

# Joe Biden and China

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Irrespective of the result of the US presidential elections in November, it is worth subjecting to some scrutiny the statements and positions on the People's Republic of China (PRC) taken over a long political career by the Democratic nominee for President, Joe Biden. Biden's long service at the heart of the Washington establishment – as a two-term Vice President, and during a 34-year stint on the prestigious Senate Foreign Relations Committee, including 12 years as its chair, presents us with a rich picture of how his views on the PRC have evolved and developed in relation to a dramatically changing international environment. Indeed given his political longevity, in Biden's record on the PRC might be seen something of the gradual transformation in broader US policy approaches to the PRC itself, one where initial hopes and optimism surrounding a policy of engagement have gradually given way to an increasingly harder line towards the Middle Kingdom. Despite Biden reflecting aspects of the new consensus in Washington on the need to muscle up to Xi's PRC, a Biden presidency is likely to result in some changes to both the tone and content of American PRC policy.

This briefing focuses on Biden's record on the PRC, what might be expected on US PRC policy from a Biden administration and the implications for Australia.

While management of US PRC policy was relatively more amplified in this year's presidential primary debates than during 2016,<sup>1</sup> it was cemented as a focal point with the release of a series of attack ads in May by the Biden and Trump campaigns, each seeking to tar each other with a 'soft on China' brush. This followed a concerted push from the Trump camp to politicise the COVID-19 pandemic and deflect attention from the government's initial response to the virus.<sup>2</sup> A *Politico*/Morning Consult poll in May showed that 31 percent of Americans view the PRC as an 'enemy', an increase of 11 percentage points from January.<sup>3</sup> Both contenders in the presidential race likely see an opportunity to harness this national sentiment, and in doing so, further fuel it.

## Biden's record

Frequently described as a centrist, establishment candidate, Joe Biden has a long foreign policy record as a two-term Vice-President and a 34-year stint on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, with 12 years as the committee's chair.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Elena Collinson, 'China hardly figures in the US election campaign, but it really should', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 21 2016 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/china-hardly-figures-us-election-campaign-it-really-should-0>>.  
<sup>2</sup> Glenn Kessler, 'Biden vs Trump: The ad battle over China and the coronavirus', *The Washington Post*, May 15 2020 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/15/biden-versus-trump-ad-battle-over-china-coronavirus/>>.  
<sup>3</sup> Marc Caputo, 'Anti-China sentiment is on the rise', *Politico*, May 20 2020 <<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/20/anti-china-sentiment-coronavirus-poll-269373>>.

Biden had been described by the *South China Morning Post* in 1991 as a Senator who ‘favours a tough China policy’ and who accused Bush of ‘suffer[ing] from a China syndrome’ and of ‘having two blind eyes’ in his treatment of China after the Tiananmen Square massacre.<sup>4</sup>

But Biden has a long track record of broadly favouring engagement with the PRC. In June 1998, as the US seemed poised to enact a series of sanctions against the PRC, including an act to require the US to oppose the making of concessional loans by international financial institutions to any entity in the PRC, visa restrictions on PRC officials and the registration of US citizens conducting business in the PRC, Biden was part of a bipartisan group of 10 US Senators who in a letter to colleagues outlined their opposition to the measures.<sup>5</sup> The letter read:<sup>6</sup>

We are all for human rights, there’s no dispute about that. But the question is, how do we best achieve human rights? We think it’s through engagement...These amendments, if accepted, would do serious damage to our bilateral relationship and halt a decade of US efforts to encourage greater Chinese adherence to international norms in such areas of non-proliferation, human rights and trade.

Biden was consistently supportive of granting the PRC Most Favoured Nation status, although in 1991 pressed for the implementation of conditions pertaining to arms sales ‘during one of the most heated debates in Congress over extending [MFN] status’,<sup>7</sup> calling the PRC a ‘rogue elephant on weapons proliferation’.<sup>8</sup> While some of his Democrat colleagues, such as Nancy Pelosi, favoured conditions targeting human rights, Biden chose to concentrate on arms restrictions, possibly as a means to enact practicable incremental change. One American foreign policy expert has observed that Biden ‘felt that placing limited conditions...would be far more practical than analysing the nebulous concept of its human rights records’.<sup>9</sup>

In this spirit of practicality he has also indicated his openness to modifying positions should the context and circumstances necessitate. In 2001, while the US was demanding the return of 24 crew members of an American spy plane that had made an emergency landing in mainland China and with sentiment growing in Congress in favour of selling advanced weapons to Taiwan, Biden said:<sup>10</sup>

I have not been very supportive of upping the ante on Taiwan. I think we should keep it steady as you go. That position of mine could be overwhelmed by events.

## A Biden presidency

There has been a marked shift in US establishment consensus on the PRC, accelerating over the past few years. It has swung from favouring engagement to strategic competition, with broad bipartisanship on major issues such as trade, national security and human rights. And guided by a knack for leveraging establishment mood, Biden’s policy positions have evolved accordingly.

Last year saw a noticeable change in terminology in his characterisation of PRC President Xi Jinping, whom he described himself as having ‘spent more time with...than any world leader had by the time we left office’.<sup>11</sup> He transitioned from emphasising their ‘friendship’, for example in remarks in 2013<sup>12</sup> and reportedly up until about 2016,<sup>13</sup> to a ‘thug’ who ‘doesn’t have a democratic, with a small D, bone in his body’.<sup>14</sup> The very same terminology of ‘thug’ was also applied by Biden to North Korea’s Kim Jong-Un.

4 *South China Morning Post*, ‘Relief at US Senate vote on trade with China bill’, July 25 1991, p1.

5 See US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Legislative calendar – One hundred fifth Congress, December 31 1998.

6 *Reuters*, ‘US Senate group backs China engagement policy’, June 17 1998.

7 Evan Medeiros, *Reluctant restraint: the evolution of China’s non-proliferation policies and practices, 1980-2004*, NUS Press, 2009, p56.

8 *NBC News*, ‘Interview: Senator Biden introduces bill to limit weapons suppliers’, May 15 1991.

9 John Hulsman, *A paradigm for the new world order: A schools of thought analysis of American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era*, Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997, p89.

10 Alison Mitchell, ‘Anti-China coalition in Congress is emboldened’, *The New York Times*, April 5 2001, p1.

11 Peter Martin and Daniel Ten Kate, ‘Biden championed close China ties and then Xi came along’, *Bloomberg*, April 23 2020 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-23/a-biden-presidency-wouldn-t-mean-better-u-s-china-relations>>.

12 Office of the Vice President, ‘Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China’, The White House archives, December 4 2013 <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/04/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-and-president-xi-jinping-peoples-republ>>.

13 Peter Martin and Daniel Ten Kate, ‘Biden championed close China ties and then Xi came along’, *Bloomberg*, April 23 2020 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-23/a-biden-presidency-wouldn-t-mean-better-u-s-china-relations>>.

14 *CBS News*, ‘South Carolina Democratic debate’, transcript, February 25 2020 <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/south-carolina-democratic-debate-full-transcript-text/>>.

Similar rhetoric on other fronts has been deployed by Biden during the presidential debates and the campaign proper: the PRC as ‘authoritarian dictatorship’;<sup>15</sup> ‘Trump rolled over for the Chinese’;<sup>16</sup> Xinjiang ‘concentration camps’.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the language used, for example in Biden’s description of President Xi, has echoes of 1992 when Bill Clinton charged his incumbent rival George H. W. Bush with ‘coddling dictators from Beijing to Baghdad’<sup>18</sup> and referred to the Communist Party leadership as the ‘butchers of Beijing’.<sup>19</sup> As such, some of the rhetoric may well be performative, described by American political commentator Peter Beinart as ‘ideological jujitsu that comes naturally to Democrats of Biden’s generation’.<sup>20</sup>

But while the campaign rhetoric may well be dialled back post-election, when Biden will have no pressing electoral need to employ ‘tough on China’ language, the harder edge that has inserted itself into American foreign policy with respect to the PRC likely remain, if not intensify.

Biden has plainly stated his opposition to allowing PRC firms any involvement in the building of American critical infrastructure. Asked during a Democratic presidential debate on February 25 2020 whether he would ‘allow Chinese firms to build critical US infrastructure’, he replied, ‘No, I would not’.<sup>21</sup>

Biden’s senior adviser Jake Sullivan stated in a May 2020 interview that Biden would ‘look to expand restrictions on the transfer of technology’ to the PRC used to facilitate the internment of over a million Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, an issue that Biden would also ‘raise directly with Xi’.<sup>22</sup>

Another Biden foreign policy adviser, Tony Blinken, in a statement the same month, said that a Biden administration would ‘fully enforce’ the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, ‘including sanctions on officials, financial institutions, companies and individuals’. The US, he said, needed to ‘take a stand against China’s crackdown in Hong Kong’.<sup>23</sup> Biden in June 2019 had praised the ‘extraordinary bravery shown by hundreds of thousands in Hong Kong marching for civil liberties & autonomy promised by China’, noting that ‘the world is watching. All of us must stand in support of democratic principles and freedom’.<sup>24</sup>

And during the 2019 December Democratic presidential debates Biden outlined his support for an increased American presence in the Asia-Pacific region:<sup>25</sup>

We should be moving 60 percent of our sea power to that part of the world to let, in fact, the Chinese understand that they’re not going to get any further, we are going to be there to protect other folks.

This appears to be a revitalisation of the Obama-era ‘pivot’ to Asia strategy, wherein then-Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta told the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2012 that ‘[b]y 2020, the navy will reposture its forces from today’s roughly 50-50 percent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60-40 split between those oceans’.<sup>26</sup>

While Biden has taken aim at Trump’s trade war with the PRC, stating that the phase one deal ‘won’t actually resolve the real issues at the heart of the dispute, including industrial subsidies, support for state-owned enterprises, cyber theft, and other predatory practices in trade and technology’, he has signalled a

15 CNN, ‘Transcript: Washington Democratic presidential primary debate’, March 15 2020 <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/2003/15/se.03.html>>.

16 Glenn Kessler, ‘Biden vs Trump: The ad battle over China and the coronavirus’, *The Washington Post*, May 15 2020 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/15/biden-versus-trump-ad-battle-over-china-coronavirus/>>.

17 *The Washington Post*, ‘Transcript: The December Democratic debate’, December 19 2019 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/12/20/transcript-december-democratic-debate/>>.

18 Nicholas Kristof, ‘China worried by Clinton’s linking of trade to human rights’, *The New York Times*, October 9 1992 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/09/world/china-worried-by-clinton-s-linking-of-trade-to-human-rights.html>>.

19 Michele Kelemen, ‘Candidates criticize China; Presidents show caution’, *NPR*, September 10 2012 <<https://www.npr.org/2012/09/10/160880265/candidates-criticize-china-presidents-show-caution>>.

20 Peter Beinart, ‘The utter futility of Biden’s China rhetoric’, *The Atlantic*, April 20 2020 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/futility-bidens-china-hawkery/610285/>>.

21 CBS News, ‘South Carolina Democratic debate’, transcript, February 25 2020 <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/south-carolina-democratic-debate-full-transcript-text/>>.

22 Michael Martina, ‘Exclusive: Biden to hammer Trump’s ‘tough talk, weak action’ on China, top adviser says’, *Reuters*, May 13 2020 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-biden-china-exclusive/exclusive-biden-to-hammer-trumps-tough-talk-weak-action-on-china-top-adviser-says-idUSKBN22P02B>>.

23 Michael Martina, ‘Top campaign advisor says Biden would sanction China over Hong Kong’, *Reuters*, May 28 2020 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-biden-hongkong/top-campaign-advisor-says-biden-would-sanction-china-over-hong-kong-idUSKBN23403E>>.

24 Joe Biden, *Twitter*, June 15 2019 <<https://twitter.com/joebiden/status/1139563899533946880>>.

25 *The Washington Post*, ‘Transcript: the December Democratic debate’, December 19 2019 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/12/20/transcript-december-democratic-debate/>>.

26 *BBC News*, ‘Leon Panetta: US to deploy 60 percent of navy fleet to Pacific’, June 2 2012 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-18305750>>.

commitment to continuing the effort to hold the PRC to account for unfair trade practices, articulating the need to ‘push back on China’s aggressive and predatory behaviour’.<sup>27</sup>

In meeting the PRC challenge, one fundamental point of difference between a Biden foreign policy in practice and that of the current administration is a focus on coalition-building, forging stronger relationships with allies, partners and like-minded. A rejection of isolationism has long been woven into the tapestry of Biden’s foreign policy thinking,<sup>28</sup> as has attention to multilateralism.

In 2007, for example, on how best to address PRC currency manipulation, Biden said:<sup>29</sup>

Us doing it by ourselves is the ultimate blunt instrument. We may be able to do that, but were I president, I’d be calling a similar conference [to the ’99 Plaza Accords], bringing in the rest of the world to rationalize our currencies here.

This approach endures. In remarks on June 11 2019, Biden asserted that the US needed to ‘build a united front of allies to challenge China’s abusive behaviour’. He said:<sup>30</sup>

We need to rally more than half the world’s economy to hold China to account for their cheating. And get a chorus of voices speaking out on China’s repression.

In a speech on July 11 2019 he said:<sup>31</sup>

China can’t afford to ignore half the global economy if we’re united. That gives us substantial leverage to shape the future rules of the road on everything from the environment to labor to trade to technology to transparency.

Biden has also acknowledged the need to identify areas of cooperation with the PRC, describing on February 25 2020 how he was able to ‘convince’ Xi to join the Paris Agreement ‘because, guess what, they need to be involved’.<sup>32</sup> He said, ‘You can cooperate and you can also dictate exactly what they are’.<sup>33</sup>

Biden might be fairly described as more willing than the incumbent to place an emphasis on institutional experience and knowledge. As such, it is also worth considering potential sources of advice to the Biden campaign, who have been laying down more detailed ideas on US-China cooperation. Democratic advisors John Podesta and Todd Stern made a forceful case in *Foreign Affairs* for climate diplomacy, recommending arranging a meeting with President Xi during the early days of the presidency to collaborate on climate change, pointing out that ‘[t]he harsh reality is that if the United States and China don’t get climate change right, the fallout from that failure will dwarf most other issues, including those stemming from US competition with China’.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Biden has signalled that climate change is top of his agenda: ‘On day one, when I’m elected president, I’m going to invite all of the members of the Paris Accord to Washington...I will get them to up the ante in a big way’.<sup>35</sup>

Obama-era undersecretary of defense, Michèle Flournoy, touted as a favourite to run the Pentagon under a Biden presidency,<sup>36</sup> recently wrote that the US ‘must also reopen a sustained high-level strategic dialogue with Beijing’; ‘reestablishing a forum in which China and the United States could regularly discuss their respective interests and perspectives, identify areas of potential cooperation (such as non-proliferation and climate change), and manage their differences short of conflict is essential; tactical discussions on trade issues are simply not enough’<sup>37</sup>

27 Jennifer Epstein, ‘Biden slams Trump-China trade deal as lacking on key disputes’, *Bloomberg*, January 16 2020 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-15/biden-slams-trump-china-trade-deal-as-lacking-on-key-disputes>>.

28 See, e.g., vote against Foreign Relations Authorization Act (Fiscal years 1996 and 1997), characterising the bill as ‘back-door isolationism’.

29 *NPR*, ‘Iowa Democratic candidates’ debate’, December 4 2007 <<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16898435>>.

30 *CNN*, ‘Joe Biden’s remarks as prepared for delivery in Iowa’, June 11 2019 <<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/11/politics/joe-biden-iowa-remarks/index.html>>.

31 Jacob Pramuk, ‘Biden slams Trump’s trade war even as he calls to ‘get touch’ on China’, *CNBC*, July 11 2019 <<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/11/joe-biden-slams-trump-china-trade-war-in-foreign-policy-speech.html>>.

32 *CBS News*, ‘South Carolina Democratic debate’, transcript, February 25 2020 <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/south-carolina-democratic-debate-full-transcript-text/>>.

33 *Ibid.*

34 John Podesta and Todd Stern, ‘A foreign policy for the climate’, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2020 <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-13/foreign-policy-climate>>.

35 *NBC News*, ‘Transcript: ninth Democratic debate in Las Vegas’, February 19 2020 <<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/full-transcript-ninth-democratic-debate-las-vegas-n1139546>>.

36 Jim VandeHei and Mike Allan, ‘Joe Biden’s secret governing plan’, *Axios*, March 9 2020 <<https://www.axios.com/joe-biden-cabinet-vice-president-picks-b17882ac-3953-450f-8afb-38a3c8dcd57.html>>.

37 Michèle Flournoy, ‘How to prevent a war in Asia’, *Foreign Affairs*, June 18 2020 <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-18/how-prevent-war-asia>>.

## Implications for Australia

A Biden presidency might well see more pressure placed on Australia to involve itself in US-PRC strategic competition. Nicholas Burns, a former diplomat and adviser to the Biden campaign, in a speech in Australia in October 2019, stated that the US and its allies needed to ‘limit’ and ‘blunt’ PRC assertiveness, suggesting that an Australian contribution to this effort should ‘first and foremost’ concentrate on increasing defence spending above two percent of GDP. He said, ‘We must deepen our alliance and ask more of each other’, noting that ‘We would like to see Australia play a bigger role’.<sup>38</sup>

That said, a focus on multilateralism and consensus-building might also provide more scope for flexibility in terms of how Australia pursues its own national interest in terms of balancing its relationships with the PRC and the US. Biden has historically exhibited regard for allies and the sensitivities they may have with respect to US policy positions. In April 2001, of President George W. Bush’s pledge to ‘do whatever it took’ to defend Taiwan in the event of conflict with the PRC, Biden stated that the President had shown ‘utter disregard for... the vital interest of our key Pacific allies, specifically Japan’, saying:<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the president is unaware that without using US bases in Japan, we would be hard-pressed to make good on his commitment to use US forces to defend Taiwan in the event of a conflict with China. Perhaps he is unaware of how sensitive an issue this is for the Japanese government, which has taken great pains to avoid explicitly extending the US-Japan Security Alliance to a Taiwan contingency.

A Biden administration is likely to continue on the US’ harder line with respect to its relationship with the PRC, but equally stands ready to look at some element of normalisation – or at the very least limited cooperation – in dealing with Beijing. This may blunt anticipation from some quarters in Australia who visualise a new ‘Cold War’ being upon us, thus reducing the volume of chest-thumping. However, much will hinge on the PRC showing some more subtlety than they have displayed with their increasingly heavy-handed policy – including, but not limited to, on Hong Kong and Xinjiang – and standing ready to yield up some offerings.

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<sup>38</sup> Nicholas Burns, ‘2019 Owen Harries lecture: the China challenge’, National Press Club, October 2019 <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/news-and-media/multimedia/audio/2019-owen-harries-lecture-nicholas-burns-china-challenge>>.

<sup>39</sup> *Agence France-Presse*, ‘Bush Taiwan pledge showed ‘utter disregard’ for Asian allies: Senator’, April 26 2001.