

Safer to Keep America at a Distance

Terry Su

Joe Biden has been sworn in as president of the United States at last, and the troubled nation can breathe a sigh of relief – especially after the storming of the Capitol.

January 6, the day of the Capitol attack, was doubtless a watershed in American politics. It saw the climax of the right-wing attempt, epitomised by the four-year presidency of Donald Trump, to roll back the progressive tide – which was followed by a surprisingly ruthless counter-attack by the left-wing establishment in the days leading up to, and stretching beyond, Biden’s inauguration.

The storming of the Capitol was condemned as an “insurrection” incited by the sitting president; Trump’s social media accounts were closed (forever, in the case of Twitter), those accused of storming the Capitol arrested, and Washington garrisoned by 25,000 soldiers; the president’s immediate removal was demanded and Nancy Pelosi acted as if she were the commander in chief, calling the head of the US army to ensure Trump would not be able to launch a nuclear war.

In recent weeks, Washington has looked more like war-torn Baghdad, partitioned into Green and Red Zones, and less like a shining city on the hill.

The world is now witnessing an unprecedented, blatant liberal crackdown on the reactionary masses, an instance when the United States is putting aside much of the prudence and moderation it has demanded from other countries, in the name of good fighting evil at a defining moment.

In *The New York Times Magazine* on January 9, historian Timothy Snyder effectively issued a clarion call against the forces of “white supremacy” (a mix of racism and pre-fascism, according to him) marshalled by the Republican Party and Trump, warning that the US could face a worse threat of nationwide violence four years down the road.

The gloves are indeed off: the elites have realised that they must terminate the Trumpian experiment. For four years, Trump said he would “drain the Washington swamp”. The fact is, however, that with Trump seen off in disgrace, the old guard is returning in droves.

The difference is that with the US in a considerably worse state after four years of Trump, Americans need to put their house back in order first, and anything else – even the bipartisan hostility towards China – will have to wait. Yet, they cannot fail to have noticed that core allies, Europe and Japan, signed epoch-making economic cooperation agreements with China at a juncture when the US was at its weakest and undergoing the messiest transfer of executive power ever.

Taking all this into account, we would see why Biden added an Indo-Pacific coordinator position to his core advisory team and filled it, just days prior to his takeover, with Kurt Campbell.

A resourceful and experienced diplomat, Campbell is the co-author (with Jake Sullivan, Biden’s pick for national security adviser) of an article for *Foreign Affairs* magazine in

2019, advocating a policy of challenging China without provoking it. Just days ago, Campbell told a forum that both the US and China need to back down from their respective hardline positions, and then proceed with their relationship on the basis of predictability, steadiness and clarity.

The new master of the White House seems to have decided on his priorities and to be signalling for reconciliation with China in a subtle but unequivocal way. Does it mean Beijing should eagerly accept this olive branch and engage with the Biden administration immediately?

Perhaps not, for two reasons.

First, although Trump and his secretary of state Mike Pompeo are gone, Biden’s hand will still be forced by the domestic, racial and ideological tensions so perfectly embodied in the close, divisive presidential election. Biden might have no more qualms than

Trump about channelling these tensions into a mobilisation against China, meaning that any substantive engagement between the two sides could be manipulated to stoke anti-China hysteria and obscure the failure of his domestic agenda.

Biden has many balls to keep in the air – Covid-19, the economy, the 2022 midterm congressional elections, his 2024 re-election, dealing with the European Union and Japan when they are increasingly going their own ways – and it would be all too easy to fail. Beijing would a convenient scapegoat for Washington.

Second, the Biden administration is proposing more stimulus to address demands on all fronts, from the population to infrastructure. At a time when the European Union and Japan have every reason to be worried about the consequences of the US' expansionary fiscal policy and lack of fiscal discipline – but Biden has to press ahead because he has no choice – China must not give the US an excuse to cry, “See, China is the reason why all this had to be done!”

It would therefore be wiser for Beijing to declare that it is socially distancing. China must keep safe from the US' pathological bouts of enmity towards it every time its effort to forge domestic unity fails. Already, Biden's promise to deliver 100 million vaccine shots in his first 100 days in office has been called into question, and Amazon's offer of help is a telling sign.

It is time for China to make known its distrust of America and to demand from it good faith for any meaningful engagement based on predictability, steadiness and clarity.

Biden was quoted as recalling how he once told China's Xi Jinping, years ago, that the US was about “possibilities”. Possibilities, however, go both ways; so China had better keep its distance from America for quite some time.

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