Biden should summon the courage to reverse course on China

Donald Trump’s hardline policies served only to strengthen Xi Jinping and the communist system

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Financial Times, 8th April 2021

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In Alaska last month Antony Blinken, US secretary of state, and Jake Sullivan, national security adviser, gave a public dressing down on democracy and human rights to Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi, China’s top foreign policy officials. They did so in the confident belief that the US knows how to triumph slowly and patiently over a communist adversary.

Yet even though the US won the cold war, China may understand better why Soviet communism failed. It is determined not to make the same mistakes.

China’s analysis would match that of George Kennan, the US master strategist. Kennan wisely predicted that the cold war would be determined by Washington’s ability “to create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problem of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power”. Here’s the shocking comparison. Vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, the US was ahead on all three counts. Vis-à-vis China, it is not.

The first indicator of the Soviet collapse came from negative trends in indicators of social wellbeing: life expectancy, infant mortality, suicides, opioid (or alcohol) addiction. Today it’s the US that is doing badly. In contrast to other developed societies, US life expectancy is declining. The educational standards of US teenagers lag behind those of many advanced industrial countries.

If Kennan were alive today, he would be shocked to see the US spending $5tn on unnecessary wars, while the bottom 50 per cent of Americans have seen their incomes stagnate for decades. There is a “sea of despair” among white working classes.

China is doing the opposite of the former Soviet Union. China believes the Soviet leaders failed because they lost touch with their own people, ignoring their welfare while engaged in foreign wars. China hasn’t fought a major war in 40 years. Unlike the Soviet Union, it controls military expenditures.

No country has improved its people’s wellbeing as much as China. In terms of human development, the past 40 years have been the best four decades in 4,000 years of Chinese history.

China still faces many internal problems. Success is not guaranteed. Yet against the backdrop of a century or more of humiliation and suffering, the lives of the Chinese people have never been better. Hence, the US cold war strategy will not work.

The Biden administration is making a strategic mistake in carrying on with Donald Trump’s policies towards China. Curiously, Biden himself declared in 2019 that Trump’s trade war had failed to help US workers. The data backs Biden’s assessment. In 2009, the size of China’s retail goods market was $1.4tn, compared with $4tn for the US. By 2019, after three years of Trump’s trade war, China’s market was approaching $6tn, bigger than that of the US at $5.5tn.

Even if Biden’s administration wished to change course on China, it is constrained by a rising anti-Chinese mood in the US body politic. Unwise steps taken under Trump remain in place: the closure of China’s consulate in Houston, restrictions on Chinese journalists, ending the Peace Corps and Fulbright Scholarship programmes in China.

Biden administration officials are clearly afraid to be seen as “soft” on China. However, if they wanted, they could construct a strong case for reversing Trump’s policies. They could point to the reality that the Trump administration actually strengthened China and Xi Jinping, its president. How?

The Chinese people can see that their government has protected them well in the Covid-19 emergency. Meanwhile, the Trump administration floundered, resulting in the deaths of more than half a million Americans. When US vice-president Mike Pence and secretary of state Mike Pompeo hurled insults at China, they only strengthened the standing of the Chinese government. Similarly, most Chinese thought that their policymakers won the public argument in Alaska. So too, did many other Asians.

All this points to a wiser course available to the Biden administration. It should declare, as Biden did earlier, that Trump was wrong on China. It should then press the pause button on the US-Chinese geopolitical contest, while assessing whether Washington can formulate a better strategy against such a formidable competitor.

Ending the trade war with China would boost economic growth in the US, helping Biden in the 2022 midterm elections. And most of the world would cheer if the Biden administration pressed the pause button, especially while Covid-19 is still raging.