community need to find an entirely new way to coexist.

Having drawn upon their experiences leading American institutions during the great power competition of the past, Kissinger and Brzezinski have flagged the warning signs of a perilous future. Just as Brzezinski foresaw the two new contending blocs — requiring greater

“geostrategic skill” — that are forming today, Kissinger has emphasized the unprecedented dangers that AI could introduce into a divided world. Leaders in the U.S. and China would be wise to consider both the history and the new reality of great power conflict, as the consequences of following the current path toward confrontation would be catastrophic not only for both countries, but for the entire world.

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**Notes:**

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart Lau and Laurenz Gehrke, “Merkel Sides with Xi on Avoiding Cold War Blocs.” *Politico*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/merkel-sides-with-xi-on-avoiding-cold-war-blocs/>. For the Chinese term, see *Zaobao* (Singapore), January 27, 2021, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/realtime/china/story20210127-1119644>.

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<sup>6</sup> “Antony Blinken Opening Statement at his Senate Confirmation Hearing, January 19, 2021, United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, January 19, 2021, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/nominations-011921>.

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<sup>10</sup> Sergey Lavrov, “Sino-Russian Relations are now at the Best Level in History.” *China News*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.chinanews.com/gj/2021/03-23/9438152.shtml>.

<sup>11</sup> “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks and Answers to Media Questions Following Talks with Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi, Guilin, March 23, 2021.” The website of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, March 21, 2021, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4647898](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4647898).

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<sup>20</sup> Gavin Cordon and David Hughes, “Boris Johnson Warns against New ‘Cold War’ with China.” *Irish Examiner*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/40245650.html>.

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<sup>22</sup> Zhang, “Quad: A regional military alliance to contain China will not work.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, “There Will Not Be a New Cold War: The Limits of U.S.-Chinese Competition.” *Foreign Affairs*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-03-24/there-will-not-be-new-cold-war>.

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<sup>28</sup> Yuan Peng, “On the Eve of the High-level Strategic Dialogue: Where are China-US Relations Heading?” China News, March 17, 2021, <https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2021/03-17/9434718.shtml>.

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