



Biden cannot counter China with team that lacks expertise

BY WILLIAM H. OVERHOLT, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 07/07/21 10:00 AM EDT
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President Biden's foreign policy team says China is the priority, but the team lacks China expertise. Other than trade experience at the Office of the United States Trade Representative, Biden's Cabinet has no China expertise. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has worked on issues involving Europe, Canada and the Middle East. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has a distinguished career as a general in Iraq and as leader of U.S. forces in the Middle East. National security adviser Jake Sullivan's biography highlights work on Libya, Syria, Iran and Myanmar.

Biden's lead candidate for ambassador to Beijing continues the pattern. Nicholas Burns has served in the Middle East and Europe. An Indiaphile and Sinophobe, he lacks China experience and disdains China experts with more complex views.

I'm a lifelong Democrat who criticized George W. Bush's foreign policies. But Bush had outstanding success with U.S.-China relations. He gained enduring respect and appreciation from both Beijing and Taipei. He strongly supported Taiwan but forbade dangerous Taipei provocations. He managed difficult problems, starting with the [downing of a U.S. surveillance plane](#) on Hainan. Bush's China success was created by his team — notably, Hank Paulsen at Treasury, Dennis Wilder at the National Security Council, and Sandy Randt as ambassador. They knew China.

Presidents Obama and Trump lacked top-level China expertise and their Asia policies were successive fumbles. Obama's team idled while North

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Korea built nuclear weapons. He sacrificed U.S. allies' confidence by [failing to defend Scarborough Shoal](#), validated the Japanese breaking of a four-decade peace understanding over [the Senkakus](#), used phony arguments in failed opposition to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and invested too little, too late in the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#). Trump's record was worse.

Below Cabinet level, Biden's key Asia officials are Kurt Campbell at the National Security Council and Ely Ratner at the Department of Defense. State's Sung Kim is rock-solid but less prominent. Neither Campbell nor Ratner has deep, direct experience with China. Obama's Asia failures happened on Campbell's watch. Campbell and Ratner are famous for a 2018 [Foreign Affairs article](#) asserting that U.S. engagement with China has failed because it assumed that engagement would make China a liberal polity — fatuous historical revisionism based on out-of-context quotes. Congressional testimony shows that all key engagement decisions hinged on national security and economic risks and opportunities, uneasily mixed with moral opprobrium. The Campbell-Ratner misrepresentation of history should have disqualified them from their current government positions.

Campbell's primary contribution under Obama was "[the pivot](#)" to Asia, a conceptually valid shift of U.S. resources away from the Middle East and South Asia to East Asia. The Middle East focus of Biden's team so far proves the pivot's strategic failure. The pivot's biggest contribution to U.S. strength was the pitiful shift of [a couple thousand U.S. troops](#) to northern Australia, but its management provoked Beijing to anticipate a major strategic challenge — a big net loss for the United States.

The Biden team's record on Pacific Asia has been a series of missteps. Blinken's [antagonism in Anchorage](#) played well domestically but could hamper productive dialogue for years. Blinken called Taiwan a "country," although his professional colleagues walked that back; someone who understood China would never make that gaffe. Biden's policy toward North Korea lacks substance and is hopeless without a China dimension. Blinken [half-snubbed](#) the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which holds the balance of Chinese and American power in Asia, by offering their meeting only an in-flight video conference because he gave priority to a Middle East meeting — and then he couldn't make the meeting technology work.

Blinken has warned countries not to accept Chinese infrastructure loans, lest China end up owning the projects, echoing the falsehood put forth by former Vice President Mike Pence and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that Beijing lends money inappropriately so that it can seize collateral. In [more than a thousand African loans](#), Beijing has never seized collateral and never sought to take advantage of a squeezed borrower. The Pence citation of a 2017 Chinese [lease agreement](#) with Sri Lanka's Hambantota port was such a distortion that [some scholars call it a lie](#).

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The Biden administration does not know how to be tough but not provocative on Taiwan. If you sell Taiwan advanced weaponry and send three carrier task forces to the Taiwan Strait, you're tough — but don't break the 1972 agreement that underlies Taiwan's democracy and prosperity. However, if you [invite the Taiwan representative](#) to the

presidential inauguration, send members of Congress as official emissaries, and characterize Taiwan as a “security partner,” you don’t strengthen Taiwan but nearly abandon the 1972 agreement to sever official diplomatic and alliance ties. That risks putting Chinese leader Xi Jinping in a position where keeping his job could require decisive action.

Would America have accepted a Cold War leadership without Soviet expertise? The more you see China as a dangerous adversary, the more important it is to actually understand China. It is insufficient for officials to be well-connected, experienced on Middle East issues, and dislike China.

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