

Opinion – The Biden Administration Confronts Peak China

Written by Andrew Latham

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ANDREW LATHAM, MAR 22 2021

Many of those who recently voted for Joe Biden were hoping his election would consummate a transition in US foreign policy that they believed was initiated during the Obama years only to be rudely interrupted by the election of Donald Trump in 2016. The hope seemed to be that Mr. Biden would finish what President Obama started – a transition from a foreign policy based on *realpolitik* and power politics to one based on soft power and multilateral diplomacy in the service of an ethical foreign policy agenda focused on promoting social justice, human security, and American-style progressivism abroad as well as at home. But that is simply not going to happen. If the first few months are any indication, the Biden years will not herald a return to the kind of liberal internationalism that is imagined to have characterized American foreign policy under President Obama. Rather, as signaled by Mr. Biden's choices for his foreign policy team, the next administration is likely to be far more hawkish in its outlook than were its Obama (and perhaps even Trump) administration predecessors.

Reading the views expressed in recent years by Antony Blinken, Biden's Secretary of State, and Jake Sullivan, Biden's National Security Adviser, it is clear that the Biden team sees China as a near-peer competitor that aspires to upend the liberal order and/or displace the US as global hegemon. One does not get the impression at all that Mr. Biden's team comprises naïve progressives who see international politics as a realm of immanent harmony – a realm in which peace, justice, and prosperity will spontaneously erupt if only we can create one more international institution, sign one more multilateral treaty, or convince one more state to adopt the norms of liberal democracy and fair trade.

To be sure, the Biden foreign policy team continues to genuflect in the direction of secondary threats – deadly epidemics, climate change, global economic meltdown, massive cyber-attacks, and the like. And the Biden administration certainly has not abandoned the view that America's primary and secondary foreign policy challenges are often best tackled through multilateral institutions and agreements. But, there can be little doubt that the people confirmed to the top-level positions on Biden's foreign policy team see the factory setting of world politics as conflictual and war-prone, requiring the leadership of a benign hegemon like the US to override those factory settings and establish the conditions of possibility for global peace and prosperity. Nor can there be much doubt that they understand that establishing and maintaining those conditions requires not just the generation of soft power but the exercise of hard power as well.

Nowhere is this set of reflexes on more prominent display than in the realm of China policy. The newly ascendant Democratic Party 'China Hawks' clearly believe that a rising China is using its newfound wealth and power to advance its own narrow self-interests, even to the point of conducting liminal warfare in places like the South China Sea and the Himalayas. They also clearly believe that this constitutes a major threat, not only to America's friends and allies around China's periphery but to the entire American-centered world order.

In one sense, of course, the rise to prominence of these China hawks is very reassuring. The dangerous Clinton-to-Obama-era delusion that, given time, China would evolve into a responsible stakeholder in the liberal order seems to have largely been consigned to the gnawing criticism of the mice. In its place, at least at the commanding heights of the Democratic Party, has crystalized a more clear-eyed sense that China is neither the poor-if-revisionist country of

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yesteryear nor the rich-but-responsible stakeholder of recent liberal-internationalist fantasy, but a rising power aggressively seeking to claim what it perceives to be its rightful place in the sun. Compared to the flawed assumptions and faulty policies of the Clinton-Obama years, this new perspicacity ought to augur well for a period of sound strategy – a period in which American power is used to manage China's rise and thwart its hegemonic aspirations.

And there's the rub. As I have argued elsewhere, China is *not* a rising power, at least in the sense that it is on a linear trajectory to become ever more prosperous and powerful, and perhaps one day predominant. Rather, it is a *faltering power*, one that is fated first to stumble and then decline, at least in relative terms. And this looming reversal of fortunes is neither a remote possibility nor one that is contingent on some policy misstep on the part of the Chinese Communist Party. It is baked into China's demography and economy, and it is reinforced by the logic of geopolitical counter-balancing. At this point, there is simply nothing the CCP can do to avoid the 'middle-income trap,' the imminent prospect of 'growing old before growing rich,' or the effort on the part of weaker neighbors to band together to constrain what they consider to be an increasingly menacing China. Simply put, though China's star might seem to be in the ascendant at the moment, it has effectively peaked. And it has done so long before displacing the US as the global, or even Asian, hegemon.

While this might seem like a blessing, if history is any guide, a faltering China is likely to prove anything but. Consider the two historical cases of Germany in 1914 and Japan in 1941. In both cases, a rising power – a power that had grown increasingly wealthy and that wanted to claim its rightful place in the sun – began to lose ground, in the German case demographically; in the Japanese case militarily. Having realized that their relative power positions were likely to get worse over time, both powers decided to initiate wars that they knew had only a slim chance of winning because they also knew that their prospects were only going to get worse with each passing year. In both cases, the hegemonic contender made a desperate bid to lock in its relative power position by launching a war to reset the international system in their favor. In neither case was war caused by states leaping through open windows of opportunity created by actual military advantage. Instead, they were caused by a stalled rising power attacking despite being at a disadvantage because to do so was the least bad of several very bad options open to them. That is the danger posed by a once-rising power that has faltered and that realizes that its reach has exceeded its grasp. That is the challenge that will face the Biden administration and its successors for the foreseeable future.

The real question for the Biden administration, then, is not how to manage a rising China. Rather it is how to manage one that is plateauing – and that knows that it is plateauing. Put slightly differently, the challenge facing the next administration is not how to preserve US hegemony in the face of a China bent on seizing the mantle of global leadership for itself. Instead, the most important foreign policy challenge facing the Biden foreign policy team will be to figure out how to deal with a China that, like Germany in 1914 and Japan in 1941, sees its predominance slipping away just as it was nearly within its grasp.

And, assuming that history is a guide, the Biden administration will need to get this right. For history teaches us that the costs of failure, the costs of mishandling a faltering and frustrated hegemonic contender, can be almost unimaginably high.

About the author:

Andrew Latham is a Senior Washington Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, where he focuses on military strategy, great power politics, and the future of warfare. He is also a tenured full professor of International Relations at Macalester College in Saint Paul, MN. His work has appeared in *E-International Relations*, *The National Interest*, *RealClearDefense*, *19FortyFive*, *The Hill*, and *The Diplomat*.