

## A Downward Spiral

Terry Su

Under the world's keen watch, US President Joe Biden called Chinese President Xi Jinping on February 11. He made public his censure of China on human rights issues regarding Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and its "coercive and unfair" trade practices, largely for the benefit of his audience at home, but his call was also known to have lasted for two hours.

It is not difficult to conjecture as to why it lasted that long and what topics consumed the time – between a sitting and an emerging superpower, there is much to talk about, and after all, President Donald Trump left much real work to be done.

After his call to Xi, President Biden summoned a bipartisan group of senators to discuss the need to upgrade American infrastructure to compete with the Chinese, warning: "if we don't get moving, they are going to eat our lunch".

These have happened as Biden, who enjoys a high approval rate of 68 per cent according to a Gallup poll, promises to promote unity and boost the economy at home while forging an international liberal democracy alliance against China and Russia. However, one is well advised to keep cool about the chances of Biden making it. For one, since the January 6 Capitol storming and ensuing clampdown on those deemed culpable, the Republicans and their populist base remain defiant.

Former secretary of state Mike Pompeo has landed a position with the Hudson Institute as he brews his plans to campaign for the next presidency. Senator Ted Cruz is stubbornly re-tableting a bill to limit congressmen to two terms, enhancing his post-Trump heavyweight status. And House minority leader Kevin McCarthy went all the way to Florida to pay court to Trump after his White House departure.

Most recently, Republicans in the Senate foiled Trump's second impeachment by a vote of 43-57, and the now Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell prevaricated – masterfully as usual – by rejecting the impeachment and excoriating Trump at the same time.

All this – the failed impeachment in particular – show that, short of a high-handed, determined political crackdown on right-wingers including Republican bigwigs, the midterm congressional elections in 2022 can have grave consequences for President Biden and the Democrats, paving the way for the nightmarish prospect of a Republican comeback.

What is happening in Yangon is a test case abroad. A chorus of condemnations from Western capitals met the military junta's coup in Myanmar, which rolled back its 10-year

long democratisation process. The Biden administration has also imposed sanctions on the top generals deemed responsible for the coup.

But how will it work amid what *The New York Times* calls "sanctions fatigue", when China does not take US sanctions seriously and Japan cannot afford to, given its huge vested interests in Myanmar?

In his recent "The Future of Liberalism", Timothy Garton Ash, a renowned liberalist intellectual and history professor at my alma mater, St Antony's College, Oxford, reflects on the development of liberalism and admits that for the past few decades, liberals have got ahead of themselves and are in need of "learning from their serious mistakes".

"Nothing could be more absurd than to reduce 'liberalism' either to the theory of John Rawls or to the practice of Goldman Sachs", he wrote.

The absurdity breeds class conflict: the masses that the philosopher Rawls spoke of seem to be rising in a face-off with the likes of Sachs believers, leaving the Biden administration likely to be caught in between, like in the GameStop duel between day traders and corporate short-sellers.

"The most passionate voices for freedom come to us, like the prisoners' chorus in Beethoven's Fidel, from among the unfree", wrote Professor Ash in his adamant defence of liberalism's universalism. President Biden is practising just that with his sanctions on Myanmar.

As philosophical contemplations such as this trickle down to the arena of real politics, Biden is treading a fine line. That America needs to retrench internationally to put its house in order is obvious to more than a few shrewd foreign policy specialists.

Kurt Campbell, the newly appointed Indo-Pacific Coordinator, sees this, as I have said in this paper. The latest Rand report advocating "a grand strategy of restraint" suggests this, and Paul Heer of the Centre for the National Interest has this on his mind when he refutes the "Longer Telegram", allegedly written by a Trump administration's China hand on condition of anonymity and which advocates aggressive posturing against China. Heer scorned it for "a sense of 'back to the future'" and urged that "a central challenge for the United States going forward will be that of finding and adjusting to its place in the post-Cold War world".

The thing is, however, that the liberal progressivist elites in America do not seem to have perceived a political paradigm shift being called for, and hence the need to reign and manoeuvre in an accordingly different way at home and abroad, and what does not help is that America, having never really experienced cycles as a hegemonic power, may not know how to handle its downward spiral.

To quote a German fellow Antonian of mine, who is now the head of a research institute at Bonn University, “a mountaineer cannot be said to be a real one unless he’s got experience of finding himself at the foot of the mountain; America has never been down to the foot of the mountain, unlike China and Germany.”

Now that the second Trump impeachment has failed, and with a green Julian Gewirtz as Director for China on the National Security Council calling for America to prove its greatness to China, President Biden’s attempt to tread a fine line is likely to be tough going. When will Biden trip up? No one has a crystal ball, but how long Campbell lasts in his current position may be a telling sign.

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