

BRITISH EMBASSY WASHINGTON
Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

TO: The Rt Hon. Dominic Raab, *Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs*

SUBJECT: The Biden Administration's potential actions on a UNSC resolution demanding the demilitarisation of Chinese occupied islands in the South China Sea

5 December 2020

THE CURRENT SITUATION

After its inauguration, the Biden Administration will be faced with a decision on a Trump Administration-led UNSC resolution on China's occupation of the South China Sea. While President Trump has always led a sharp and transactional approach towards Beijing, President-elect Biden's rhetoric has also become harsher over the course of the campaign, at one point referring to President Xi as a 'thug'.

On the other hand, Biden is a quintessential internationalist, and has formed a foreign policy team that has been clear in its aims to restore diplomatic leadership. It is unlikely that the Biden Administration will want to enact such a formal, public admonishment of Beijing so quickly after his instalment without first exhausting all diplomatic channels. Couple that with Britain's post-Brexit economic and diplomatic interests in the Indo-Pacific, it is the recommendation of this office that the Foreign Secretary strategically float the suggestion that Biden might withdraw the resolution.

DIPLOMACY FIRST, DEMANDS SECOND

Most pertinent to this subject is Biden's pledge to work with countries who are party to the South China Sea dispute. The Obama-Biden Administration's premier 'pivot to Asia' policy included active engagement with ASEAN and the East Asia Summit, the former since without a US Ambassador during the Trump Administration and the latter without participation from Trump entirely. A Biden return to this multilateral approach will give Southeast Asian countries the diplomatic assurance that the United States is again a Pacific power on their behalf. Considering the new UK Mission to ASEAN, Britain should offer its support to multilateral engagement with the region.

Biden is also clear-eyed that Washington and Beijing have convergent interests in combating climate change, nuclear non-proliferation and global health security in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unlikely that Biden will want to torpedo these grand strategic goals in the first days of his Administration by publicly shaming Beijing in the UN. As strategic emphasis, a discussion about these areas of cooperation should be included in the UNSC resolution agenda item.

BRITAIN'S NATIONAL INTERESTS

It is not in Britain's national interests to inflame the situation in the South China Sea. In economic terms, 12% of UK seaborne trade passes through the South China Sea. To aggravate tensions with one of Britain's major trading partners could prove detrimental, as is proving the case in Australia after its leadership of an inquiry into China's COVID-19 response. Additionally, this UNSC resolution weakens Global Britain's diplomatic *bona fides* by rushing to UNSC condemnation before a robust exercise in dialogue in partnership with the new administration in Washington.

That said, Britain should offer to join the US's freedom of navigation exercises in coalition with other participants like Japan and Australia to enhance a multilateral affirmation of the international rules on maritime shipping lanes.

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