

U.S. National Security Strategy and the Biden Administration's Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

The Biden administration has greatly improved U.S. international leadership through various multilateral initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region. And yet, despite those achievements, the U.S. needs to tackle a number of hurdles. India and ASEAN are wary of taking a pro-U.S. defense posture. The Ukrainian War and the changing security dynamics in Europe have made it more difficult for China to collaborate with Europe to ease the pressure from the United States. The war has also weakened U.S. overall preparations for the consolidation of an Indo-Pacific Strategy. The U.S. and China have intensified their competition in the Indo-Pacific and the complex relations of two great powers are the most difficult to manage when it comes to Taiwan. President Biden's security commitments to Taiwan come at a critical juncture after the crisis in August 2022, which suggests that Taiwan may become the real test for Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Keywords: National Security, Indo-Pacific Strategy, U.S.-China Relations, Quad, Taiwan Security

I. Introduction

This paper analyzes the national security strategy of the Biden administration, especially the Indo-Pacific strategy, and examines its impact on the security of the Indo-Pacific region. The paper begins with an analysis of President Biden's reports on *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* and *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, examining their goals, means and possible constraints the U.S. faces. In addition to factors not entirely attributable to China, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is clearly the

biggest geopolitical and economic challenge to the U.S.’ national security strategy. How China challenges the U.S.’ encirclement strategy in the Indo-Pacific region and prevents the U.S. from elevating ties with Taiwan are discussed in the latter part of the paper.

II. Biden’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance

President Biden released his first *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* on March 3, 2021. Generally, the official version of the National Security Strategy is issued by the White House about one year after a new president has taken office. The unprecedented release of an interim document at the initial stage indicated that Biden demanded that his policy priorities be implemented as early as possible. A more complete version was delayed by the Ukrainian War in February 2022.



Figure 1. President Joe Biden in the White House

Source: White House, “President Joe Biden meets with White House staff in the Oval Office of the White House,” April 27, 2021, *Flickr*, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/51224514221/in/album-72157719342698874/>>.

The *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* stipulated that the national security of the U.S. must start by strengthening and enriching the sources of American power—the economy, defense, and democracy—followed by the promotion of favorable power distribution to deter its adversaries from threatening the U.S. and its allies, especially preventing them from gaining access to global common domains (such as space, ocean, etc.) or controlling key geostrategic areas. The Biden administration has taken the approach of leadership of a free and open international environment by uniting like-minded allies and rejoining multilateral institutions from which the Donald Trump administration had withdrawn.

The *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* sets the thinking of the Biden administration. First, the greatest threat facing the U.S. has no boundaries and requires collective action. Second, anti-democratic forces are increasingly using disinformation, misinformation and weaponized corruption to “exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations.” Third, the distribution of power in the world has changed, and China is “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”¹ In a nutshell, the rules-based order, agreements and norms established by the U.S. and its allies have been under the challenge from the PRC.

The Biden administration positions the PRC as a strategic competitor, and believes the U.S. government must reactivate a democratic alliance and partnerships. The U.S. also needs to strengthen its military and organizational structure to negotiate with China and Russia over the development of military technology such as intermediate-range ballistic missiles. The Biden administration will ensure any business transactions with China will not sacrifice American values and will help China's neighbors and business partners avoid being subjected to Chinese coercion and undue influence. More importantly, President Biden will cultivate more U.S. national security talents in China affairs, climate change, global public health, and

1. White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, pp. 7-8, *White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>>.

emerging technologies, and “incentivize them to work in the federal government.”²

On the same day, the White House released the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, Secretary of State Antony Blinken made eight task priorities in his first major foreign policy speech. The list includes the following: containment of the Covid-19 pandemic and strengthening global health and security; creation of a stable and inclusive global economy; revitalization of democratic countries; a humane and efficient immigration system; restoration of U.S. relations with allies and partners; forging a clean energy revolution in response to the climate change crisis; and consolidation of U.S. leadership in technology. Blinken emphasized U.S. leadership by saying that “[w]hen the U.S. pulls back, one of two things is likely to happen: either another country tries to take our place, but not in a way that advances our interests and values; or, maybe just as bad, no one steps up, and then we get chaos and all the dangers it creates. Either way, that’s not good for America.” Blinken is most concerned



Figure 2. A Foreign Policy for the American People

Source: Antony J. Blinken, “A Foreign Policy for the American People,” March 3, 2021, *U.S. Department of State*, <<https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>>.

2. White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, p. 21.

about the role of the PRC, and therefore U.S. policy toward China must include the following three aspects: “be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.”³

1. Major Themes of Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy did not start from scratch. The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) took off on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit in November 2017 under the Trump administration. Biden stepped up efforts in the Quad and held four summit meetings from 2021 to 2022. Although the Biden administration is somewhat disappointed that India did not condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. understands India's key position in the implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. India does not want to make the Quad an Asian version of NATO, but hopes it can play a more important role in human security issues. The Quad has developed several mechanisms in the form of working groups and partnerships such as the Vaccine Partnership, the Clean Hydrogen Partnership, Cybersecurity Partnership, a major infrastructure coordination group, a key emerging technology working group, Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), and the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Partnership.⁴ The Quad states that liberal democracies can deliver solutions to the greatest challenges both on traditional or non-traditional security issues. The vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific under U.S. leadership is more attractive than the China-centric model Beijing promotes. Nevertheless, India has kept quiet on the security of the Taiwan Strait and had maintained a certain distance from the position taken by the U.S., Japan, and Australia.

The formation of a security arrangement among Australia, the U.K., and the United States (AUKUS) in September 2021 took many world leaders by surprise. In the very beginning, Beijing exhibited some *schadenfreude* at the deterioration of Biden's relationship with France and the European Union, but soon discovered the

³ Antony J. Blinken, “A Foreign Policy for the American People.”

⁴ White House, “Quad Joint Leaders' Statement,” May 24 2022, *White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/24/quad-joint-leaders-statement>>.

potential security challenges to its strategies in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. Beijing has tried to stir up negative reactions from the region toward AUKUS by suggesting the possibility of an arms race and nuclear proliferation, direct threats to the legality of Treaty of Nuclear-Weapon Free Zone in Southeast Asia or in South Pacific, and most importantly, a weakening of ASEAN centrality in regional security.⁵ However, ASEAN has not been able to take a united position on the emergence of AUKUS. An annual survey of elites from ASEAN countries showed that 36.4% believed AUKUS will help balance China's growing military power, 22.5% argued it will escalate an arms race, and 18% worried ASEAN centrality will be weakened.⁶ Without criticizing AUKUS, certain ASEAN members, such as Singapore (50.9%), Vietnam (46.5%) and the Philippines (60%), have been implicitly supportive of the new pillar for security in the Indo-Pacific to balance China's military while reminding the U.S., U.K., and Australia that ASEAN centrality should not be undermined.

AUKUS will strengthen the full implementation of the U.S.-initiated Indo-Pacific Strategy by supplementing an additional non-U.S. naval and aerial presence in the East and South China Seas. This could create a new scenario for the PRC when it conducts assertive and aggressive military maneuvers in the region. Taiwan welcomes developments of both the Quad and AUKUS and hopes to see assurances that the Taiwan Strait will not become a sea or air domain monopolized by the PRC. Both the Quad and AUKUS emphasize the necessity of enhancing joint capabilities and interoperability. The targeted areas of collaboration include cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technology, and additional undersea capabilities.

In July 2021, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Singapore and presented Biden's strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific. Austin stated that the U.S. will ensure that regional states are able to maintain their sovereignty and freedom

5. White House, "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS," September 15, 2021, *White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>>; Kevin Rudd, *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022), pp. 218-219.

6. Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2022* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022), p. 29.



Figure 3. AUKUS Trilateral Security Pact

Source: Depositphotos.

to plan their own destiny, and that the Pentagon will endeavor to ensure freedom of the sea and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Austin disputed China's claims to most of the South China Sea as having no basis in international law and violating the sovereignty of other claimants. The U.S. treaty obligations with Japan and the Philippines will cover the disputed islands under their administrative controls in the East and South China Seas. Austin also highlighted China's aggression against India at sea and on the land border, military coercion against Taiwan, and genocide and crimes against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.⁷ Given the emerging threats, Austin proposed an "integrated deterrence" operational plan to strengthen deterrence, resilience, and teamwork. The tools of "integrated deterrence" have military and non-military means, such as joint maintenance of peace with allies and partners, building new capabilities to deploy them in a networked fashion with the goal of better coordination, tighter

7. Lloyd J. Austin III, "Secretary of Defense Remarks at the 40th International Institute for Strategic Studies Fullerton Lecture (As Prepared)," July 27, 2021, *U.S. Department of Defense*, <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/2708192/secretary-of-defense-remarks-at-the-40th-international-institute-for-strategic/>>.

networks, and faster innovation.⁸

The Biden administration has its own new initiatives tacked onto the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the Partners in the Blue Pacific were announced respectively in May and June 2022. The four goals of the IPEF are a connected economy, resilient economy, clean economy, and fair economy. In addition to four Quad partners, South Korea, New Zealand, seven ASEAN countries (except Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar) and Fiji joined the IPEF. The key feature of the IPEF is that countries can flexibly participate in some projects and its activation does not require U.S. congressional approval. Other Indo-Pacific partners with common goals and interests can participate, but a much-qualified Taiwan remains excluded, ostensibly to alleviate Beijing's suspicions.⁹ In a parallel arrangement, the Biden administration decided to launch U.S.-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade talks.

In June 2022, the U.S., Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K. established the Blue Pacific Partnership, raising US\$2.1 billion to develop and assist Pacific island countries. Then, at the G7 summit in Germany, Biden called for the establishment of Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), raising \$600 billion by 2027 to assist developing countries with infrastructure.¹⁰ As a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Biden has given countries in the region incentives to join the IPEF for additional infrastructure development assistance.

One of the characteristics of Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy is that he pays more attention to the security situation in the South Pacific than his predecessor. Former

8. Lloyd J. Austin III, "Secretary of Defense Remarks at the 40th International Institute for Strategic Studies Fullerton Lecture (As Prepared)."

9. "Biden's Real Taiwan Mistake," *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2022, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/bidens-real-taiwan-mistake-indo-pacific-economic-framework-china-11653339196>>.

10. White House, "FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Formally Launch the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment," June 26, 2022, *White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/26/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-formally-launch-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>>.

Vice President Mike Pence attended the APEC Summit in Papua New Guinea in November 2018, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a first visit to Micronesia in August 2019, and then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper made his first visit to Palau in August 2020. All those rare high-level visits indicated that the U.S. had long overlooked the geopolitical importance of South Pacific until the Biden administration. China's aggressive diplomatic posture alerted Biden administration officials. Secretary of State Blinken visited Fiji and Australia in February 2022 before the Ukrainian war began, and Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink were dispatched to the Solomon Islands to try to block a Chinese security deal with the Solomon Islands in April 2022. Thanks to the Biden administration's diplomatic preemption and

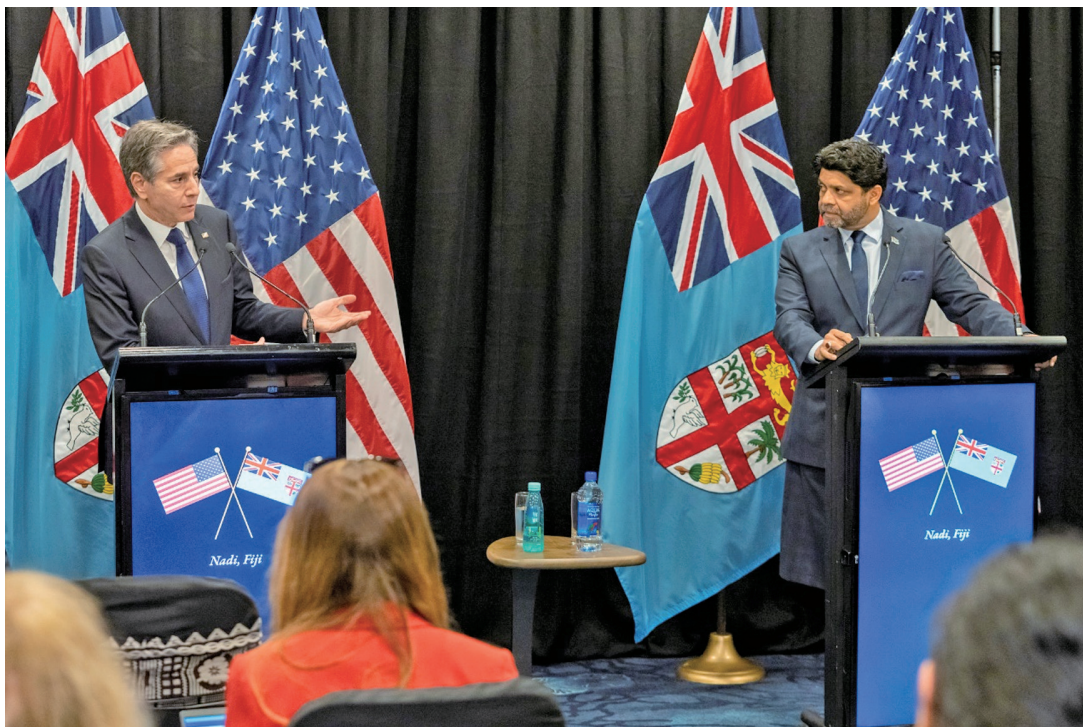


Figure 4. U.S. Secretary Blinken Participates in a Joint Press Availability with Fijian Acting Prime Minister Sayed-Khaiyum

Source: U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Secretary Blinken Participates in a Joint Press Availability with Fijian Acting Prime Minister Sayed-Khaiyum," February 12, 2022, *Flickr*, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/statephotos/51876348962/>>.

joint efforts by Australia, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi was not able to sign a multilateral security-related agreement with the 10 South Pacific countries in June 2022.¹¹

Compared with its predecessor, the Biden administration has also been more proactive in holding summits with ASEAN. For example, Biden held two summit meetings with ASEAN leaders within a year and a half (October 2021 video meeting, May 2022 special summit). President Trump only attended one summit meeting with ASEAN in November 2017. Unlike Trump's preoccupation with the signing of the U.S.-China trade agreement and the widely publicized summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Biden has been more preoccupied with efforts to prevent China subverting the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

2. The Goals of Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy

After Biden took office, Kurt Campbell, coordinator of Indo-Pacific affairs, took control of the promotion of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The list of other officials suggests that steps have been taken to implement the task, not just words. Although former president Obama claimed to be the first Asia-Pacific president of the U.S., visited Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos in Southeast Asia, held the first summit between the U.S. and ASEAN, and joined the East Asia Summit for the first time, Obama nevertheless failed to stop Chinese leader Xi Jinping from completing land reclamation activities in the South China Sea. Moreover, Obama undermined his pivot to an Asia-Pacific strategy by sequestering the U.S. defense budget, leading to a decrease in the number of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. For his part, Biden declared numerous functional cooperation plans such as U.S.-ASEAN Forest Future Initiative, SERVIR Initiative, Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, Private Sector Initiatives, Regional Maritime Security Initiatives, Global Health Worker Initiative, etc., to bolster progress in relations with ASEAN

11. Christian Shepherd, "China Fails on Pacific Pact, but Still Seeks to Boost Regional Influence," *Washington Post*, June 1, 2022, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/01/china-influence-pacific-deal-wang/>>.

countries.¹²

In February 2022, the Biden administration declared 10 action plans under its Indo-Pacific Strategy, including investment in new resources, leadership of the IPEF, reinforced deterrence, a strengthened and unified ASEAN, support for India's rise and regional leadership, making the Quad a premier regional grouping, expanding U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation, building a Pacific Islands partnership of resilience, supporting good governance and accountability, and supporting Open, Resilient, Secure, and Trustworthy Technologies. Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy is clearly aimed at competing with China for international leadership in the Indo-Pacific region. The Biden administration knows too well that the U.S. cannot rely on its own efforts, and needs to gather allies and partners to form a coalition of the willing to contain China's maritime domination in Southeast Asia, as well as in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. One of new tools of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy is the law enforcement role U.S. Coast Guard cutters in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, ostensibly targeting China's illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities.¹³

Some of the above goals have been fulfilled, but the status quo in the Indo-Pacific is not static. The U.S.-China relationship has also become the thematic component of Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy. The establishment of a guardrail between the two countries to prevent the relationship from derailing and colliding has become the first step for the Biden administration. In May 2022, Secretary Blinken delivered a talk on China policy. According to Blinken, three U.S. strategic approaches are needed: invest to strengthen the U.S., to unite allies, and to compete with China. Blinken pointed out that the U.S. is not seeking conflict or a new cold war with China and is ready to cooperate on issues such as climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, and global food

¹² White House, "ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit 2022, Joint Vision Statement," May 13, 2022, *White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/13/asean-u-s-special-summit-2022-joint-vision-statement/>>.

¹³ White House, "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," February 2022, pp. 15-17, *White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>>.



Figure 5. U.S. Coast Guard

Source: Depositphotos.

security. Instead of using his older term of confrontation, Blinken reiterated that the U.S. will contest China if necessary. More importantly, the U.S. will establish a China House within the State Department to coordinate and implement policies across issues and regions, and work with Congress as needed.

Credit must be given to the Biden administration for its masterful incorporation of the pro-Taiwan Six Assurances into the U.S.’ “one China” policy, and not being dictated to by Beijing’s insistence on the three joint communiqués.¹⁴ The U.S. will

¹⁴ Six Assurances include: the U.S. has not agreed to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan, has not agreed to consult with the PRC on arms sales to Taiwan, will not play mediation role between Taipei and Beijing, has not agreed to revise the *Taiwan Relations Act*, has not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan, and Will not exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC. See also Richard Bush, “A One-China Policy Primer,” March 2017, p. 3, *Brookings Institution*, <<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/one-china-policy-primer-web.pdf>>.

also honor its commitments under the *Taiwan Relations Act* to ensure Taiwan has sufficient asymmetric self-defense capabilities. President Biden also signed a bill to support Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations. For the Biden administration, maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is not only in the interests of the U.S., but also an issue of international concern, which is crucial to the Indo-Pacific and even global security and prosperity.¹⁵

Although the Biden administration did not modify the U.S. government's longstanding policy of strategic ambiguity over Taiwan-China tensions, it does promote and has sought to achieve an "internationalization of Taiwan Strait security." In April 2021, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga agreed to include a statement with Biden to "underscore the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" at a U.S.-Japan summit. The statement set a precedent and was then followed by leaders from Australia, South Korea, the G7, the European Union, and New Zealand in their respective summit statements with the United States.

III. Challenges to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy: Not Purely the China Factor

Southeast Asia is the region where the U.S. and China have competed most fiercely for leadership. Southeast Asian countries are reluctant to choose sides between the U.S. and China, but welcome the Biden administration providing the region with more assistance, resources, and foreign policy considerations. The overall relationship between the U.S. and Southeast Asia has improved, and China is no longer able to wield its influence unchecked. China is perceived by ASEAN elites as the most influential economic power (76.7%) with the most political/strategic influence (54.4%) in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, only 13.6% of respondents regard China as the leader in maintaining a rules-based order and upholding international law, compared with 36.6% for the U.S., 16.8% for ASEAN, and 16.6% for the European Union. Notably,

¹⁵ Antony J. Blinken, "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China," May 26, 2022, *U.S. Department of State*, <<https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>>.

the U.S.' share grew from 24.5% in 2021 to 36.6% in 2022. More interestingly, when ASEAN elites are forced to choose to align between China and the U.S., 43% will choose China and 57% the United States. Only 13.7% of respondents believe China is a status quo power, and a majority either perceive China as a revisionist power (41.7%) or one that seeks to supplant the U.S. as regional leader (26.6%).¹⁶

India has been the brake valve in development of the security dimensions of the Quad at a time when the U.S. is determined to take a more hardline position against China. China. The “Quad minus India” has compelled the U.S. to be dependent on two bilateral alliances (U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Australia security mechanisms) or a trilateral security arrangement. The Quad is not an Asian NATO, because India has too many reservations in its strategic thinking and security mindset. The Quad plus one, with the possible participation of the U.K., has the potential to become a new security cornerstone in the Indo-Pacific region. India is fully committed to creating a counterbalancing China strategy, even if it does not state so publicly. Whether or not India joins the Quad in areas of defense cooperation, Beijing regards the Quad as “a closed, exclusive clique targeting other countries runs counter to the trend of the times and the aspirations of regional countries” and that “it will find no support and is doomed to fail.”¹⁷

The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war, whether in terms of foreign policy or resource allocation, is bound to distract the Biden administration's implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. During the Cold War, the U.S. had the ability to fight two major wars and one limited conflict simultaneously. With the end of the Cold War and the coming of the global anti-terrorism campaign, the U.S. concentrated its military forces on Iraq and Afghanistan and completely withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021. The Biden administration and its U.S. global military posture could have been concentrated on the Indo-Pacific region, but the war in Ukraine has impelled the U.S. to increase its troops stationed in Europe, from 80,000 to 100,000 troops.

16. Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2022*, p. 21, 26, 34.

17. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on September 24, 2021,” September 24, 2021, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202109/t20210924_9580316.html>.



Figure 6. 2022 Quad Leaders’ Summit

Source: White House, “President Joe Biden meets with White House staff in the Oval Office of the White House,” May 24, 2022, *Flickr*, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/52244295252/in/album-72177720297940353/>>.

The Biden administration’s claim that the U.S. can handle the challenges of the Ukrainian War and the Indo-Pacific Strategy at the same time is obviously aimed at warning China not to destabilize the region.¹⁸ Starting from May-June 2022, new governments in South Korea and the Philippines somewhat reduced security concerns in Washington, and it is expected that the Australian Labor Party government under Anthony Albanese will continue Canberra’s vigilance over China. Whether and when North Korea will conduct its seventh nuclear test, and whether UN Security Council sanctions can be passed on the matter is a lingering nightmare for Seoul, Tokyo,

¹⁸ Asma Khalid, “How the War in Ukraine is Challenging the Long-sought Pivot to Asia,” *National Public Radio*, May 19, 2022, <<https://www.npr.org/2022/05/19/1099725081/how-the-war-in-ukraine-is-challenging-the-long-sought-pivot-to-asia>>.

and Washington. President Biden's low-key and weak response to North Korea's continuous missile tests has relapsed into the Obama administration's "strategic patience" mistake.

A prolonged Russian-Ukrainian War and the resulting security turbulence in Europe could weaken the foundations of Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Before the War in Ukraine is over, the U.S. and its NATO allies could struggle to make the Indo-Pacific a top priority. The longer the Russia-Ukraine War drags on, the more unfavorable this will be for the implementation of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, which China could exploit to create more security challenges for the U.S. and its allies. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine War, the Biden administration has provided \$6.9 billion in security assistance to Ukraine (as of July 2022). Some weapons systems approved for sale to Taiwan, such as the M109A6 Paladin Medium Self-Propelled Howitzer or portable surface-to-air missiles, have been diverted to Ukraine given the more immediate contingency there.

U.S. domestic factors will conceivably play a lesser role in Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Biden's polls continue to be sluggish. The midterm elections in November 2022 could cost Democrats their House of Representatives majority or the Senate. This could push the U.S.-China relationship in a direction of greater tensions. According to a Gallup poll released in July 2022, overall confidence of the American people in 14 public and private (such as church, TV media) institutions in the U.S. has hit a record low of 27%. Biden's job approval rating fell to 38%, with 59% of Americans disapproving his job performance.¹⁹ The U.S. midterm election factors are not conducive to President Biden's reelection in 2024, should he seek a second term. Although the Democratic and Republican parties have a consensus on promoting the Indo-Pacific strategy, their attitudes toward its implementation are somewhat different. Given that it was nearly impossible for President Trump to call on U.S. allies to join in the fight against China, a future Republican president if prioritizes an unilateral approach to foreign policy, and consequently China will be able to divide and disrupt

¹⁹ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Biden Job Approval Dips to New Low," *Gallup*, July 29, 2022, <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/395378/biden-job-approval-dips-new-low.aspx>>.

Trans-Atlantic cooperation.

IV. China's Countermeasures to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

For the PRC, the most convenient response to the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Strategy is to deepen cooperation with Russia. Even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China did not suspend strategic coordination with Russia outside the Ukrainian theater. In May 2022, China and Russia organized joint naval and air patrols in waters and airspace surrounding Japan when President Biden was about to conclude his first trip to Japan. If North Korea launched its 7th nuclear test, China and Russia could possibly restrain the UN Security Council from adopting a resolution imposing new sanctions on Pyongyang. Secretary Blinken concluded his observations on China's position after the invasion of Ukraine by saying that China has been adopting measures that have "alignment" with Russia, instead of neutrality, by sheltering Russia at the United Nations and international organizations, and broadcasting Russian propaganda.²⁰ China continues to prepare to supplant the U.S.' overseas influence through its international united front strategy. Although China's international image was tarnished in Europe by the Ukrainian War, Beijing has repeatedly warned against any plans for an Asia-Pacific version of NATO and called on the U.S. to "rectify" its perceptions of China and—to paraphrase—"confrontational mentality."²¹

To undermine Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy, Beijing has forged a united front strategy with countries in the developing world. Besides the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs, the Chinese Communist Party uses its International Liaison Department (ILD) to cultivate friendly relations with political parties in different countries. It is believed that Beijing has many bedfellows in Africa, Latin America, South and East Asia, and Oceania, and has at least 80-90 iron tickets in the United Nations to support, or at least not to repudiate, China's policies on Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Xinjiang.

20. "Blinken Tells China: 'It's Pretty Hard to Be Neutral' on Ukraine," *New York Times*, July 12, 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/07/09/world/russia-ukraine-war-news>>.

21. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Reality Check: Falsehoods in US Perceptions of China," June 19, 2022, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619_10706059.html>.



Figure 7. China and Russian Joint Naval Operations Against Japan

Source: Ministry of Defense (Japan), 〈中国及びロシア海軍艦艇の動向について〉, July 18, 2022, *Ministry of Defense (Japan)*, <https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2021/p20211018_02.pdf>.

China has also actively engaged with the military junta in Myanmar. Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Myanmar in July 2022 to participate in the seventh Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Conference in Bagan and put forward plans in the fields of agriculture, water resources, digital economy, aerospace, education, and public health. Beijing not only seeks to divide ASEAN's internal policy toward Myanmar, but has also distanced itself from U.S. sanctions on Myanmar. The PRC has also upgraded its bilateral relations with countries in Central Asia and Middle East to disrupt the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Xi Jinping has put forward the Global Development Initiative and pledged financial support with a total of US\$3 billion in 2022-2024, under the 2030 United

Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, Xi declared the Global Security Initiative at Boao, Hainan, in April 2022 to publicly chastise the U.S. by stating that the PRC will “reject the Cold War mentality,” which “would only wreck the global peace framework, hegemonism and power politics would only endanger world peace, and bloc confrontation would only exacerbate security challenges in the 21st century.”²² Before these two initiatives, in September 2020 Beijing proposed the Global Data Security Initiative to counter the Trump administration's Clean Network Initiative. These three Chinese initiatives could constrain the U.S. by using Chinese guaranteed voting bloc majority at the United Nations.

The Biden administration has tried to form a U-shaped containment posture against China to limit Chinese malign influence. The U.S. and China have intensified their competition in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. The South Pacific is the most likely arena where China can challenge efforts to limit its military to areas within the first island chain. Once China can have a base or security agreements in the South Pacific, it will be easier for it to delay U.S. efforts to assist Taiwan militarily in a Taiwan Strait crisis.

The thorniest issue for Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy is the prevention of an unexpected Taiwan crisis. President Biden has been proactively seeking guardrails mechanism with China through all channels of communication. China has repeatedly intruded into Taiwan's southwestern Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and across the tacit median line in the Taiwan Strait, leading international media to significantly increase their coverage about Taiwan's security. Beijing is opposed to the concept of “internationalization of Taiwanese security” created by the Biden administration and is prepared to take military countermeasures to prevent that concept becoming operational. All these pressures put the relationship to a test after U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D.-California) landed in Taipei on August 2, 2022.

²² “Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022,” April 21, 2022, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202204/t20220421_10671083.html>.



Figure 8. U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi Visited Taiwan

Source: Office of the President, Taiwan (ROC), “President Tsai meets US delegation led by House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi,” August 3, 2022, *Flickr*, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/presidentialoffice/52258808672/>>.

Even before Pelosi’s trip to Taiwan, Xi had increased military pressure in the Taiwan Strait by denying the legality of the median line in September 2021 and denying that the Taiwan Strait is international waters in June 2022. Beijing’s legal warfare is to paint the Taiwan “issue” as an internal affair and to force the U.S. Navy to suspend its routine transits in the Taiwan Strait. Biden and Xi held their fifth phone call on July 28, 2022. Biden told Xi that the U.S. Congress and his administration are “separate and co-equal branch of government” and tried to distance himself from Pelosi’s decision to visit Taiwan. Biden expressed clearly his “strong opposition to any party on both sides of the Taiwan Strait changing the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait,

or undermining the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait.”²³ Xi told Biden that Chinese “public opinion cannot be defied,” and “[t]hose who play with fire will perish by it.”²⁴ This preordained that China would take strong countermeasures in response to Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan; even Biden added the word “strong” before “opposition.” According to Beijing’s version of the conversation, Xi and Biden agreed on the “need to maintain communication at all levels” on “coordinating macroeconomic policies, keeping global industrial and supply chains stable, and protecting global energy and food security,” and the “need to work for de-escalation of regional hotspots, help rid the world of COVID-19 as early as possible, reduce the risk of stagflation and recession, and uphold the international system centering on the UN and the international order underpinned by international law.”²⁵

Xi’s promise was valid only for a week; his U-turn, it seems, was not slower than Sichuan Opera. Xi hinted at the possibility of holding a physical summit on the sidelines of the G-20 or APEC in November 2022. Whether this will occur depends on whether China can reduce tensions across the Taiwan Strait. Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan has become a pretext for military pressure on Taiwan and diplomatic retaliation against the United States. China has condemned President Tsai Ing-wen for her alleged plot to “rely on the United States to seek independence” and deplored the Biden administration to “use Taiwan to control China.” For Xi, this was not necessarily meticulously planned heightened military tensions before the 20th National

23. White House, “Readout of President Biden’s Call with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China,” July 28, 2022, *White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/28/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>>; White House, “Background Press Call on President Biden’s Call with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China,” July 28, 2022, *White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/07/28/background-press-call-on-president-bidens-call-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>>.

24. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping Speaks with US President Joe Biden on the Phone,” July 29, 2022, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202207/t20220729_10729593.html>.

25. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping Speaks with US President Joe Biden on the Phone.”

Congress. Beijing sanctioned Pelosi and her immediate family members, but retaliated mainly through diplomatic measures against the Biden administration. The Chinese government cancelled a phone call between the heads of the military theaters of the two militaries, working-level meetings of defense officials, and the meeting of the maritime military security consultation mechanism; but there was no mention of the meeting at the level of defense minister/secretary and chiefs of joint staff. China also “suspended” cooperation between China and the United States on the repatriation of illegal immigrants, criminal judicial assistance, combating transnational crime, and anti-drug cooperation, as well as negotiations on climate change. Beijing can decide to resume at any time because it could prove its co-equal status with the United States.



Figure 9. PLA’s DF-15B Short-Range Ballistic Missile

Source: Wikipedia, “DF-15,” September 3, 2015, *Wikipedia*, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DF-15>>.

After the end of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, President Biden stated three times that if China invaded Taiwan, the U.S. would assist in the defense of Taiwan.²⁶ However, he did not support or even dissuade Pelosi from visiting Taiwan, and has repeatedly reiterated to Xi that the U.S.' "one China" policy has not changed and that he does not support Taiwan independence. The Biden administration delayed the scheduled test launch of the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile by the U.S. Air Force to avoid escalation in the Taiwan Strait. The Biden administration led more than 30 democratic countries in supporting the "internationalization of Taiwan's security," but the U.S. intentionally positioned the USS Ronald Reagan at a certain distance from waters to the East of Taiwan. The Biden administration has encouraged Taipei and Beijing to maintain a channel of communication to settle cross-Strait disputes, but this faces limitations in how to deal with Xi's high-intensity "gray zone" activities around Taiwan.

Biden has stated that the executive and legislative branches are independent, and that the executive branch is the actual decision center on U.S.-China relations. U.S. military operations and deployments are needed to let allies know that the Biden administration is not a "paper tiger" as Beijing might believe. Secretary Blinken referred to China's "extreme, overreacting and escalating military response to increased provocative military activities in and around the Taiwan Strait without justification." The Biden administration and allies of the U.S. believe that China has been changing the *status quo* and that it treats the new *status quo* as the new normal, which is unacceptable. China's 360-degree encirclement scenario for Taiwan was in full display during the August 2022 military exercises, with the PLA firing 11 missiles into waters surrounding Taiwan. China likely has more military scenarios in mind, which makes it imperative for the U.S. to demonstrate its commitments under the *Taiwan Relations Act*. How to cooperate with Japan and Australia in a joint coordinated crisis response requires future refinement for the Biden administration.

²⁶ Zolan Kanno-Youngs & Peter Baker, "Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan if It Faces a Chinese Attack," *New York Times*, May 23, 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/23/world/asia/biden-taiwan-china.html>>.

Xi Jinping's decision to spark a crisis in response to Pelosi's visit reflects the original intimidation of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, such as "resolutely responding and counteracting," but firing missiles over Taiwan constitutes disproportionate military retaliation. For the Biden administration, it has become more difficult to counterbalance China's future military coercion against Taiwan, but it is clearer than ever that China is the source of international threats and instability. Taiwan, Japan, Australia, South Korea, ASEAN countries and the European Union are watching closely what President Biden does in response to Chinese provocations and to reassure U.S. allies and partners.²⁷

V. Conclusion

With the consolidation of Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Biden administration has greatly improved U.S. relations with ASEAN member states, South Korea, and South Pacific nations. Through the formation of the IPEF and PGII, the U.S. is offering its partners additional choices *vis-à-vis* China's BRI. With the improvement in relations between South Korea and Japan, the trilateral alliance between the United States, Japan and South Korea will become more closely integrated. Even if Biden is in office for only four years, the formation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy has been finalized and future policy will not be adjusted substantially. U.S.-led containment of China, meanwhile, has been greatly improved. Despite all this, President Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy faces many potential challenges, and there is no apparent guarantee that it will prevail, particularly over countermeasures taken by China.

Xi will secure a third term as general secretary at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. China's comprehensive national strength will

27. Jane Perlez, "Pelosi's Taiwan visit Risks Undermining U.S. Efforts with Asian Allies," *New York Times*, August 3, 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/03/world/asia/taiwan-pelosi-visit-allies.html>>; Keith Zhai & Feliz Solomon, "Southeast Asia Seeks to Tiptoe Through U.S.-China Taiwan Minefield," *Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2022, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/southeast-asia-seeks-to-tiptoe-through-u-s-china-taiwan-minefield-11659872556>>; "Revealing Korea's Dilemma," *Korea Times*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2022/08/202_333923.html>.

further improve and will not be subject to severe internal obstruction. However, the international order China wants to establish will encounter more backlash and likely opposition. The anti-encirclement strategy that China can form is relatively weak, and the number of countries that can provide substantive assistance to China is relatively small; at most, they support Beijing's position with votes at the United Nations. This explains why China has been emphasizing a UN-centered world order.

If China can gain a greater military advantage in the Taiwan Strait, in the northeastern part of the South China Sea and the Bashi Channel, it will be detrimental to Taiwan's security. Even if China is unable to set up bases or strongholds in the South Pacific, it can still counter U.S. interference in the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. needs to strengthen its regular presence in the Philippine Sea to monitor China's actions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. and China eventually would adopt crisis avoidance measures to avoid collisions through guardrails mechanisms. Dialogue between the two great powers has been carried out through multiple channels, but at the same time, public criticism of the other side will not stop.

