

## On China, Biden is found lacking

Written by Joseph Bosco

Wednesday, 26 August 2020 04:44

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The commonalities are there: A former US vice president who served two terms under an iconic president has been out of office during a successive administration of the opposite party, earlier made an unsuccessful bid for the US presidency and then runs against either the incumbent president or vice president.

He seeks to use his age and longevity in public life to his advantage, claiming wisdom from experience, primarily in the area of international relations and national security. To establish his gravitas, he turns to the pages of Foreign Affairs to lay out his foreign policy vision.

If former US vice president Joe Biden, the Democratic candidate, is channeling former US vice president Richard Nixon from 1967, the simulation falls far short of the Nixon model.

For one thing, Nixon could write his own article — he had the coherent strategic vision and the developed communications skills — and it reads in his voice. Biden's piece lacks the same ring of authenticity and personal conviction, essentially because, unlike Nixon, Biden has no set of core principles that define him, despite decades of public service.

Even the difference in titles illustrates the contrast in focus. Nixon's seminal article was titled "Asia after Viet Nam," reflecting the backdrop of the war that had been waging for over a decade because of the mistakes of his predecessors. However, looking forward rather than backward, he did not call his piece "Asia after Kennedy and Johnson."

Biden's offering is personality rather than policy-driven: "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing US Foreign Policy after Trump."

Given how Biden lacerates every aspect of the national security policy of US President Donald Trump's administration and finds nothing of value in it, it could well be titled "The World after Trump."

Where Nixon laid out a specific roadmap to achieve the essential objective of his vision —

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changing “Red China” and integrating it into the “family of nations” — Biden mostly assembles a collection of generalities and platitudes.

Yet, the danger from communist China that Nixon addressed 50 years ago is even greater today, due to the follies of post-Nixon blind engagement. James Clapper, director of national intelligence in former US president Barack Obama’s administration, called China “the greatest mortal threat to the United States.”

Given that geostrategic reality, Biden’s prescription for how to deal with it is ominously sparse, reflecting his earlier casual approach to the US’ premier national security challenge: “C’mon, man, they’re not bad folks, folks. China is not going to eat our lunch.”

Trump has a decidedly different attitude. He sees a rapacious communist China that, under his predecessors, has been “ripping off” the US. He has vigorously pursued making it a fair trading partner.

At some point, Trump must have realized that structural economic reform in China would inexorably lead to political reform, an existential threat to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that his “friend” Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) would not willingly accept, but he pushed the trade button anyway, even harder — until the progress he was making was conveniently stopped in its tracks by the COVID-19 pandemic (a foreign policy subject left entirely untouched in Biden’s article).

Regardless of whether Trump is a secret political reformer, his vice president, secretaries of state and defense, national security adviser and deputy, and key Asia officials are unabashed advocates for a reformed China, and he has given them a green light to push ahead — on Hong Kong, on Uighur concentration camps, on broad human rights in China, even calling explicitly for the end of communist rule.

Yet, Biden writes: “When the world’s democracies look to the United States to stand for the values that unite the country — to truly lead the free world — Trump seems to be on the other team, taking the word of autocrats while showing disdain for democrats.”

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Biden seems unaware that China's openly aggressive actions have restored a sense of reality and priority to governments regardless of whether they feel great affection for the US and its leaders.

In Nixon's time, the Vietnam War soured some countries' attitudes toward the US, but even then, they recognized which system presented the real danger, and which offered hope for security and freedom.

What Nixon said half a century ago remains true today: "The common danger from communist China is now in the process of shifting the Asian governments' center of concern — its threat is clear, present, and repeatedly and insistently expressed. The message has not been lost on Asia's leaders. They recognize that the West, and particularly the United States, now represents not an oppressor, but a protector. And they recognize their need for protection... [A]ll are acutely conscious of the Chinese threat."

Biden's response to the threat is to tout his long tenure in government: "China represents a special challenge. I have spent many hours with its leaders and I understand what we are up against. China is playing the long game by extending its global reach, promoting its own political model, and investing in the technologies of the future."

However, China is also playing a short game. Former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's (邓小平) caution to "hide our capabilities, bide our time" has been overtaken by the accelerated pace of achieving Xi's aggressive "China Dream." A major component of its short game is in the security realm, where military capabilities are no longer to be hidden, but to be flaunted — and used.

Biden entirely ignores that most dangerous aspect of China's challenge, except for a passing general reference to a commander in chief's responsibility "to protect the American people, including, when necessary, by using force ... as a last resort."

When he asserts that the US "does need to get tough with China," he cites the theft of intellectual property and unfair subsidies ("eating our lunch?"), not its military aggression in the South and East China seas or toward Taiwan — which gets nary a mention in his 4,500-word piece, despite his emphasis on democracy-building.

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As for the other Asia military threat, Biden said that he would “jump-start a sustained, coordinated campaign with our allies and others, including China, to advance our shared objective of a denuclearized North Korea.”

Of course, that is exactly what the Trump administration has been doing — using a combination of threats and blandishments with Pyongyang — but it has come to the realization, unlike Biden, that China does not care about North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, but finds it useful to divert Western attention from its own expansionism.

That is why Trump imposes secondary economic sanctions on China for undermining international sanctions on North Korea — and why he needs to expand them.

Biden sees nothing good in the Trump’s foreign policy and nothing wanting in the Obama-Biden record. That offers little hope that a Biden administration would improve on either when dealing with China’s existential threat.

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