The Evolution of U.S.-China Relations Under President Biden

Featuring Mr. Demetri Sevastopulo

Abstract

On Thursday, June 23, 2022, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) hosted the virtual policy briefing, “The Evolution of U.S.-China Relations Under President Biden.” In this event, Mr. Demetri Sevastopulo, U.S.-China Correspondent at The Financial Times, shared his assessment of how the U.S.-China relationship has evolved under President Biden’s leadership. He presented three distinct phases of U.S.-China engagement under the Biden Administration, noting positive developments in how the United States is coordinating with allies in Europe and Asia to take a tougher stance on China while emphasizing the worrisome trend of declining U.S.-China relations that has been ongoing since the Trump Administration. Mr. Sevastopulo also discussed the evolving security environment surrounding Taiwan which has elicited new approaches from the United States and Japan to preserve peace and order in the Taiwan Strait.

This talk was presented by Sasakawa USA’s Policy Briefing Series and was held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community along with members of academia, think tanks, and media, as well as current and retired members of the U.S. military and Japanese Self-Defense Forces. Introductory remarks were provided by Dr.
The Phases of U.S.-China Engagement Under President Biden

Mr. Sevastopulo began by framing President Biden’s approach to China as largely a continuation of the status quo established by the Trump Administration, which did not hold back from shining a harsh spotlight on China’s adversarial behavior. Concurrently, China has increased its antagonistic economic and military behavior with little regard for how such action undermines the trust necessary to have working relationships with the United States and its allies. The result of these developments has been a significant deterioration of U.S.-China relations with few instances of substantive, productive engagement between the two governments.

The evolution of U.S.-China relations thus far under the Biden administration can be roughly broken down into three phases:

1) **January 2021 - May 2021**: At this time, Biden officials sought substantive talks with Chinese counterparts and were stymied in most of their attempts. The tension-charged Alaska talks which took place in this phase corporealized the breakdown of communications between the two governments.

2) **Summer of 2021**: At this point, China increased provocation by repeatedly denying U.S. officials access to their Chinese counterparts, going so far as to snub Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in their attempts to plan meetings.

3) **September 2021 - present**: Beginning with a Biden-Xi phone call in September, the White House attempted to set guardrails to prevent major conflicts over issues like Taiwan. A series of phone calls and virtual summits ensued over the proceeding months. Another call is expected to take place following the G7 summit on June 26-28.

Mr. Sevastopulo contended that while the number of talks has increased during this most recent phase, these meetings have failed to discourage China’s antagonistic behavior and have yet to yield any substantive improvements to the U.S.-China relationship. The Biden Administration’s
language reflects the growing strain on relations. Goal setting has shifted away from trying to directly influence China and moved toward the more nebulous goal of maintaining international peace and order.

Even so, the Biden Administration has found success in its efforts to bring together allies and partners in pursuit of its objectives. Stronger alignment with the EU is one marked improvement, as are the resurrection of QUAD meetings and the development of AUKUS. In the economic realm, President Biden has successfully applied sanctions, technology export blacklists, and selective bans on investments in Chinese firms suspected of supporting PLA attempts to threaten U.S. security. The launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) during President Biden’s Tokyo visit last month is a step forward, though disappointing to many who view the CPTPP as a more substantive medium for economic engagement.

These tools of statecraft function best when reinforced by a strong, united domestic front. The Biden Administration must work on repairing the U.S. economy and restoring the social and political fabric of our democracy so that it can approach relations with China from a position of strength.

The Impact of Taiwan and Ukraine on U.S.-China Relations

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the evolving security environment surrounding Taiwan have colored the tone of communication and rhetorical posturing between China and the United States.

In the case of Taiwan, there appear to be few concrete guardrails in place to prevent the escalation of conflict. Mr. Sevastopulo gathered from his recent attendance at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore that many in the region are increasingly fearful that the United States and China are on a collision course over Taiwan. He highlighted U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin’s remarks at Shangri-La which raised concerns about Chinese military activity around Taiwan and stressed that the United States would maintain its military capacity to resist any force that would threaten Taiwan. This was met with a retort by China’s Minister of National Defense, General Wei Fenghe, who stated the PLA would not hesitate to crush any attempts at independence in Taiwan. The
situation surrounding Taiwan will continue to evolve with the rapid modernization of the Chinese military and as we approach the centenary of the PLA in 2027. Mr. Sevastopulo affirmed the legitimacy of concerns originally voiced by Admiral Philip Davidson, who in 2021 predicted that China could take military action on Taiwan within the next six years.

Stronger Alignment with Allies on Taiwan

Japan has taken significant steps to clarify its position on Taiwan. The need for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait was explicitly mentioned in the U.S.-Japan joint statement which came out of then-Prime Minister Suga’s visit to Washington in the spring of 2021. Far from mere boilerplate diplomatic language, this marked the first time a Japanese leader produced such a direct statement on Taiwan since 1969. No longer a taboo subject, Taiwan has since been incorporated into routine political discourse in Japan. Statements regarding Taiwan have been reinforced by recent measures like Japan’s Reciprocal Access Agreement with Australia, which could prove critically useful to the United States in a Taiwan contingency.

Following Prime Minister Suga’s visit to the White House, former South Korean President Moon Jae-in included Taiwan in a joint statement made with President Biden, which was perhaps an even more significant change in the status quo than Japan’s acknowledgement of Taiwan. Other democratic allies such as the UK have begun serious conversations with the United States regarding their potential role in a Taiwan scenario.

Interpreting President Biden’s Remarks on Taiwan

In recent months, President Biden has on multiple occasions stated that the United States would intervene militarily in a Taiwan scenario. Each time, the White House has released statements walking back his remarks, yet Mr. Sevastopulo argued that it is unlikely these were mere gaffes on President Biden’s part. Rather, he contended that President Biden’s statements reflect a new approach to bolstering U.S. deterrent power in the face of an increasingly aggressive China, one which maintains strategic ambiguity while demonstrating U.S. resolve to preserve order and stability in the region.
The Connection Between Taiwan and Ukraine

At this time, there are many conjectures as to what Russia’s invasion of Ukraine implies for Taiwan. Mr. Sevastopulo’s assessment of President Biden’s response to this situation is that the invasion of Ukraine necessitates a strong signal to China that the United States will not stand for similar action to be taken against Taiwan. The invasion bluntly demonstrates that threats from authoritarian regimes are not abstract, and so any voiced intent on aggression from Russia or China should be considered seriously.

How Washington Needs to Revise Its Perception of China

To conclude his remarks, Mr. Sevastopulo emphasized that Washington must take into consideration not only the scale but also the speed at which the Chinese government pursues its political agenda. It is disheartening that this speed is not matched by the United States. The Biden Administration has yet to produce a National Security Strategy or National Defense Strategy, and even more concerning is Congress’s inactivity. No issue unites members across the aisle more so than China, so this lack of congressional action does not suggest a positive trajectory for U.S.-China relations moving forward.

Q&A Session

There was an engaging Q&A with the audience following Mr. Sevastopulo’s remarks. Questions covered topics including: Japan’s approach to China vis-à-vis Taiwan, China’s balance of deterrence versus provocation, multilateral security arrangements like AUKUS and the QUAD, preparing for China’s military modernization, Southeast Asia’s reaction to the IPEF, and potential involvement of Vietnam in a China-related maritime conflict. In his responses to questions, Mr. Sevastopulo made the following points:

- Regarding Japan’s current approach to China, since the Abe Administration Japan has taken a more openly hawkish stance, particularly with regard to security in the Taiwan Strait and around the Senkaku Islands. The Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement, while not reported on widely in the United States, is a significant demonstration of Japan’s forthright approach to bolstering its defense capabilities.
Some officials in Southeast Asia have voiced concerns that the language used regarding Taiwan, which has at times leaned towards formalizing the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, could incite backlash from China. The Biden Administration faces a complex situation in which actions taken by either the U.S. or China perpetuate a cycle of tit for tat; what is viewed as incitement by Beijing could be considered a necessary response to a prior transgression. Nonetheless, many in Southeast Asia maintain this concern.

The deepening of cooperative security arrangements such as AUKUS and the QUAD likely do not constitute a red line to China. It appears the most significant red line that could instigate a military response from China is Taiwan itself.

A key question moving forward will be how the United States prepares for and responds to China’s rapid military modernization, particularly the modernization of its nuclear arsenal.

The vast majority of people in Washington have yet to recognize that China is here to stay as a global power. The United States must seriously consider how to coexist with China rather than continuing to assume that the U.S. will remain the global hegemon.

The IPEF agreement is seen by many in Southeast Asia as the United States imposing its domestic priorities on other countries. It is perceived as containing fewer opportunities for substantive bilateral engagement compared to the CPTPP.

It is difficult to envision Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam or Cambodia attaining a level of security cooperation on par with the United States’ allies in Asia, due in part to trade and investment ties connecting these countries to China. Some cooperation may be possible, but likely not at the level of a strategic agreement with the United States.