

A Golden Opportunity for Better International Relations

By **BERTIE AHERN**

THE Biden administration's arrival, after years of turbulent, impulsive, and damaging policies pursued by the Trump administration, was met with new hopes and optimism around the world. Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, said, "This new dawn in America is the moment we've been waiting for so long. Once again, after four long years, Europe has a friend in the White House." In Beijing as well, China's Foreign Ministry welcomed the new President with its spokesperson Hua Chunying at a regular press briefing, "With cooperation from both sides, the better angels in China-U.S. relations will beat the evil forces."

Such expressions of optimism were soon backed by moves taken by Mr. Biden, who, within hours of becoming president, committed the United States to rejoining the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement, both major priorities of Europe and China.

The world is now in a complicated situation but there can be little doubt that cooperation and engagement between Europe, China, and America is essential to solving the planet's problems. As prime minister, I led Ireland's largest ever trade delegation to China in 2005, and have returned many times since to attend environmental and business forums involving senior members of the Chinese leadership. Every Irish leader is close to the United States with so many citizens of Ireland having emigrated there in the 19th century that all of us have family connections in America.

In 2008, I was honoured to be invited to address a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress where I told the legislators in attendance, "To be an Irishman among Americans is to be at home." Beyond my personal connections to both superpowers, the InterAction Council of former world leaders (of which I am co-chair) has also consistently urged European-American-Chinese dialogue and cooperation to solve the world's problems. So, the question facing us now is: is this possible as we contemplate the arrival of a new U.S. administration?

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Europe and China's initial embrace of the Biden administration carries an urgency because there has been no shortage of irritants between Beijing, Brussels, and Washington in the recent past. Trump certainly alienated many of America's traditional allies: The tariffs imposed by the Trump administration not only damaged the spirit of free and open trade, but also harmed American businesses and economic growth. Beyond the trade war launched by Trump against Europe and China, the Trump administration further antagonized Beijing by tightening F-1 student and H-1B skilled worker visas under

the guise of keeping out Chinese spies.

International relations are not just about treaties, sanctions, and deals; they are also about gestures and people-to-people exchanges. The most damaging aspect of Trump's handling of China was that it combined an inconsistent, incoherent, and disjointed strategy of dealing with China's growing power and influence with a complete absence of awareness or understanding of how to engage the Chinese people and the country's leadership. Trump's approach towards China was noisy



Hours after his inauguration on January 20, President Joe Biden signs a flurry of executive orders, moving fast to dismantle his predecessor's legacy.

outside but empty inside.

Europe, in contrast, has always favored engagement with China over confrontation. After seven years of negotiation, for example, the European Union and China recently announced the signing of a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment that gives European companies greater access and better legal safeguards in their direct investments in China's mainland. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, President Emmanuel Macron of France, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, and President Xi Jinping of China jointly appeared on a meeting via video link to announce the conclusion of the agreement on December 30, 2020.

Personal relationships matter, both in substance and in appearance, especially in the context of Asian history and diplomacy. With China's apparent willingness to look favorably on Washington, will the Biden administration follow Europe's lead in accepting China as a part-

ner on many fields rather than as a threat on all fields?

A key measure of success for President Biden's potential engagement with China will necessarily depend on his relationship with President Xi and senior Chinese leadership, despite current challenges stemming from COVID-19, for high-level diplomacy. Biden must seize the opportunity to proactively engage with President Xi and China's political elites, with a coherent and nuanced understanding about Chinese priorities in international affairs.

As President Lincoln said, "A house divided against itself, cannot stand." It is only fitting that the new president's inauguration speech focused on unity because it is something that the U.S. desperately needs. Today, the United States is deeply divided, not just on racial differences but in terms of ideologies and partisanship, economic inequalities, and fundamental visions about the role of the United States in the world. The spirit of innovation, partnership, and cutting-edge solutions that

once guided U.S. foreign policy has given way to passive, confused, ad-hoc policies on a range of complex challenges facing the international community.

Sino-American relations always had ebbs and flows, at times tinged with doses of suspicion, hostility, and anxiety, but the stakes are much higher today, both for Washington and Beijing because the problems confronting us are much greater. From a global pandemic, to growing tides of protectionism, to ageing populations and climate change, both superpowers along with Europe must find a way to carefully build on each other's strengths rather than assigning blame. Finding common ground, as Europe has done, should be a top priority for both Washington and Beijing, because neither can afford the cost of prolonged battle against each other.

There are three key priorities for the Biden administration as it looks to repair and renew the U.S. relationship with China.

First, President Biden needs a clear vision on the role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, one based on a careful and balanced assessment of key American priorities. In the recent past, Chinese influence has been actively expanding in the region. Beijing

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has signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with 14 other countries in the region. China's Belt and Road Initiative, and Beijing's greater vision for the world, will continue to evolve and move forward, regardless of the person in charge at the White House. Instead of feeling threatened by China, Washington needs its own vision and strategy for the next century.

Second, the Biden administration needs to focus on renewing partnerships and alliances in the Asia-Pacific region to restore geostrategic balance. The Northeast Asia region has the highest concentration of military capabilities in the world and the United States has spent billions of dollars throughout its history to promote peace and stability in the region in the past few decades. The United States must actively engage with its allies like South Korea and Japan — two critical partner nations for NATO — and renew its commitment towards peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and use multilateralism as a channel for promoting American values and interests.

Third, Washington needs to increase its investment in improving American competitiveness. In today's world, where artificial intelligence and advanced communication technologies will dictate our future, the United States needs a long-term strategy in collaboration with its private sector, to properly manage its technological competition vis-à-vis China. Such investment should entail a greater focus on research and development funding, an institutional culture that rewards digital innovation and attracting the brightest human capital.

Reversing the damage done by the Trump administration will not be easy. It will take time, patience, and persistence. But the opportunity for a new engagement strategy between Europe, China, and the United States is a precious one, which President Biden and his team should nurture and cultivate. ■

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On the evening of January 20, 2021

After being sworn in as the president of the United States, Joe Biden signed a flurry of executive orders including the one recommitting the U.S. to the Paris Agreement on climate change and the one stopping the U.S.' withdrawal from the World Health Organization.

