

When US president-elect Joe Biden takes over from US President Donald Trump, he must confront a complex and daunting China problem.

However, Trump's team also leave Biden a simple — although not easy — China solution: Take the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) out of the equation.

Well before China unleashed the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration was moving toward a confrontation with the People's Republic in the realm of information warfare. Beijing has waged the ideological component of "Cold War II" for decades without a serious response from the US, until now.

Trump's National Security Strategy (NSS) identified China and Russia as "revisionist powers that ... weaponize information to attack the values and institutions that underpin free societies, while shielding themselves from outside information."

The NSS pledged new initiatives to address the ideological challenge, saying: "The United States must empower a true public diplomacy capability to compete effectively in this arena."

Launching that effort, US Vice President Mike Pence issued a veritable declaration of the US' response to the new cold war, proclaiming human rights an essential focus in a different US-China relationship.

"Previous administrations ... hope[d] that freedom in China would expand in all of its forms. ... but that hope has gone unfulfilled. The dream of freedom remains distant for the Chinese people... Beijing's ... lip service to 'reform and opening' now rings hollow," Pence said.

In a speech recounting four decades of failed US-China relations, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo faulted US policymakers for turning a blind eye to China's manifold human rights violations.

“We all too often shied away from talking directly about the human rights issues there and American values when they came into conflict, and we downplayed ideological differences, even after the Tiananmen Square massacre and other significant human rights abuses,” he said.

Pompeo promised further administration speeches addressing China’s serial contraventions of international norms.

At the Nixon Library in July last year, in a speech that would be seen as a historic turning point, Pompeo carried the informational confrontation to its logical conclusion.

Reviewing Beijing’s malign behavior on trade, security and human rights, he called for a united effort to support China’s populace in pressing for change.

“We must ... engage and empower the Chinese people — a dynamic, freedom-loving people who are completely distinct from the Chinese Communist Party... For too many decades, our leaders have ignored, downplayed the words of brave Chinese dissidents who warned us about the nature of the regime we’re facing. And we can’t ignore it any longer. They know as well as anyone that we can never go back to the ‘status quo,’” he said.

Pompeo said that the international community must be involved in the struggle: “Changing the CCP’s behavior cannot be the mission of the Chinese people alone. Free nations have to work to defend freedom.”

The implicit message was that 40 years of engagement failed to bring peaceful and honorable coexistence with China. Regime change is now the only alternative short of war.

Also important was US Deputy National Security Adviser Matt Pottinger’s speech in May, commemorating student protests over China’s unfair treatment at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

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Written by Joseph Bosco

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Delivered in Mandarin, it was favorably received by Chinese citizens, but panned by a CCP spokesperson who told Pottinger to “mind his business.”

Chinese clearly hunger for honest information and friendly communication with Americans, including US officials. Messages from Pottinger, Miles Yu (俞寰宇) at the State Department Office of Policy Planning, and other Mandarin speakers in the US government would find receptive audiences in China.

The natural conduit for such direct communications would be an expanded and invigorated effort by Radio Free Asia and Voice of America, but some at Voice of America fear a conflict between reporting the news and disseminating “propaganda.”

Voice of America and its sister communications agencies have earned global legitimacy and respect for their journalistic integrity and truthfulness.

It would not jeopardize that reputation if news reports about administration speeches or policy statements, with a few quotations, provided links to the complete texts. Funding should be provided for more translators if needed.

A fuller presentation of US policies would be perfectly consistent with the three missions set forth in Voice of America’s charter: a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news; a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions; and statements of US policies and responsible discussions and opinion on these policies.

Some at Voice of America have chafed at going beyond the first mission — pure news.

Experts close to the organization have addressed that concern: “This third mission is often called public diplomacy but ... a better term is ‘policy advocacy,’ defined as efforts by US officials and diplomats to explain and defend US interests, intentions and ideals to overseas audiences. Some critics within [the agency] argue for eliminating policy advocacy, calling it

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inimical to the norms of professional journalism. But this is unrealistic. Policy advocacy is an inescapable part of any government's communication with the world. The challenge is to keep policy advocacy separate from news reporting — and to do it in ways that are truthful, not propagandistic.”

However, providing the Chinese audience access to actual US administration speeches and policy statements fits easily within even the narrower mandate of “just reporting the news.”

Voice of America and Radio Free Asia can unapologetically meet the congressional mandate to present the US' position on the news, whether it is China's genocidal oppression of Uighurs, forced organ transplants, suppression of Hong Kong, or aggression against Taiwan. Chinese are entitled to know what their government is doing, and what the US and the outside world are saying and doing about it.

A recent survey in China found high support for the government among people who heard only the CCP's story, but when they were exposed to news about international criticism, approval levels dropped significantly.

Chinese are proud and honorable people who do not want to be shamed by their own leaders.

Former US president Ronald Reagan appealed to the conscience of Russian and East European populations to rid the world of communism's first “Evil Empire.” The Trump administration started the ball rolling against the Chinese version. Biden and his people should pick up the ball and run with it.

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