

# The Open Door:

## How Relations between China and America may be Transformed with the new US Administration

by Michael North

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The great American poet sang:

*Your old road is rapidly agin'  
Please get out of the new one  
If you can't lend your hand  
For the times they are a-changin'*

...Bob Dylan, 1964

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These words come to life again now, as America enters a new stage in its long, winding evolution. The world watches, listens and awaits a new Administration.

It's possible to anticipate the type of changes that are coming for US-China relations, since many of the people and ideas that guide the new Biden Administration are well-known and understood, and they fall in line with historic trends and priorities that America has pursued in the modern era.

No nation watches America more closely than China. As friends, competitors, allies, teachers and students of each other, Americans and Chinese are closely linked. The links go deeper than most of us know -- for example, in 1784, the newly independent America dispatched its first consuls to Guangzhou, and some of the Founding Fathers admired China, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.

Now, the massive wheels of civilizational change turn within each other once more. After a period of confusion and disruption, America and China set their feet again, to find, perhaps, a new balance.

For a time, America's diplomacy toward China seemed to outsiders to be willful, spontaneous, unplanned. America became unpredictable, and this was a deliberate policy. Long-standing American principles, alliances, policies and priorities, all focused on globalism and multilateralism, seemed suspended or cancelled all together. Trade policy toward China focused only on narrow protectionism. This was not the America that China knew.

This is changing now, and many of the themes of the recent past will re-assert themselves. The center of gravity of American diplomacy will once again be steady, governed by established principles that are explained, followed and applied consistently. Whether China agrees with America or not, the course of relations will be normalized, and become more disciplined with the new Administration led by President Joe Biden.

The first changes begin on January 20, 2021, but they are likely to take some years to unspool. Change will not come overnight; a great deal of study and reorientation to China has already been done by professionals in the economic, diplomatic and national security spheres in America, and significant changes will follow quickly. But great ships take time to turn.

There will be two contrasting themes: re-establishing policies and alliances that have worked well in the past, and taking the opportunity at this moment for a re-boot, a step back, occasioned both by the change in federal Administration and by the anticipated recovery from the global pandemic.

The wise course for China during this time of re-assessment in America will be watchful patience, quickly and strongly encouraging positive developments when they emerge -- and firmly countering potential negative developments with patience. China should not be shy in asserting its competitive advantage now; that is part of the natural economic ecology. But a sense of proportion, patience, and risk assessment with respect to the amount of U.S. debt held by the Bank of China, will yield the best long-term results for both nations.

Any nation as complex as America does not change overnight, even if it wants to. There is no single lighthouse of leadership in America, even with a strong President. The President sets the direction in macro foreign policy, but the vast American tapestry contains many colors and weave patterns, and they change organically, adjusting to each other, re-balancing constantly.

In America there are 50 States, hundreds of Counties, thousands of cities and towns, and each one has its own perspective, its own mini-foreign policy. There is a single "United States of America," but not all the States are the same. That diversity is actually good, a source of America's historic strength. This is a challenge for Chinese observers to grasp immediately, since in China there is a strong principle of central solidarity and consistency, tempered by ongoing regional struggles. America seeks unity as well, but not unanimity -- in different ways than in China.

The same is true for ancient China, which has a history 20 times deeper than America and has witnessed everything in political history happen before. China

does not change overnight, either, though her political and cultural chemistry are so different that the engines of change in China operate very differently.

It is necessary for the leaders of China to see America through American eyes, as much as possible -- not to judge America by Chinese standards.

The previous statement should be mirrored:

It is necessary for the leaders of America to see China through Chinese eyes, as much as possible -- not to judge China by American standards.

The tone and tenor of the new Administration may be clearly read through the prism of two key choices made by Joe Biden, as soon as he began to form a new government, still two months away from Inauguration.

Those choices are Antony Blinken (Secretary of State) and Linda Thomas-Greenfield (Ambassador to the United Nations). These two are not yet household names, in America or anywhere else outside their own communities and professional institutions. But soon, they will be. China, and all the world, will learn to deal with them.

What can we learn about the direction and velocity of the coming change, for improving the historic China-U.S. dialogue? These are vital and diverse figures, each revealing a different facet of American strategic thinking about its relationships with the world, and with China.

Antony Blinken said, when he was first introduced by the President, that Americans needed the “humility and confidence” to depend on allies once again.

Mr. Blinken was National Security Adviser to Vice President Biden during the Obama administration. He also served as a Senate Staff Director for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee



from 2002 to 2008, and on the National Security Council staff during the Clinton administration. So this young man (58) has a rare combination of talents and experience -- legislative, diplomatic and security -- that qualify him as a well-informed Secretary of State, ready for action on January 20.

Expect him to quickly bring order to a demoralized, fragmented State Department, to invite back many who quit or took early retirement recently, and to re-populate America's embassies and consulates around the world, opening up shuttered offices. Based on the wide respect for Secretary Blinken in the State Department, China should expect more diplomats requesting to be based at the US missions.

Expect a repair to the closing of the China Consulate in Houston, and the US Consulate in Chengdu, breathing life back into those important communities. That kind of change may seem symbolic; but it is more. Symbols are currency in the diplomatic world, and when they are shared, they augur well for improvements in other areas -- trade, culture, education. Change may come quickly in culture and education; it may take longer in trade.

At the State Department, Mr. Blinken led diplomatic efforts to counter ISIS. He worked on the global refugee crisis and the rebalance to Asia. So, in the Middle East and in Asian affairs in general, expect him to be hardline on terrorism, and to have an open line on multilateral diplomacy.

In a key interview held on July 20, 2020 at the Hudson Institute, Antony Blinken laid out an inclusive vision for the re-launch of America to the world:

“...It’s evident that we’re living in a time of shifting power and alignments among nations, a huge diffusion of power away from states and a growing questioning of governance within states... tremendous economic, demographic, technological, environmental, geopolitical change that we’re all experiencing every day.

...”We are facing, I think, the most challenging and complex international landscape and international security landscape, certainly in decades.

...”The world tends not to organize itself. There is a premium still... on American engagement, on American leadership, because basically we have a choice. If we’re not doing a lot of that organizing in terms of shaping the rules and the norms and the institutions through which countries relate to one another, then ... either someone else is doing it and probably not in a way that advances our own interests and values, or maybe just as bad, no one is and then you tend to have chaos and a vacuum...”

The State Department, which in many ways sets the tone for international relationships across multiple agencies, will be more activist on China, more engaged in dialogue and multilateral exchange, and more challenging to China in the realm of ideas. Blinken went on to say:

“The big problems that we face as a country and as a planet, whether it’s climate change, whether it’s a pandemic, whether it’s the spread of bad weapons...[do not] have unilateral solutions...There’s no wall high enough or thick enough to ward them off. We have to figure out ways to cooperate more effectively...”

The style Mr. Blinken advocates is more familiar to Chinese diplomats than the improvisational, top-down effort of recent years. Now, there will be a bottom-up

process, more consultative, open-minded. That doesn't mean a lack of firmness or principle; in fact, this more customary style rewards firmness and clear ideas. If China responds respectfully, in a way more natural to Chinese thinking, the results could be surprisingly positive.

Don't expect apology or retreat from the State Department under Blinken. You can sense a pragmatic, tough assertion of American power and influence here; this could be very good for China, and be built on much more firm ground. Blinken explains, on the specific subject of China:

"There is a growing consensus across parties that China poses a series of new challenges and that the status quo was really not sustainable particularly when it comes to China's commercial and economic practices, the lack of reciprocity in the relationships...

"Here's the problem... Take a step back. My concern now is that in terms of China's strategic interests and in terms of our own, China... is [now] in a stronger position and we're in a weaker position. What do I mean by that?

"China sees alliances as a core source of strength for the United States, something they don't share and enjoy. [We have] now weakened...our core alliances, particularly in Asia. China's trying to assert its own leadership in international institutions at the expense of our own. Our own withdrawal...has left an opening for China to fill.

"...We are in a competition with China, and there's nothing wrong with competition if it's fair. In fact, it hopefully brings out in some ways the best. We need, in the first instance, to invest in our own competitiveness...when it comes to investing in American infrastructure, American education, the health care system, our workers and their competitiveness.

“For example, on trade... we’re about 25% of world GDP alone. When we’re working with allies and partners... it’s 50% or 60% of GDP. That’s a lot more weight and a lot harder for China to ignore.

...”Having re-established a relative strength in the relationship...[we’ll] be able to engage China and work with China, in areas where our interests clearly overlap, whether it is...contending with climate change, dealing with global health and pandemics, dealing with the spread of dangerous weapons. We’re much better off... finding ways to cooperate when we’re acting from a position of strength than from a position of weakness.

This is the core of America-China relations, since 1972, when Premier Zhou Enlai strode across the tarmac at Beijing Airport and firmly took the hand of President Richard Nixon -- shaking his hand firmly, not once, twice or three times, openly engaging the President’s eyes.

They are all saying -- a strong America is good for China; a strong China is good for America.

The full Hudson Institute talk should be read in context, because it forms as close to a roadmap for the coming US engagement strategy as one may find, at this early stage:

<https://www.hudson.org/research/16210-transcript-dialogues-on-american-foreign-policy-and-world-affairs-a-conversation-with-former-deputy-secretary-of-state-antony-blinken>

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Linda Thomas-Greenfield is nominated to be the new Ambassador to the United Nations. She brings a very different sensibility to her new job that Antony Blinken brings to the State Department. She is another authentic American face, and her way of thinking will influence



how she engages with the world's greatest multinational institution, and how she engages with China's diplomats in New York and beyond.

Ms. Thomas-Greenfield grew up in the deep South, in Louisiana -- as she says, "in a segregated town in which the KKK regularly would come on weekends and burn a cross in somebody's yard."

So she will likely value order, empathy, respect for social institutions. And her reserves will be stretched -- in the face of recent severing or weakening of ties to the World Health Organization, UNESCO, the Human Rights Council, and a de-emphasis on shared leadership in the UN and other multilateral institutions.

Where Secretary Blinken may tend to be cool and analytical, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield will be warm, sensitive, seeking consensus. She will be a decisive foe of sexism, racism, and an advocate for grassroots social justice and community communications. In short, she will be closely aligned with some of the core values promoted by Chinese diplomacy. She may find strong, quiet friendships in the Chinese Mission.

Africa has been important to her, through much of her long career. She was the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs from 2013 to 2017; with extensive service experience in Africa, as Ambassador to Liberia (2008–2012), and Director

General of the Foreign Service. She has been posted, during her 35+ year career, to nations as diverse as Switzerland, Pakistan, Kenya, Jamaica and more.

A formative experience: Two days after her arrival in Rwanda, the Rwandan genocide began. Thomas-Greenfield was mistaken for a Tutsi and held at gunpoint until she could prove her American nationality.

Now, she will have influence beyond the UN, as her post is restored to Cabinet-level status; she will be in regular consultation with the President in Washington DC, and a member of the National Security Council, with a broad responsibility to both defend and advocate American interests around the world.

Let's look inside her words to measure her character and genius. This speech was delivered at the Atlantic Council in Washington DC, on March 9, 2017. When Linda Thomas-Greenfield speaks of Africa, she is speaking of the whole developing world:

“How can we help Africa address its surging youth population;

How more jobs, economic growth, and investment in Africa can be created, providing opportunities for its youth;

How best to partner with Africa in countering terrorism and conflict.”

“The United States is not the only player in Africa. We also want to encourage other countries to invest. I often get asked about China's role in Africa. Africa is a huge continent. There's room for everyone to work there, and there are opportunities for all.

“It’s up to African countries to look at potential investors and pursue the best deals for their countries and their people. Africa’s success depends on a strong U.S.-Africa relationship and continued engagement, and that requires a team effort.”

This is the American voice so common for the past 100 years. This voice is idealistic, compassionate, sensitive, committed.

With this woman in a leadership position for America on the world stage, expect more engagement with Africa, Central America, the Middle East, South Asia, the whole developing world.

She knows that American capital is not only the financial capital that trades on Wall Street; American capital includes the assets of ideas, advocacy, justice.

Her personal history could lead to questioning about human rights policy in China, and Chinese diplomats should be prepared for this with clear, factual responses, and with commitments that are followed, if they expect to deal successfully with this powerful lady.

She will not be manipulated by stories told by others; she will want to see, hear, listen and judge for herself, without fixed ideology except respect for people. She will be instinctively sympathetic to China, to China’s rise from a developing nation not long ago, to a first-rank nation today. Yet she will be cautious. To work productively with Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, China will need to work and act from its own heart -- this will be to its own benefit. This lady has lessons to teach everyone.

We can only look briefly at two emblematic individuals entering the new Administration, and attempt to extrapolate from their words and histories. In the coming years, progress will be made, and there will be setbacks; these two people have the patience and maturity to maximize the former and minimize the latter.

In the spring of 2018, in the depth of the trade disputes between America and China, a conference was held in Lexington Kentucky, one of the most conservative States in America. The Governor at the time was a deeply committed Republican, so you might think he would be committed to confrontation with China.

Nothing could be further from what happened in Lexington. Governor Matt Bevin gave a talk, delivered with Chinese Ambassador Cui Tiankai in the front row of the audience, that applauded efforts at peace and rapprochement between America and China. He called upon the officials present, which included several US State Governors and Chinese Provincial Governors:

“There was a time, 75 years ago, when Great Britain was in the news. There was a World War. A man named Winston Churchill came into leadership, and he led, with boldness and conviction — ignoring the small minds, ignoring the weak people. He led with boldness.

“People called Winston Churchill the ‘Lion of England.’ Winston Churchill said, ‘I am not the lion. The people of England — they are the lion.

But history has called upon me to deliver the roar.’

“Think about that. The lion is you. Those of you who are here. Those of your fellow citizens, no matter what country you call home. The lion in this moment is the people of the United States, the people of China. But who among us will deliver the roar?

“Now is the time for a roar to be delivered: the roar of Sino-US relationships, of building bonds, of being partners, of being friends, of coming together, weaving a fabric together that will not be easily separated.

“Now is the time. We cannot grow weary; we cannot give up. We must rise up, as ambassadors...for what is the right thing to do...The opportunity for us to do the right thing for the world.

“Because when there is strength and stability and peace in America, strength and stability and peace in China, both the east and the west will be stronger, the world will be stronger, the world will be safer; there will be more opportunity for all of us.

“This is why I’m doing this. I’m one small piece. I’m not afraid of hard work. I grew up in a simple way. I ask each of you to roll up your sleeves, put on your overalls. Deliver the roar of history.

“Because history is knocking, and now is the time.”

For video and other details, see:

<http://www.galaxytradetechnology.com/news/kentucky-governor/>

The new Biden Administration will be fired by idealism, yet tempered by decades of hard-headed realism. The people and leaders of China and America may be ready for a renaissance, because the door is there, and it may open, with great commitment and hard work from all.

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*Come senators, congressmen  
Please heed the call  
Don't stand in the doorway  
Don't block up the hall*

*For the times, they are a-changin’*

...Bob Dylan, 1964

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