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## As Biden and Xi Begin a Careful Dance, a New American Policy Takes Shape

Top administration officials will meet with their Chinese counterparts for the first time on Thursday as the United States shifts to a more competitive posture with Beijing.



By David E. Sanger and Michael Crowley

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WASHINGTON — **President Biden is engineering a sharp shift in policy toward China,** focused on gathering allies to counter Beijing's coercive diplomacy around the world and ensuring that China does not gain a permanent advantage in critical technologies.

At first glance, it seems to adopt much of the Trump administration's conviction that the world's two biggest powers are veering dangerously toward confrontation, a clear change in tone from the Obama years.

**But the emerging strategy more directly repudiates the prevailing view of the last quarter century that deep economic interdependence** could be counted on to temper fundamental conflicts on issues like China's military buildup, its territorial ambitions and human rights.

**It focuses anew on competing more aggressively with Beijing on technologies vital to long-term economic and military power,** after concluding that President Donald J. Trump's approach — a mix of expensive tariffs, efforts to ban Huawei and TikTok, and accusations

about sending the “China virus” to American shores — had failed to change President Xi Jinping’s course.

The result, as Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s national security adviser, put it during the campaign last year, is an approach that “should put less focus on trying to slow China down and more emphasis on trying to run faster ourselves” through increased government investment in research and technologies like semiconductors, artificial intelligence and energy.

Mr. Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will road-test the new approach in what promises to be a tense first encounter on Thursday with their Chinese counterparts in Anchorage. It is a meeting they delayed until they could reach the outlines of a common strategy with allies — notably Japan, South Korea, India and Australia — and one they insisted had to take place on American soil.

But it will also be a first demonstration of Beijing’s determination to stand up to the new administration, and a chance for its diplomats to deliver a litany of complaints about Washington’s “evil” interference in China’s affairs, as a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman put it on Wednesday.

The United States imposed sanctions on 24 Chinese officials on Wednesday for undermining Hong Kong’s democratic freedoms, an action whose timing was pointed and clearly intentional. Mr. Blinken said in Tokyo this week that “we will push back if necessary when China uses coercion or aggression to get its way.”

And that is happening almost daily, he conceded, including Beijing’s efforts to terminate Hong Kong’s autonomy, intimidate Australia and Taiwan, and move ahead, despite international condemnation, with what Mr. Blinken has said is a “genocide” aimed at China’s Uyghur minority.

It is all part of the initial resetting of the relationship that has marked Mr. Biden’s renewed, if now far more tense, encounters with Mr. Xi.

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Back when Mr. Biden was vice president and Mr. Xi was consolidating power on his way to becoming China’s most powerful leader in decades, the two men met in China and the United States and offered public assurances that confrontation was not inevitable.

The intelligence assessment inside the American government at the time was that Mr. Xi would proceed cautiously, focus on economic development at home and avoid direct confrontation with the United States.

But in their years out of power, the aides who are now managing Mr. Biden’s new approach concluded that the earlier assessment badly misjudged Mr. Xi’s intentions and

aggressiveness. And the new approach — a mix of promises to cooperate in areas of mutual concern like climate change while taking China on more directly in technology and military competition in space and cyberspace — is gradually becoming clear.

Its outlines were reflected, aides said, during a two-hour telephone conversation last month between Mr. Biden and Mr. Xi whose contents have been tightly held by both sides.

Mr. Biden, the aides reported, warned Mr. Xi not to believe China's own narrative that the United States is a declining power, consumed by the political divisions that were on full display in the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol.

Shortly after the conversation, though, Mr. Xi reportedly told local officials in northwest China that “the biggest source of chaos in the present-day world is the United States,” which he also described as “the biggest threat to our country's development and security.”

Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Blinken are betting that Mr. Xi's declaration reveals a pang of Chinese insecurity, a fear that, for all the country's bluster about new weapons systems and advances in artificial intelligence, it is vulnerable to “choke points” where the United States remains in control of foundational technology.

**The result is that both nations are racing to secure their own supply chains and to reduce dependency on each other — a reversal of 40 years of economic integration.** But more broadly it reflects the end of a post-Cold War construct that assumed the interests of the two powers were inextricably intertwined.

“There's no doubt that the trajectory has shifted in a dramatic way,” said Elizabeth C. Economy, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and the author of a biography of Mr. Xi. “I think fundamentally there's a lack of trust that will be extremely difficult to overcome.”

**For a Democratic president, the Biden approach represents a full reversal from the days of Bill Clinton's assurances,** in his talks with Chinese university students more than 20 years ago, that a wealthier, internet-connected China would become a more democratic and pluralistic one. President Barack Obama's talk of managing China's “peaceful rise” is also gone.

Today, there seems to be broad agreement that U.S.-China relations have not only reached one of their lowest points since the country's 1949 communist revolution, but that they threaten to grow even worse.

Henry Kissinger, the man who cleared the way for America's opening to China nearly 50 years ago, said shortly after Mr. Biden was elected that the United States and China were increasingly drifting toward confrontation.

America, Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner wrote, “underestimated China’s willingness to directly take on the United States, or use its economic might to rewrite the rules of trade and technology in its favor” and failed “to detect Mr. Xi’s authoritarian-nationalist instincts.”

Today Mr. Campbell is the White House Asia policy coordinator, with new authorities over a range of government departments. And Mr. Ratner, recently installed as the Pentagon’s top official for Asia, is in charge of a four-month rush project to reassess the military competition between the two countries.

Mr. Ratner’s review is expected to encompass everything from Beijing’s slow-but-steady embrace of a more sophisticated nuclear arsenal to its growing capabilities in space and hypersonic weaponry, much of it intended to keep American carrier groups at bay — and prevent the United States from taking the risk of mounting a defense of Taiwan.

American officials warn that a Taiwan crisis could be brewing, as Mr. Xi, emboldened by his success in suppressing dissent in Hong Kong, turns to the intimidation of an island it regards as a breakaway province.

Last week, the chief of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Adm. Philip S. Davidson, warned that China could try to take control of Taiwan within the next six years. An American destroyer sailed through the Taiwan Strait the next day, the traditional reminder that an overt move to take over the island would provoke a response from the United States.

Nonetheless, many in the Pentagon believe that Chinese strategists increasingly regard such shows of force as empty gestures, convincing themselves that an America already tired of failed wars in Afghanistan and elsewhere would not take the risk of direct military confrontation.

Mr. Sullivan holds a more nuanced view. Before taking office he cautioned against assuming China’s plan was to attain power through territorial gains in the Pacific. Instead, he suggested, Mr. Xi may be banking on expanding Chinese influence through “increasing emphasis on shaping the world’s economic rules, technology standards and political institutions.”

The risk, he conceded, is that it could be pursuing both strategies simultaneously.

At the heart of the Biden administration’s critique of the Trump administration’s approach to China was the absence of a competitive strategy.

Mr. Trump and his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, threatened allies that were negotiating to install Huawei’s 5G communications network, telling them they could be cut off from American intelligence because Washington could not risk having critical data diverted to the Chinese.

But there was no American alternative to offer them, since U.S. companies had largely exited the field.

Mr. Biden's team promises a different approach — one that is exploring, for example, ways of organizing Western democracies to draw on American open-source software and European-made switching gear from Nokia and Ericsson to offer a more secure, Western-made alternative to Huawei. But putting together such combinations requires a level of government and private-sector cooperation that is rare in peacetime, and can take years to assemble.

It is far from clear that other nations will hold off on their purchases, especially as China uses its leverage — most recently in providing coronavirus vaccines — to bolster Huawei's chances in nations where only months ago it was blocked.

Similarly, the Biden administration regards Mr. Trump's effort last year to block TikTok, the Chinese social media operation, and force a de facto takeover of its American operations, as such a hastily assembled deal that it will never survive legal challenge. It promises a different strategy that focuses on the key issue: how to monitor the software that is pumped into the phones of over 100 million users in the United States.

“The Cold War was primarily a military competition,” Mr. Campbell said. But “**the modern ramparts of competition will be in technology,**” he said, such as 5G networks, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics and human sciences.

Competing in those areas, Mr. Sullivan said recently, would require “making progressive, ambitious public investment here in the United States so that we stay on the cutting edge.”

Elements of Mr. Trump's approach remain, of course, including punishing tariffs on Chinese imports, which one Biden official briefing reporters last month called a source of “leverage.”

But Mr. Biden has walked away from Mr. Pompeo's declaration that with enough pressure, the Communist Party in China will collapse. Last month Graham Allison, a political scientist at Harvard, and Fred Hu, a prominent investor, argued that for now there is no choice but to deal with China as it is.

“Preventing military crises, combating climate change, containing future pandemics, preventing nuclear proliferation, fighting terrorism, managing financial crises,” they wrote, “none of this can be done without accepting the reality that the autocratic regime in Beijing runs China now and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.”