

As then-US president Richard Nixon's national security adviser in 1972, Henry Kissinger helped engineer the president's historic opening to China. Yet he managed that policy transition — and as an outside adviser to every subsequent president — in a way that arguably has produced the US' greatest diplomatic failure and its most dangerous strategic miscalculation.

Nevertheless he persists, and now offers the same, apparently unsolicited, advice to US president-elect Joe Biden.

However, Kissinger first had to clear away the underbrush by erasing any earlier association with US President Donald Trump's confrontational approach to China.

When Trump was riding high after his election in 2016, Kissinger said this about him: "Donald Trump is a phenomenon that foreign countries haven't seen... He has an extraordinary opportunity [to be] a very considerable president ... who's asking a lot of unfamiliar questions. And because of the combination of the partial vacuum [under former US president Barack Obama] and the new questions, one could imagine that something remarkable and new emerges out of it [and] could lead to good — great results."

Kissinger's operating personal style when interacting with powerful leaders was revealed in his conversations with the president on the Nixon tapes. It would not be surprising to learn that while he publicly praised Trump's disruptive approach, he also was assuring his Chinese interlocutors that the flattery was necessary to ingratiate himself to advocate a more pro-China policy.

Yet now Trump is on his way out, along with the superb national security team that, contrary to Kissinger's advice, implemented Washington's most realistic and effective China policy in four decades. Since Biden's own positions on China have been all over the map, he presents an inviting target for Kissinger's sage blandishments.

The campaign for the hearts and minds of the Biden administration began with Kissinger's pre-emptive strike at the recent virtual Bloomberg conference on national security. He

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Written by Joseph Bosco

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established his newly discovered anti-Trump credentials by disparaging the disruptive style he once said he admired.

“Trump has a more confrontational method of negotiation than you can apply indefinitely. [I]t was important for him to emphasize the deep concerns Americans have about the evolution of the world economy that is not balanced. I think that was important to emphasize. But since then, I would have preferred a more differentiated approach,” he said.

So, Kissinger says a little trade pressure on Beijing was tolerable, but the Trump administration should have “differentiated” that from China’s aggression in the South and East China seas and against Taiwan; its undermining of US and international sanctions on North Korea; its theft of intellectual property from universities and research centers; its cyberattacks and stepped-up espionage out of its consulates; its crackdown on Hong Kong; its cultural genocide against the Tibetans and actual genocide against the Uighurs; and its persecution of Christians, Falun Gong and others who stray from devotion to the Chinese Communist Party.

Kissinger acknowledges Western concern regarding China’s domestic governance, as long as it is handled prudently: “Of course, there are differences on the issue of human rights. It is important for each side to understand the sensitivities of the other, and not necessarily to solve the problem, but to alleviate it to a point where further progress is possible.”

Translation from Kissinger-speak: Beijing needs to recognize Western sensitivities over its inhuman and even genocidal practices, and the Biden administration needs to understand China’s sensitivities about the US expressing those concerns.

Kissinger does not explain how that balancing of offsetting sensibilities would work.

“Alleviating” the problem could mean Washington would accept Uighur concentration camps — which former White House national security adviser John Bolton claims Trump was willing to do for trade concessions (on Kissinger’s advice?) — in exchange for China’s harvesting fewer human organs. Or, Washington could be quiet about Hong Kong’s repression if China would agree not to burn as many Buddhist monasteries in Tibet. The potential moral trade-offs are endless.

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Having cleared the decks of Trump's disruptive style, it might be thought Kissinger would applaud Biden's preference for multilateral cooperation, but not so. He now worries that, combined with the Biden team's professed emphasis on human rights, it could lead to what Trump critics, and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have suggested — building a coalition of democracies to take on Beijing.

"I think democracies should cooperate wherever their convictions allow it or dictate it," Kissinger said. "I think a coalition aimed at a particular country is unwise, but a coalition to prevent dangers is necessary where the occasion requires."

After 40 years of Beijing's broken promises and increasing aggression toward the West, Kissinger is still unwilling to concede that "a particular country" — the People's Republic of China — is the primary source of the "dangers" the world faces, with the China-origin pandemic only the latest example of the harm it has caused.

"If you can look at COVID as a warning, in the sense that in practice it is dealt with by each country largely autonomously, but its long-term solution has to be on some global basis. It should be dealt with as a lesson," he said.

Yet he is not willing to apply that lesson of international cooperation against the global danger to democracies from communist China itself.

"Europe has been an anchor of American foreign policy in the entire post-World War II period. The question for them now is whether, in the evolution of relations with other parts of the world, they will attempt to play a totally autonomous role," he said.

Instead, to avoid US-China conflict, Kissinger advocates "an institutional system by which some leader that our president trusts and some Chinese leader that [Chinese] President Xi Jinping (习近平) trusts are designated to remain in contact with each other on behalf of their presidents."

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Left unsaid is that the leaders' designees could consult as well with Kissinger. Even more efficiently, since Kissinger sees himself as the one figure who is trusted by US and Chinese leaders, they could designate him as the intermediary.

That would formalize the role Kissinger has been playing since he left government 43 years ago, simultaneously advising US presidents and communist dictators on the best course ahead to avoid war, deepen profitable engagement, and not let human rights and democracy issues get in the way.

It would not be the first time Kissinger has nominated himself for a pivotal role in US-China relations. When Nixon asked him who should serve as emissary to Beijing to prepare for his historic trip, Kissinger went through the list of high-level candidates and eliminated them until he was the inevitable choice.

He is still every president's indispensable China hand.

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