

Biden doubles down on “great power” conflict with China

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In a speech delivered Wednesday by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and an accompanying national security strategy document, the Biden administration has signaled the continuation, and escalation, of the Trump administration’s “great-power competition” with Russia and China.

But to an extent even greater than its predecessor, the Biden administration is singling out China as the greatest US adversary and target for conflict. In his remarks on the interim strategy document, Blinken concluded, “Several countries present us with serious challenges, including Russia, Iran, North Korea ... but the challenge posed by China is different. China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power” to “challenge” the United States.

Biden’s focus on the US conflict with China includes the explicit threat to wage war. “The United States will never hesitate to use force when required to defend our vital national interests,” the national security strategy document states. “We will ensure our armed forces are equipped to ... defeat threats that emerge.”

The Trump administration’s realignment of US foreign policy toward conflict with China was widely viewed as its defining foreign policy stance. Trump’s “America first” nationalism—involving protectionism and mercantilist trade war policy, was inseparable from its orientation toward conflict with China.

Likewise, the Biden administration has made clear that it will continue Trump’s trade war policies.

“Some of us previously argued for free trade agreements because we believed ... those deals would shape the global economy in ways that we wanted,” Blinken said. “Our approach now will be different. We will fight for every American job and for the rights, protections and interests of all American workers.”

Foreign Policy argued earlier this month that Biden’s foreign policy is a “Kinder, Gentler Spin on ‘America First.’” This comparison is facile at best; many of the new administration’s statements seem neither kinder nor gentler. “Wherever the rules for international security and the global economy are being written, America will be there and the interest of the American people will be front and center,” the Biden national security document states.

A central focus will be the attempt to recruit the American population into supporting this conflict. The document states that “We must also demonstrate clearly to the American people that leading the world isn’t an investment we make to feel good about ourselves. It’s how we ensure the American people are able to live in peace, security, and prosperity. It’s in our undeniable self-interest.

To this end, both parties have for years worked to demonize China. Trump declared that COVID-19 is the “Chinese virus” and “kung flu,” while the Biden administration has continued to claim that the disease may have been created in a Chinese lab, while accusing China of genocide.

These appeals have had an effect on public consciousness. Nine in 10 Americans now see China as a competitor or an enemy, rather than a partner, according to a Pew research poll conducted last month. And two-thirds of respondents have “cold feelings” toward Beijing, up from 46 percent just two years ago.

“The fact that both Republican and Democrat administrations have framed the relationship as strategic competition and highlighted numerous threats that China has posed, it’s not surprising that more and more Americans—who are reading and hearing about this on a daily basis—are more and more concerned, and have an unfavourable view of China,” noted Bonnie

Glaser, director of the China Power Project at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

In his book *The Room Where It Happened*, former Trump National Security Advisor John Bolton, who on most foreign policy questions lines up with the Democrats, made the following assessment of the Trump Administration:

Trump in some respects embodies the growing US concern about China. He appreciates the key truth that politico-military power rests on a strong economy. The stronger the economy, the greater the capacity to sustain large military and intelligence budgets to protect America's worldwide interests and compete with multiple would-be regional hegemony. Trump frequently says explicitly that stopping China's unfair economic growth at US expense is the best way to defeat China militarily, which is fundamentally correct. These views, in an otherwise bitterly divided Washington, have contributed to significant changes in the terms of America's own debate about these issues.

It was this viewpoint that guided the drafting of the 2018 national defense strategy under Secretary of Defense James Mattis, which concluded, "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."

Under Trump, the corollary to this approach was not merely trade war, but preparations for full-scale nuclear war. The White House's withdrawal from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was aimed centrally at ring-fencing China with nuclear missiles, and Trump accelerated a multi-trillion dollar build-up of US nuclear weapons. These preparations will continue under Biden.



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