

# **How to Understand the Mixed Approach Applied by the Biden Administration in Managing Foreign Affairs?**

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After the Biden administration assumed office, it set a 100-day plan. Over the past 3 months, in order to meet the targets in line with this plan, the Biden administration has been trying to foster a new approach in dealing with the U.S. domestic and foreign affairs. From what we have seen so far, on foreign issues, the approach applied by the U.S. government has been characterized by a mixture of soft and diplomatic words and tough actions. This analysis will tend to outline how the U.S. has applied this new approach in managing foreign affairs, in particular, in relation to China and Russia, and then try to analyse the U.S. motivation behind the application of this mixed approach, as well as the impacts of it on the U.S. and other countries.

## **How Has A Mixed Approach Been Applied So Far by the U.S. Government?**

With regard to issues on Russia, on 13 April, as proposed by the U.S. side, the U.S. president Biden and his Russian counterpart Putin had a phone conversation, through which, Biden expressed a necessity to deescalate the tension between the U.S. and Russia. They also discussed possible cooperation on security and other range of issues. Besides that, the U.S. president was also hopeful of having a in-person meeting with the Russian president in a third party country. However, two days after the phone call, the U.S. side issued an executive order to impose new sanctions against Russia, in line with which, 10 Russian personnel serving in Russia's diplomatic mission in the U.S. were expelled. Also as a result of sanctions, the Russian financial institutions have been affected. According to the information cited from the U.S. Treasury Department, "as of 14 June the U.S. financial institutions will be prohibited from participation in the primary market for ruble or non-ruble denominated bonds issued after June 14, 2021 by the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the National Wealth Fund of the Russian Federation, or the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation."<sup>1</sup> In addition to these, 32 Russian entities and personnel have been sanctioned for alleged Russian interference in the U.S. 2020 election, and another 8 entities and individuals have received sanctions due to the Crimea issue.<sup>2</sup>

Then after imposing the sanctions, the U.S. government, on the same day, softened its tone to reclaim the U.S. intention to lower the temperature with Moscow - the U.S. president claimed in a speech that "The United States is not looking to kick off a cycle of escalation and conflict with Russia"; "We want a stable, predictable relationship"; and "The way forward is through thoughtful dialogue and diplomatic process."<sup>3</sup>

The Russian Foreign Ministry, in response to the sanctions, expressed strong discontent and vowed to retaliate; the Russian Foreign Minister called these “unacceptable”.<sup>4</sup>

Following a series of U.S.-Russia interactions more recently, instead of deescalating the tension between the two countries, it has got further intensified.

On issues related to China, the similar mixed approach above has been applied by the U.S. as well. For instance, regarding the China-U.S. high-level dialogue in Alaska, as proposed by the U.S. government, it was the first official face-to-face meeting between the two countries since the U.S. new administration took office. Given that China-U.S. bilateral ties, under the previous U.S. administration, was down to a low level already as a result of the trade war launched by the United States, as well as of other series of tough measures imposed by the U.S. against China, some seemed to have hold high expectations to this China-U.S. summit, and assumed that the Alaska dialogue should be an opportunity for China and the U.S. to warm up their relationship a bit, and further to seek possibilities of cooperation on certain core issues. Some world leaders and experts strongly suggested the two big powers to resume dialogue as soon as possible even before the Biden administration officially assumed office.

However, before the Alaska summit, the U.S. had taken a series of unfriendly actions in order to gain an upper hand in the upcoming China-U.S. high-level dialogue. One of the unfriendly moves was related to the QUAD summit, which was jointly held by the leaders of the four countries consisting of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. Though the joint statement issued during the summit didn’t mention China, many believed that it targeted China and aimed to put pressure on China from a psychological perspective.

Though the U.S. proposed a talk with China, instead of setting a good precondition for that, the U.S. side was intended to seek control by imposing pressure on China. It wasn’t surprising that the China-U.S. Alaska dialogue wasn’t going to the direction as many expected.

Another major issue dealt with by the U.S. in applying its mixed approach is related to Taiwan. On the one hand, the U.S. reaffirmed its commitment to the One China policy; on the other hand, the U.S. keeps selling weapons - even more advanced weapons - to Taiwan, through which, to better serve both the U.S. economic and strategic interests. More recently, the U.S. announced to expand exchanges with Taiwan. Two former U.S. officials has just conducted a visit to Taiwan recently.

Besides that, upon the Japanese Prime Minister’s visit to the U.S., the leaders of the two countries pledged to work more closely to deal with the challenges from China, defend the current world order, safeguard a free and open Indo-Pacific region, and maintain a deterrence capacity in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea etc.

Furthermore, “the Strategic Competition Act of 2021” recently uncovered by the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee showed that, from the political, economic, diplomatic, military, and ideological perspectives, the U.S. took China as a strategic competitor to the U.S., its partners, and the world order.

In the mean time, in contrast to the above series of unfriendly moves taken by the U.S., on climate change, the U.S. rather intends to exhibit a soft attitude toward China, as China's cooperation with and support to the U.S. on this issue would be of great significance for the U.S. to resume its leading role on climate.

On the World Earth Day, the U.S. government hosted a big climate event, with the participation of leaders and representatives from around 40 countries and international organizations. The countries being invited this time contribute to around 80% of the total global carbon emissions. Therefore, through organizing this event, the U.S. also anticipated to prove its influence and capacity in organizing collective actions on the issue of climate change.

Meanwhile, some analysts also indicated that, in the next steps, whether China and the U.S. will be able to cooperate more effectively on climate change cannot be completely separated from how likely the U.S. and China could further interact on other various matters such as foreign and security affairs, and also the technology issue etc.

After all, the U.S. government over the past 3 months has generally applied a mixed approach in managing foreign affairs especially when it relates to Russia and China. Then how to understand the motivation of the U.S. behind this approach, and what would be the implications of it to the U.S. and other countries?

### **Understanding the Motivation of the U.S. in Applying A Mixed Approach in Managing Foreign Affairs**

With the U.S. president taking office, he vowed to restore the U.S. reputation and leadership, as he spoke publicly, " America is back." Therefore, all what the U.S. has done or intended to do over the past 3 months is to prove this point. However, because of the time restraint - 100 days are apparently not enough for U.S. to make big breakthroughs on a number of core issues, the U.S. government must have to seek a proper approach supported by a set of effective means to make certain achievements.

Apart from the U.S. regular domestic agenda, so far as it has exhibited, in order to reach the above goal, the U.S. administration has mainly made efforts on the following aspects of work: first, trying to recover relations with its allies; second, applying a different approach, in contrast to the former administration, in dealing with other major powers; and third, re-working on the climate change issue.

From the U.S. perspective, as far as it is able to manage these three aspects of work properly, the U.S., in a relatively short period of time, will be able to re-affirm its leadership and to prove what the U.S. president has claimed - "America is back."

More specifically, regarding the issue of climate change, due to the fact that it is one of the common global challenges faced by all humans in the non-traditional security area, and also that a number of developed countries as well as the large emitters like the U.S. and China are generally enthusiastic about and supportive of making joint efforts to address

the climate issue, so it should be relatively easier for the U.S. to organize collective actions. We may say that the climate event organized by the U.S. has provided the U.S. government with an opportunity to regain a momentum over the climate change issue. Nevertheless, whether and how the U.S. will be able to fulfill its own commitment on climate change, as well as to push the relevant agenda forward together with others will remain to be seen.

In relation to the U.S. triumph in recovering relations with its allies, till now the only country having responded warmly to the U.S. alliance strategy is Japan. Maybe a few others of the U.S. traditional allies are not particularly against it as well, yet they appear to be more cautious about the possible implications of it.

Meanwhile, there are some voices at the international stage having already questioned the value and usefulness of the alliance relationship under the new historical context, and advised to re-assess it - if the alliance relationship, instead of contributing to problem-solving, could generate more problems, what is the big point to continue to develop it?

Concerning the U.S. efforts in managing its relations with other major powers such as China and Russia, the mixed approach applied by the U.S. hasn't made its engagements with the two major powers go smoothly. The tension between the U.S. and Russia has been intensified recently as a result of the new round of sanctions imposed on Russia. Also, it seems to be a growing competition between China and the U.S., along with a series of unfriendly moves taken by the U.S. against China.

Some observers indicated that applying the kind of approach mixed with soft words and tough actions toward Russia is part of the U.S. tactics, with the purpose of safeguarding the U.S. national interests, as well as of getting the situation under the U.S. control by making Russia exhausted and keeping Russia in a restrained position. Nevertheless, some analysts also assumed that this kind of tactic cannot work on Russia. Instead of restraining its position, Russia would respond to the U.S. moves in accordance with Russia's interests.

On China, the U.S. approach should carry the similar purpose as it has applied toward Russia. Yet apart from that, the U.S. management of its relations with China should be more sophisticated - on the one hand, the U.S. expects China to play a more constructive role on certain issues; and on the other hand, the U.S. is worried about the possible challenges posed by China to the U.S. position and interests.

Therefore, the current situation appears to be that even though a wide range of circles within the U.S. generally accept the reality that China-U.S. relations is mixed with cooperation and competition, in the process of practically handling this relationships, some U.S. officials have so far focused too heavily on the competitive aspect rather than the cooperative dimension of China-U.S. ties. Hence, the U.S. current government hasn't fundamentally worked out a different approach toward China. In addition, the application of a mixed approach by the U.S. in dealing with major powers somehow is also an indication of the U.S. rushing to retain influence.

Though this controversial approach applied by the U.S. hasn't worked out well, still it has generated certain impacts on both the U.S. and other countries.

Alongside the U.S. new administration taking office, one of the important goals set by the U.S. government was to recover the U.S. reputation. Nevertheless, the approach having been applied so far by the U.S. didn't appear to be conducive to the U.S. efforts in restoring its reputation. Deliberately and frequently applying devious tactics, as guided by the classical realist school of thought, would likely generate more uncertainties and distrust in international relations. It may lead to at least two possible repercussions: first, certain countries, in the next steps, may tend to follow the U.S. footsteps to apply the similar tactics; and second, some may choose to neglect or downgrade the words of certain U.S. politicians. As a consequence of either of these two scenarios, some countries' efforts in promoting dispute settlement through political and diplomatic means would likely meet new challenges.

## **Conclusion**

To deal with properly of the U.S. relations with others, and to better meet the interests of the U.S. and of the world, the U.S. and other countries especially the major powers need to jointly develop a more steady and sustainable approach. From a certain degree, fostering a sustainable approach means that the U.S. has to abandon some of the propositions driven by its traditional theoretical frameworks, which have greatly influenced the U.S. foreign policy-making since WWII. In addition to that, as far as a multipolar world is more secure and is in the interest of most of the states, it would be good for the U.S. and others to jointly contribute to the forging of a multipolar world, rather than prohibit it from taking place. There should be no place for a new form of imperialism in today's world.

## **Notes**

1. U.S. Department of the Treasury, <http://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/faqs/888>
2. Huaxia ed. (2021). "World Insights: U.S. sanctions against Russia come with wish for stable ties", *Xinhua*, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/17/c\\_139887527.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/17/c_139887527.htm)
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.