

# How China Responded to President Biden's Address to Congress

Addressing a joint session of Congress on April 28, President Joe Biden outlined his approach to foreign policy. As expected, China looms large in his thinking.

The president portrayed his overall foreign policy agenda as one that “benefits the middle class.” Biden explained: “That means making sure every nation plays by the same rules in the global economy, including China.”

The president cited his own conversations with President Xi Jinping, with whom he has “spent a lot of time” during his travels abroad. “We welcome the competition,” Biden says he told Xi. “We’re not looking for conflict.” However, Biden was quick to add that he made it “absolutely clear that we will defend America’s interests across the board,” standing up “to unfair trade practices that undercut American workers and American industries, like subsidies to state-owned operations and enterprises and the theft of American technology and intellectual property.” In addition, the president explained, the U.S. will “maintain a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific, just as we do with NATO in Europe—not to start a conflict, but to prevent one.”

In broad strokes, President Biden’s summary of the Chinese challenge is not all that different from his predecessor’s. President Trump often blasted the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) trade practices, intellectual property theft, and other malign actions. The CCP’s defensive rhetoric remains largely the same as well.

The day after Biden’s speech, China’s foreign ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin, responded at a press conference. Wang’s talking points were taken straight from the CCP’s playbook, so it’s worth a brief examination of them.

First, Wang asserted that China is following a “path of peaceful development and has been a promoter of world peace,” as well as a “contributor to global development and a defender of international order.” He insisted that Beijing wants only “peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation” with the U.S. Xi has repeatedly stated the same in public. I’d bet Xi said this to Biden during their

travels together as well. Of course, the U.S. government, across three administrations now, has taken a different view of the CCP's intentions. A significant body of evidence indicates the CCP's designs are not that peaceful, nor is it a "defender" of the international order, which it looks to undermine and transform.

Second, Wang feigned support for democracy. Wang claimed that "democracy is the common value of all mankind, not a 'patented product' of one single country." He went on to assert that no country should be in the business of "imposing" its democratic values on others. This "is nothing but an insult on and a travesty of democratic values, and will only create division, intensify tension and disrupt stability," Wang said.

Obviously, the CCP has no interest in promoting real democracy. The CCP monopolizes China's politics as an autocracy. What Wang was really getting at is that the CCP doesn't want the U.S. or other Western countries to promote their form of democracy first and foremost inside China, but also likely elsewhere.

In contrast, President Biden framed the American rivalry in precisely these ideological terms—as one of autocracies versus democracies. Xi is "deadly earnest about becoming the most significant, consequential nation in the world," Biden said during his speech before Congress. "He and others—autocrats—think that democracy can't compete in the 21st century with autocracies because it takes too long to get consensus." The president then quickly pivoted to an argument in favor of his American Families Plan, portraying it as a way to bolster democracy in the long-term "competition for the future" with the CCP.

Third, Wang allowed that the U.S. and China should cooperate in some fields, but he hastily turned his remarks into a broadside attack on America. Wang claimed that the U.S.—not China—"has repeatedly violated international rules and market principle of fair competition." He charged the U.S. with pursuing policies that "politicized and ideologized economic and scientific issues, abused state power to hamstring the development of China and other countries, and undermined the interests of many, provoking outrage from the international community."

With respect to China, close to the exact opposite of what Wang said is true. The U.S. helped build China's economy under the theory that economic prosperity would necessarily lead to greater political liberalization. Four decades later, that

still hasn't come true. But make no mistake about it: This was the exact argument that was used to justify China's ascent to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other policies that integrated the Chinese economy into a worldwide network.

Consider what President Bill Clinton said during a speech in 2000, when he was advocating for China's admission into the WTO:

*By joining the WTO, China is not simply agreeing to import more of our products. It is agreeing to import one of democracy's most cherished values, economic freedom. The more China liberalizes its economy, the more fully it will liberate the potential of its people—their initiative, their imagination, their remarkable spirit of enterprise. And when individuals have the power, not just to dream, but to realize their dreams, they will demand a greater say.*

Twenty-one years later, the U.S. government is no longer counting on democracy sprouting inside China anytime soon. The CCP has taken steps to extinguish Hong Kong's democratic autonomy and has its eyes on Taiwan, all while clamping down on other forms of dissent across the mainland. China's admission into the WTO had clear benefits, but it came with downsides as well—including allowing an authoritarian regime to compromise various industries across the West.

Speaking of the struggle between autocracy and democracy, there was a conspicuous omission from President Biden's speech: Taiwan. Everyone knows that the upstart democracy could become a military flashpoint in the rivalry between Beijing and Washington. It's still not clear how far President Biden is willing to go in America's defense of Taiwan, should Xi decide it is time to end the island nation's autonomy once and for all. As I've written previously, there is likely a limit on the American public's will to expend much blood in defense of Taiwan. And it's not clear if the U.S. military could even prevent a takeover, should the president decide it's worth the risk. Still, it is curious that President Biden didn't mention Taiwan in a speech devoted in no small part to the ideological battle between China's autocracy and Western democracies.

The omission of any reference to Taiwan is even more noteworthy when one considers what President Biden said he told Xi. "I told him what I've said to many world leaders: that America will not back away from our commitments—our commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms and to our alliances," Biden claimed. The president continued:

*And I pointed out to him: No responsible American president could remain silent when basic human rights are being so blatantly violated. An American president has to represent the essence of what our country stands for. America is an idea—the most unique idea in history: We are created, all of us, equal. It's who we are, and we cannot walk away from that principle and, in fact, say we're dealing with the American idea.*

That idea is being challenged at home by actors across the political spectrum. And the CCP is all too happy to challenge it abroad.

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*Thomas Joscelyn is a Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the Senior Editor for FDD's Long War Journal. Follow Tom on Twitter @thomasjoscelyn. FDD is a nonpartisan think tank focused on foreign policy and national security issues.*

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