

Will Biden Seek to De-escalate Tensions with China and Russia?

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Global Research, November 17, 2020

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

A crucial advantage that China enjoys over its Western rivals, principally the United States, is the country's rebuffing of neoliberalism. Under its present leadership, Beijing's influence over corporations and private power has increased substantially.

By contrast to America, almost all of China's 25 largest corporations are state-owned. The Chinese president Xi Jinping, in power since March 2013, has indeed tightened his administration's control over big business. He is correct to do so, and it is in fact of high importance that a government is free to move and intervene freely when required, unshackled from the chains of private power. In the West and elsewhere under the neoliberal assault, governments cannot even act without the consent of corporate executives which is a recipe for disaster.

China is led through a system in which power is centralised around the government, with Xi himself possessing huge influence, more so than any Chinese leader since Mao Zedong. The 67-year-old Xi is to remain in control "indefinitely", presumably for as many years as he deems fit. Beijing's centralisation of power is consistently portrayed in a negative light by Western media and politicians – but in reality the Xi administration, and the Chinese Communist Party, constitute much stronger institutions by comparison to the Western neoliberal model, that is increasingly in shambles.

This autumn, China's government outlined bluntly that private businesses will "firmly listen to the party and follow the party", while president Xi stresses that "the party exercises overall leadership" through "all endeavours across the country" (1). The political scientist Steve Tsang, a noted professor of Chinese studies, said that "Ever since the 19th congress [in October 2017], Xi has made it clear that the party would be at the centre of everything, private businesses included".

For a number of years the world's foremost neoliberal country, the US, has shown the hallmarks of being a failed state (2). America continues to be called a "democracy" by its top brass, which is plainly untrue. About 70% of the American population is effectively disenfranchised, having no influence on policy formation. A democracy scarcely equates to the masses being called upon to vote for an elite candidate every four years, thereafter slipping back into isolation. America consists of a plutocratic state, in which the key decisions are made by the richest business class who engineer government policy. America's two largest political parties, slightly more so the Republicans than the Democrats, have sunk deep into corporate pockets since the early 1980s.

There is something dismal about government leaders who bend to the will of multinational corporations, and it is an indication of how far the political system has declined in the West

over the past 40 years. The advent of modern day neoliberalism was championed firstly by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Reagan said that “government is the problem, not the solution” while Thatcher spoke of “no society, just individuals”, as both revealed their disregard for democratic ideals.

With corporations continuing to dictate across much of the world, it has meant that governments have been unable to sufficiently address their rising carbon emission levels. Just over 97% of scientists agree that “humans are primarily responsible for recent global warming” (3). As of December 2019 only two countries on earth, Morocco and the Gambia, had committed fully to reducing their carbon emissions to meet agreed targets. Global emissions reached an all time high in 2019, but during the first six months of 2020 worldwide emissions dropped by nearly 9%, as outlined by reports – due to a temporary slow down in human activity related to Covid-19, not because of governments tackling climate change. (4)

It can be important to provide an insight into the advantage that a non-neoliberal state, like China, has over its opposite numbers, America and Britain. Regarding healthcare, US and British hospitals have been stripped of “non-essential items” in recent decades, as health services are run according to neoliberal policy, ensuring that profiteering rules over patient needs. The result? In 1975 there were 1.45 million hospital beds in America, by 2018 it had dropped to 924,000 beds in US hospitals.

In Britain there were 240,000 hospital beds there in 2000, and by 2019 it had dropped to less than 164,000 beds in UK hospitals. Moreover, in both American and British hospitals there is often a critical shortage of medical equipment, from ventilators and drip stands to oxygen cylinders (5) (6). All of this has occurred while executives receive large sums in bonuses, an indication of how rotten the system is with governments unwilling to intervene.

In China, through the state’s direct intervention, the number of hospital beds increased from almost 3 million in 2008, to 6.5 million by 2018, more than doubling in the space of a decade (7). Chinese hospitals are well stocked with medical equipment and supplies, ensuring they are prepared in advance for a health crisis.

One consequence of handing power over to corporations – which are unaccountable to public scrutiny – is the significant rightward shift on the political spectrum across the world’s richest countries, most notably in America. Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican president from the 1950s who continued Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs including social security, would now be considered a somewhat radical figure. Mainstream Democrats today hold similar attitudes to mainstream Republicans from half a century ago. Barack Obama’s policies as president were those of a moderate Republican from two generations before.

Bernie Sanders’ political beliefs consist of a New Deal Democrat, placing him modestly to the left on the political spectrum. Many of Sanders’ policies would have been acceptable to Eisenhower, neither would they have surprised Richard Nixon, another Republican president. Yet Sanders is erroneously called “a socialist”, an almost extreme figure, by the political elite and media commentators. The establishment has been petrified of Sanders, mainly due to the popular support which he gathered around him. Sanders was unfairly denied the Democratic presidential nominee over four years ago, in favour of an unpopular candidate in Hillary Clinton. Sanders would most probably have defeated Donald Trump by a considerable margin in 2016.

The Republican Party of the 21st century, according to veteran US authors Thomas E. Mann and Norman Ornstein, is “a radical insurgency – ideologically extreme, scornful of facts and compromise, and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition”. It has abandoned the pretense of being a normal parliamentary party, and will remain “ideologically extreme” with Trump at its head.

It is quite likely also that Sanders would have enjoyed a more comfortable victory than Joe Biden has in recent days. Worryingly, Trump has officially received over 10 million more votes than in 2016. Yet Trump’s exit from the White House early next year should be regarded as a very positive outcome. Though Biden can hardly be described as a progressive figure – he endorsed the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq while he is a strong NATO supporter – the next US president is still moderate in comparison to his soon-to-be predecessor.

The Biden administration could prove receptive to the left-leaning mass activism mobilised by Sanders, an indication of the latter’s success. Many Sanders supporters later voted for Biden, part of the reason for the high turnout. Trump may well run for the presidency again in 2024, when he will be 78, just a few months older than Biden is now.

During the past four years, Trump’s policies led most seriously to an increased risk of nuclear war occurring, while the press were distracted with disingenuous attempts to tie him to Moscow. Trump’s dismantling of arms control treaties resulted in “lowered barriers to nuclear war” according to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. Four more years of Trump could have culminated in a nuclear war erupting though, remarkably enough, this crucial topic was barely raised in campaign discussions. He still has two more months to wield his wrecking ball.

Entering office in January 2021, among Biden’s most pressing issues should be to safeguard and restore the weapons treaties, while establishing a civil dialogue with China and Russia. This is pertaining to global security risks and the threats posed by thermonuclear weapons and advanced delivery systems – near the borders of China and Russia we can note, not in the Western hemisphere. Whether Biden will actually seek de-escalation with America’s main rivals is doubtful, however. At least a third of Biden’s 23 member Pentagon transition team has links to the weapons industry. (8)

Another critical area is to reinstate America to the Paris Climate Agreement, as Biden has promised, but the nuclear threat remains the more severe of the two. The military analyst and author Daniel Ellsberg said last year, “It is true that climate change may totally disrupt civilization as we know it, but how many lives would it cost? Whatever the number, some form of civilization would probably survive. By contrast a nuclear winter, which has a non-zero possibility of occurring, would occasion near extinction”. (9)

In spite of how serious climate change becomes, the likelihood is that it will not result in the extinction of humans, nor in the end of our planet. The earth endured greater upheavals in the past and it survived, such as absorbing a large asteroid impact about 66 million years ago, which resulted in apocalyptic scenes and the dinosaurs’ rapid demise. Life returned to flourish again.

Climate change may eventually render organised human existence difficult, if not impossible, but that is not an extinction scenario, as Ellsberg suggests. Unlike with nuclear conflict, some people will surely survive, such as those residing in countries where the

climate is still comfortable overall – like northern parts of America, Canada, China, Russia, etc. Though a warming world will negatively impact on the majority of species, some are currently thriving because of rising temperatures. These include mammals such as wild boar and red fox, both growing in numbers globally, along with increasingly common birds like Eurasian wren and long-tailed tit.

Climate change over the past 50 years has benefited much more bird species, for example, in England than it has harmed (10). Whereas one harsh winter always results in lasting declines in small birds, who do not have the bodily strength to withstand prolonged cold weather. A nuclear war between America and Russia or China, which within weeks would bring about the Ice Age-like nuclear winter, is a death knell for the above species, including humanity.

In July 1955 president Eisenhower, addressing a Russian delegation in Geneva, said that “It is essential we find some way of controlling the threat of the thermonuclear bomb. You know we both have enough weapons to wipe out the entire Northern Hemisphere from fallout alone. No spot would escape the fallout from an exchange of nuclear stockpiles” (11). Eisenhower’s warnings remain relevant. Dating to 1945 Eisenhower sharply criticised the atomic bombings of Japan, speaking of his “grave misgivings” and how he believed correctly, “Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary”. (12)

Atomic attacks on Japan were the instigation for the nuclear proliferation which later followed. Ellsberg noted that, “We have survived the nuclear danger for seventy years, although we have come close to conflict more frequently than the public realizes. I am not talking about just the Cuban Missile Crisis; in 1983, for example, we were also at the brink of a nuclear exchange, and there have been other instances. The risk of conflagration remains continuous and potentially catastrophic”.

A major failure of the mainstream press has been the lack of coverage it affords to the nuclear threat. The scant analysis devoted to nuclear weapons is limited largely to the Cuban Missile Crisis and atomic bombings of Japan, while some mass media outlets report on the annual Doomsday Clock announcement in January. There are powerful vested interests involved here, as nuclear arsenals are controlled by the arms corporations and military-industrial complex. Tens of billions in profits accrue for US arms manufacturers, like Lockheed Martin and General Dynamics, in the maintenance and upgrading of nuclear weapons systems (13). The US nuclear budget has been increasing year-on-year since 2015, dating to Barack Obama’s second term.

Expenditure on nuclear weapons rose further under the current US president, and Ellsberg observed that, “It didn’t start under Trump. But right now, under Trump, we are budgeting 40% higher than in the Cold War. It is obscene, it is crazy, it is wrong” (14). The potential consequences for the world are obvious, and the Atomic Bulletin noted in January of this year how, “any belief that the threat of nuclear war has been vanquished is a mirage”. (15)

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on

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Notes

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- 6 Chaun Powell, Soumi Saha, “The Untold Reality of Medical Device Shortages in the US”, [The Health Care Blog](#), 5 November 2019
- 7 Lai Lin Thomala, “Number of hospital beds in China from 2008 to 2018”, Statista, [4 November 2019](#)
- 8 Sarah Lazare, “One third of Biden’s Pentagon transition team hails from organizations financed by the weapons industry”, [In These Times](#), 11 November 2020
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- 13 Jon Schwarz, “How to dismantle the absurd profitability of nuclear weapons”, [The Intercept](#), 4 May 2019
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