

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, October 20, 2020.

## Biden's America must abandon Trump tactics and rethink US-China policy



**Tom Plate**

- While a new US president will have little room to make rapid course changes, the many ongoing challenges and need for stability should inspire some common sense
- Despite The scourge of the pandemic alone requires considerable recalculation that a Biden administration must pursue, and Beijing must lend its support

Published: 4:00am, 20 Oct, 2020



Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden puts on his sunglasses while speaking during a drive-in campaign rally at Riverside High School in Durham, North Carolina, on October 18. Should he win next month's presidential election, Biden has a chance to change the course of US foreign policy and improve the prospects for world people and geopolitical stability. Photo: AFP

Change will come. It has to, but America's confident commentariat has convinced itself US-China policy under Joe Biden will be stuck in the cement of the [new cold war](#) and would differ little from US President Donald Trump's. Let us aspire to do better.

Assuming the inauguration of the former vice-president in January, the US will have to rethink its China policy. The expected new administration will not have the diplomatic room for swift changes of course that risk the label of being “soft on communism”. However, for the sake of geopolitical stability, the enormity of climate change and the ongoing pandemic should knock some common sense into stubborn heads on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.

In the 21st century, a globe divided against itself cannot long stand against the challenges facing it. An urgent question thus goes to Beijing – is what you have put before the world really the best your diplomacy can do? Your souring mood is unnerving and can lead to no good. Throwing so many red chips to [the PLA Navy](#) may not be your smartest bet.

In some ways, China hasn't figured out how it wants to relate to itself or whether it even cares what the world thinks of it. Still, it's a puzzle why Beijing still bothers to harass [Taiwan](#) and is so easily annoyed by President Tsai Ing-wen. This overachieving island is not going anywhere internationally.

It is [cut off from official recognition](#) by the United Nations and [unrecognised](#) by most of the UN's member states. Regionally, it is strategically surrounded by a rising China. So what's the point?

Living with annoyances is part of growing up. Taiwan merits a lower ranking on Beijing's list of must-dos. Believe in the fullness of time, not in weapons of war. Look how poorly dramatic regime change has worked for the United States, going back to Vietnam.

Imagine a better scenario: before long, China and the US rise from the ashes of recycled cold war rhetoric as dual pillars of global finance, even while grumbling and stuck together.

Just last week, China's financial authorities put [billions of government bonds](#) up for sale. No one had to buy them. With Covid-19 still swirling around, Chinese bonds are hardly the only fish in the global financial aquarium. And yet, when Beijing offered up a load of new debt obligations directly to US institutional investors for the first time, they were scooped up as fast as the Ministry of Finance could lay them down.

The bottom line is China still sells. But what China is also selling, and which the world isn't interested in buying at the moment, is its vaunted peace offensive. The one thing a “[charm offensive](#)” cannot be is charmless. Beijing diplomacy seems formulaic and leaden.

Chinese leaders too often give the impression China is the sole superlative civilisation, just as Americans toot the horn of their democracy as if it's the only legitimate governing system. Yet neither colossus has been able to entirely rid itself of poverty, pollution, corruption or government incompetence – and this is just a short list.

For its part, US foreign policy still tries to strike those patented macho poses, but they ring more hollow and wind up more pointless with each iteration. Like P.T. Barnum, [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](#) offers travelling circuses of bellowing that are no more convincing than those of his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

I wish the Politburo could raise from the dead the spirit of the late [Qian Qichen](#), who between March 1988 and April 1998 proved to be China's best in that job since the legendary Zhou Enlai. Today, Chinese thinkers of the highest calibre – for example, Ambassador Fu Ying of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Professor Zhu Feng of Nanjing University, to name just two

examples – offer hope for better conversations as long as the Communist Party allows them the intellectual space.

The US public is tired of endless foreign military intervention, as Trump figured out early on in his administration. However, it's easier to initiate overseas interventions than to escape them. By next month, we should know just how highly US voters rate the governance of their country during the last three-plus years. Most polls suggest Trump will not be elected to serve a second four-year term.

What will be needed is a new geopolitical maths – call it post-Copernican calculus. Nations no longer revolve around the United States as if they are planets constrained by political orbit. A Biden administration will need polished new telescopes for clearer, more detailed looks at the geopolitical universe.

The scourge of the pandemic alone will require considerable recalibration. That is what Biden's team must do, and Beijing must help. In reality, it could not be more obvious or simple.

**Loyola Marymount University professor Tom Plate's books on China and the US include *In the Middle of China's Future* and *Yo-Yo Diplomacy*. He is vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute**